

RACE REPORTS ▶



HOLY SMOKE!
That fire and brimstone
was never more than a
few miles away



The rocky road

Alcohol and madcap ideas are rarely a recipe for success – but this race is an exception

Words: Kerry McCarthy

Volcano Half-Marathon

MONTSERRAT, NOVEMBER 27



FIRST MAN	PAMENOS BALLANTYNE 1:23:43
FIRST WOMAN	SHARON DUNN 2:12:43
LAST FINISHER	3:30:24
NO. OF FINISHERS	27

A couple of years ago, drinking buddies Ishwar and Henry were sitting outside a hilltop bar on the Caribbean island of Montserrat. Ishwar gazed at the steep mountain road that he'd have to stumble down to get home and said to Henry,

"Hey, wouldn't it be crazy to run a half-marathon on this island?"

Henry should have replied, "Yes. So shut up and have some more rum." But he didn't. He said, "Hmm..." Which is why, two years later, I'm walking up a one-in-five gradient hill with my hands on my knees, acid lungs and calves of wood, whimpering like a little girl. I pass the sign that says 'Mile 6'. The only thing that's keeping me going is the sight of Ishwar, marketing manager for Montserrat Tourism and my host for the weekend, who's no more than a minute in front of me, moving slowly and grimacing as he clutches at his groin through his shorts. (I assume it's a grimace, anyway.)

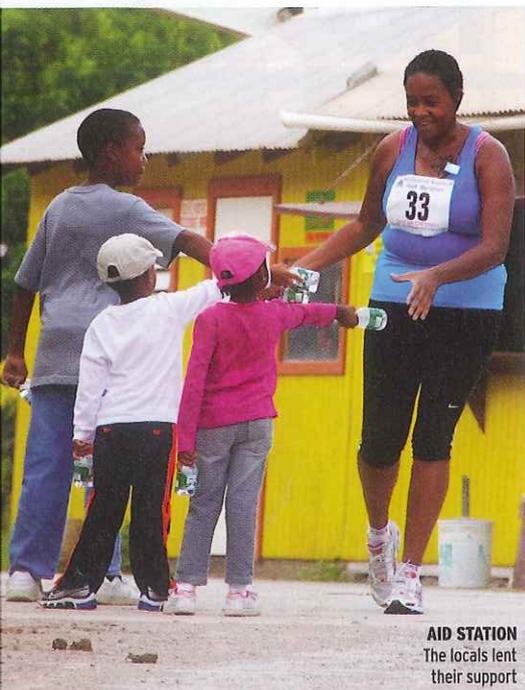
Responsible for putting me through one of the most painful experiences of my life, I'll be damned if I'm going to let him beat me to the finish, too. So I put my head down and plough on. Seven miles to go...

When I was first invited to participate in the race, I had to enlist the aid of Google to find out where Montserrat was. For those who are similarly clueless, it's a tiny island to the north of Antigua.

Still a British territory, the island has a landmass of just 102km² and a population of between 3,500 and 5,000, depending on who you talk to. In the 1970s and 1980s, it was known as a hangout for rock stars looking for sun, sea, and peace and quiet. Legendary ▶

KEY TO SYMBOLS: ROAD RURAL URBAN TRAIL FLAT HILLS

IMAGES: PATRICK BENNETT, UNCOMMONCARIBBEAN.COM; *TAKEN FROM RW ONLINE FORUM RATINGS ON 23/12/10



AID STATION
The locals lent their support

Beatles producer George Martin owned the famous Air Studios on the island, and Paul McCartney, Sting, Elton John, U2 and the Rolling Stones are among those who recorded there. They were drawn to the country for its relaxed vibe, tropical climate and lush, natural beauty.

Winds of change

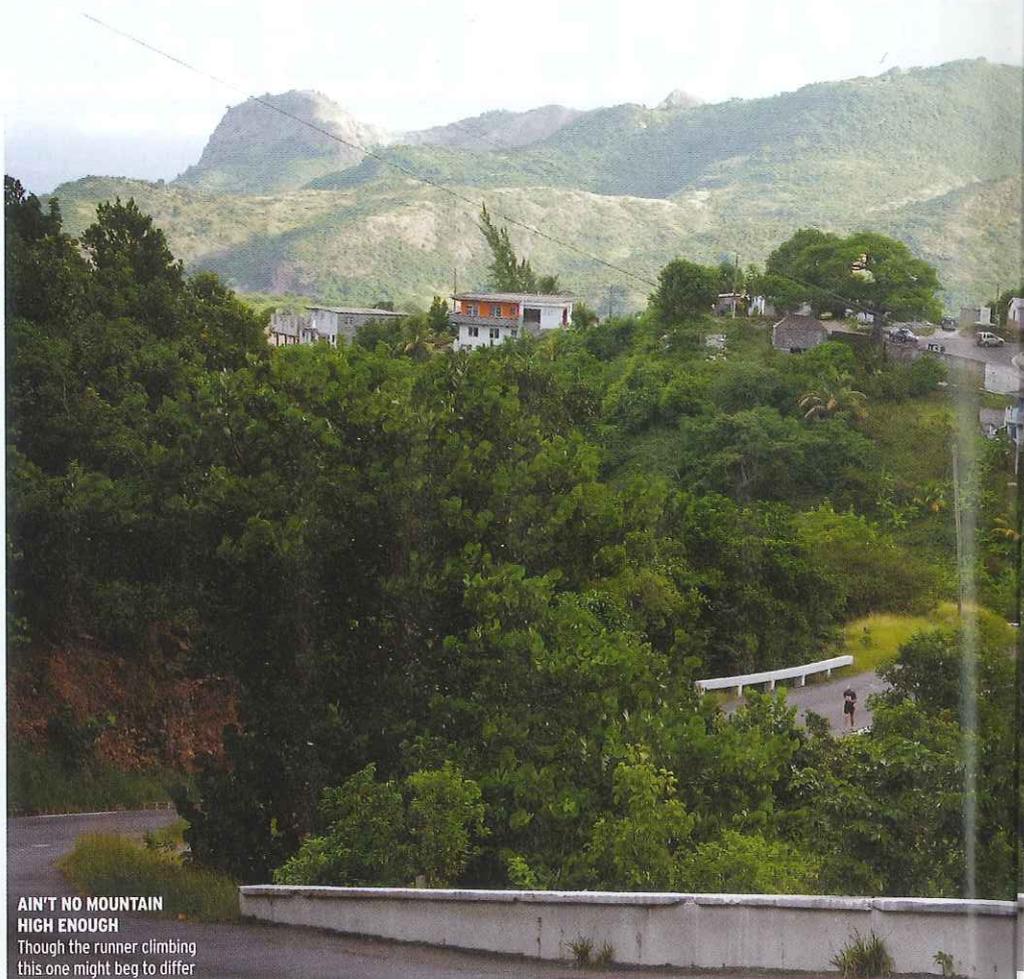
All this changed in 1989, when the island was battered by Hurricane Hugo. Air Studios was reduced to a wreck and remains so to this day. Then, in 1995, the Soufrière Hills Volcano in the centre of the island erupted. The capital city, Plymouth, was destroyed and is now known as a modern-day Pompeii. It's in the no-go zone, which covers 60 per cent of the island.

Fifteen years later the volcano is still erupting – nothing on the scale of 1995's disaster, but the curls of smoke and puffs of ash are impressive enough. As a result, Montserrat, having lost 70 per cent of its population to other islands, now places the volcano at the centre of its tourism strategy.

The half-marathon is the latest way of leveraging it. And although runners didn't get close to the volcano during the race because of the restrictions, it was never

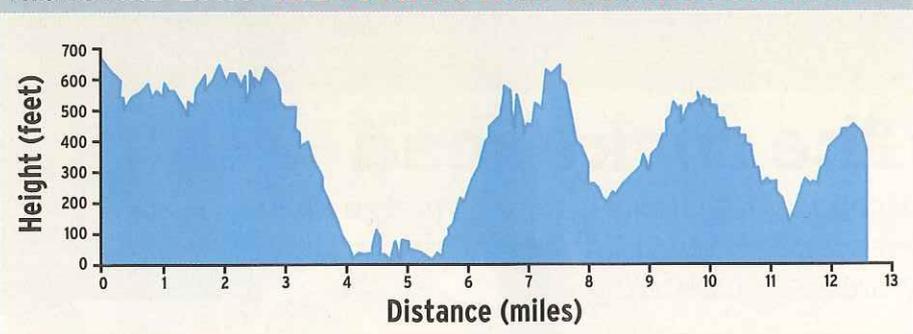
Majestic views of the volcano belching out smoke brought me to a standstill – if the arduous course hadn't done so already

more than a mile or two away. It's the highest point of a very small island, so there were enough majestic views of it belching out smoke to bring me to a standstill – if the arduous course hadn't done so already.



AIN'T NO MOUNTAIN HIGH ENOUGH
Though the runner climbing this one might beg to differ

HIGHS AND LOWS THE VOLCANO HALF ELEVATION PROFILE



The elevation profile (above) should give a flavour of the undulations encountered. The steepness of the slopes was painful, sure, but the real killer was the complete lack of recovery time. In the entire 13.1 miles there

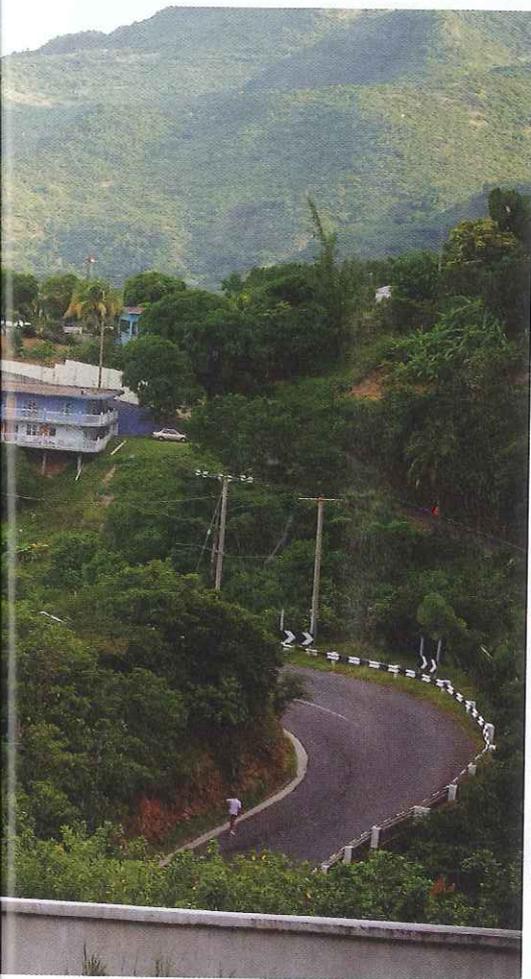
an English volcanologist – mysteriously decided not to run at the last minute), I seriously considered giving up. My anguished expression was clocked by an enormous old woman sitting on a wall. As I shuffled past making pitiful snuffling noises, she shoved a toffee into her mouth, gave me a look of disdain and drawled, “C'mon young man, you can do better dan dat.”

Total stranger she might have been, but she was right. It was simply a matter of focusing on the upsides – of which there were plenty.

Montserrat is a stunning island, a throwback to the old-style Caribbean before the days of Sandals holidays and spa resorts.

was less than half a mile of truly flat terrain; you were always either climbing or trying to contain your momentum downwards.

As I crawled past the bar where the race was conceived (the co-conspirator Henry –



Guava trees hang by the side of the road; flowers of every colour are in profusion everywhere, goats and chickens wander the streets freely and the breeze wafts the scent of aloe over the island.

A hidden gem

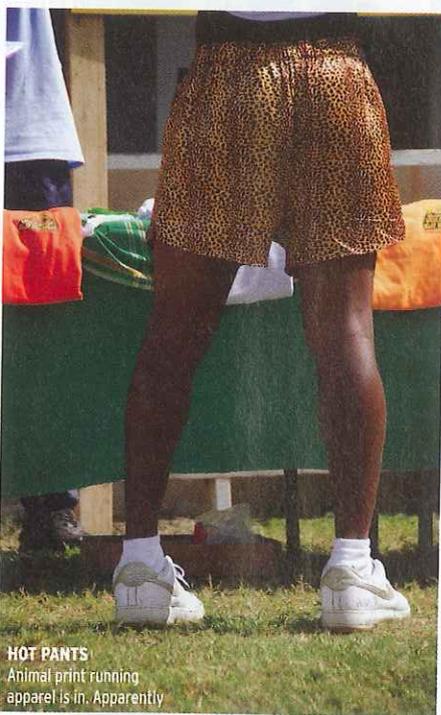
The islanders are horizontally laid-back and while most would never dream of exerting themselves by running (only two actually ran the race) they were happy to shout encouragement at the competitors.

Towards the end, a stranger screamed, "Go, English journalist!" at me. Baffled, I touched my head to make sure I wasn't wearing a Union Jack fedora with a press card stuck to it. But no, it was just another facet of island life: with such a tiny population, everyone knows everything about everybody else.

For some, this might be irritating, but it's also why there's virtually no crime on the island. More than once I was gravely informed that the last murder happened more than two years ago, when a man bumped off his neighbour for having an inappropriate, noisy relationship with a goat.

The small number of participants in the Volcano Half-Marathon is set to grow, and this year's numbers would have been twice as big had there not been last-minute

VOLCANIC DASH
No use running away from it...



HOT PANTS
Animal print running apparel is in. Apparently

problems with transfers from other islands. But it's never going to be a large race. The habitable section of the island is so small that the race route was the only one possible, and there are only 300 hotel rooms. But this is precisely what makes it such a gem.

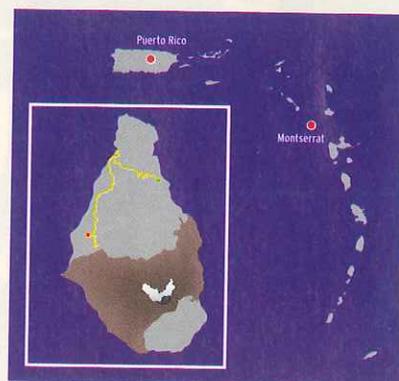
The course is extremely tough, the field is small and the location remote, but if you're looking for an unusual destination running holiday, genuine warmth of welcome and a big challenge to boot, it ticks all the boxes.

It certainly worked its magic on me: I may not have heard of Montserrat before, but I have a feeling I'll be back for more.

Run it

For details on the 2011 volcano half-marathon go to volcanorunner.com

THE LOWDOWN MONTSERRAT



GET THERE British Airways and Virgin Atlantic fly via Antigua from London Gatwick from around £550 return.

STAY MID-RANGE **Olveston House** is the holiday home of George Martin (olvestonhouse.com). From EC\$250 (£75) per night. **UPMARKET** The **Royal Palm Club** is a gorgeous colonial-style guest house. From EC\$300 (£85) per night (montserratroypalmclubinn.com).

SIGHTSEE Learn more about the Soufrière Hills Volcano at the **Montserrat Volcano Observatory** (mvo.ms) or get back to nature and go hiking, turtle watching or diving (visitmontserrat.com).

FUEL Olveston House hosts a 'pasta party' the night before the race from EC\$40 (£10) per person. For more authentic fare, go to **The People's Place** on Fogarthy Hill: try the Roti (local pasties) or Goat Water (mutton stew), from EC\$20 (£5) per person.

WARM UP Get some hill practice in – just run along the island's wide but steep roads. Islanders will drive alongside and offer encouragement.