



December 5th, 2009

The First Ever Montserrat Volcano Half Marathon Dec 5th 2009

It all started one Saturday morning at the beginning of November. Cecilia and I were huddled over the computer trying to plan a trip to Grenada, when she spotted a half marathon in Montserrat. That was it, all plans changed. The lure of running in the first ever was too much. A plan took shape and by Monday we were booked.



We flew in to Antigua and spent the night. The next day we boarded a tiny dinky toy plane for the very expensive 20 minute flight to Montserrat. Cosy was the best description of the plane's accommodation. Not even a door divided us from the pilot. I was in heaven watching the pilot and co-pilot operate the controls. More than that, I could see straight ahead through the cockpit windscreen. The flight was pretty uneventful, then we lined up to land in Montserrat. Now the pilot earned his money coping with side winds, updrafts and downdrafts and the looming hillside. Before we knew it we had landed on the super smooth new runway at the shiny new toy airport.

The flight gave me a scary insight in to what I had let myself in for.



The terrain was rugged and full of steep, very steep, I mean frighteningly steep hillsides. The taxi journey to our Olveston House made me even more aware of the challenge that lay ahead. Down, then up, down again then up, up, up. Most of the journey was on the same route as the race. I know Cecilia, it is a run, not a race. Not to me. A few fleeting doubts came and went, I could only try my best. Before coming I thought 3 hours would be a reasonable time and anything better would be a real bonus, now just finishing in any time would be an achievement. I still harboured thoughts of running a better time.

We arrived at Olveston House which is owned by Sir George Martin and were shown to our room, his room. If only I had his talent, but at least we can say we slept in his bed. Perhaps some of his talent will rub off on us. The greeting we received was warm and welcoming and we immediately felt at ease. The house was beautiful in a simple unpretentious way, nothing flash, just

elegant.



The 2 families who ran exuded the same wonderful qualities. We felt we had come to little bit of heaven. Trite, but true. Hell would have to wait until the RACE.

The next day we met Ishwar who was one of the prime motivators behind this event and agreed to meet with him and other runners for pasta that night. Well you have to devour the carbs The journey in to town brought home the scale of the place. The Governor's office, the Tourist Board shared the building with a cafe and a hairdresser. Opposite this were the "temporary" government offices and in the most imposing site, overlooking Carr's Bay and Little, Bay HM Prison Montserrat. Why do gaols in the Caribbean always get the best views?

This excursion brought home the scale of the task ahead. We sweated our way up the hills. You can imagine how grateful we were when The lady from Olveston House stopped and gave us a lift up to the Montserrat Volcano Observatory (MVO). Thanks to Iswar they specially opened the visitor centre for us as Friday was the Admin Day. As usual we had the warmest of welcomes and we learnt a lot about volcanoes. The Soufriere Hills Volcano did not disappoint (from a tourist perspective). It huffed and puffed away spouting ash and steam.

Fortunately the wind was blowing in the other direction and most of the ash fell in to the sea.



However, the scientists expected worse was to come and a few days after we left the Volcano alert was raised to Level 4 (5 is the highest level).

That night we had a jovial evening with some of the other runners over pasta. We met a French Canadian and his girlfriend from Guadeloupe. He had run a few full marathons and for some reason I was determined to beat him. Ridiculous because he was at least 20 years younger than me and he was a really nice guy. I guess you have to have your goals!!!!

So to bed.

4.15 am the alarm goes and I spring out of bed. Fast movement, but my body and brain were still really asleep. After a breakfast of muesli Reuben arrived to take us to the start point. We set off in the dark, would it ever be light, would my body wake up? On the way we passed over Cudjoe Head and Reuben told us the story behind the name. Cudjoe was a rebellious slave, who tried to organise a revolt. He was captured, tried (as if he would get a fair trial) and then beheaded at this spot. A gory and a shameful reflection on colonial history.

Then we arrived at Blades Football Field, the start. Reuben dropped me off and then drove Cecilia to the start of the Fun Run and Walk. Ironically this started at Cudjoe Head. Cecilia did not realise it was a race and enjoyed talking to others in the race and just ambled along. Still she came 3rd. Had she known she might have won? Still, she was now a celebrity thanks to our radio interview the day before and may just have enjoyed the fame. I don't think she gave her autograph.

I walked up the rutted track to the very impressive football field. Like the others I was trying to limber up, focus and wonder what on earth have I let myself in for.



It was still dark, but a little lighter as we set off.

Down the track, up to the first turn.



Am I last?

As I was approaching the turn others were running back towards me. In Fact I almost collided with one (he came second), but avoided him but fell over a slow moving car. No damage was inflicted on the car. The temptation was to speed up, but I had a race plan which somehow made me resist. Keep it steady, forget about the others, run my own race.

The first hill was gentle, then we turned right on to smoother road and a short stretch of flat. It was getting lighter. The Canadian and Henry were in my sights. Sometimes I gained, sometimes I fell back. The inclination to seed up had to be kept in check for the moment. We passed the hospital, I thought of popping in for a quick check up, then the turn to the airport and soon we were on the steep 2 plus mile run down Davy Hill. Hell on the ankles and knees. At Carr's Bay I turned right to Little Bay, thankful for the water provided, and met some runners on their way back to Carr's. We exchanged encouraging remarks, boy I needed them. My body was still in some form of stupor, it was getting hotter, will I finish this?



Back to Carr's and up the hill to Brades, passed the Governor's impressive office. Through the financial district and on to Cudjoe Head. Thank goodness the sun had not come out. Then the climb on the twisting road of Fogarthy Hill. Then around now the rain came, not light shower, but torrential. I was so grateful and invigorated, even though at times it felt like I was running against a river as torrents of water rushed down the hillsides. First I passed Henry, a few minutes later the Canadian. Will I be able to maintain the pace and keep ahead. The Canadian overtook, but a few minutes later I was ahead again. Soon I could see no one ahead or behind. Had I strayed off course?

No, there was a water station ahead. I took on some Gatorade and kept on going. I was running alone, no one to compete with, no one to judge my pace. Still I looked behind...no one to be seen.

At Desert Storm I turned left down the hill to the Belham Valley.



Now I saw another runner walking wearily up the hill towards me. We shouted encouragement and kept going. Alone again I came to a fork in the road, wondering if I was still on track.. There was a warning sign saying KEEP OUT DANGER OF DEATH, I bore right and carried on down to the Belham Valley checkpoint. After what seemed an age I was delighted to see the checkpoint and a smiling lady with water and banana in hand. I accepted the water gratefully and began the long climb to Desert Storm. On route I saw a dead rat, still no sun what a relief, but it was still hot and humid. On up the hill, then I saw an apparition of Cecilia outside Desert Storm. She had come to spur me on. We gave each other an encouraging wave.

Only a few hundred yards to go and it was all downhill. I picked up my pace with Cecilia running beside me. I kicked for home, where was this coming from? I seemed to be getting faster and faster as I turned in to Salem Park. The tape was in sight, a feeling of relief and a definite high. I ran through the tape. I had finished in a time I could not believe.....**2hours 35 minutes 21seconds. It semed longer! A lot longer!!!!!!!!!!**

By the way I felt great and had the broadest of smiles.



Sometime later Henry and the Canadian came in to our cheers. Now we all waited to cheer in the lady from Guadeloupe. The rescue service took the Canadian to see how she was doing. He protested that he had a beer in hand. The driver told him to bring it and they drove off.. After a while she came in sight complete with police and rescue service escort with sirens blaring. She ran to the line to loudest cheers and finished in 3hours 55minutes 06seconds. **Fantastic!**



As you can imagine it was party time.

In true Caribbean spirit everyone was determined to enjoy and the music was very loud. Smiles all round then the rain came again.

I slept for most of the afternoon and that evening we had a wonderful meal at Ziggy's, a sort of voodoo lodge. Great atmosphere, good food, terrific service. As we were about to leave another couple offered us a lift and took us to see the volcano and watch the lave flows. A wonderful experience, then we joined some of the other runners for a farewell drink.

So what had I achieved (**very much tongue in cheek**):

A respectable time

The oldest man to finish

The first man who is resident in the UK to finish

Sponsorship money for Brainwaves

First in my age group

Finished 11th

Sore knees and ankles



What next??

Return in 2010 with a team of runners. The interest is there and some have already provisionally signed up to go. We hope to be there again!