

# RUNNING *the* Atlas

**Alice Morrison** wrestles with demons on an African Mountain Marathon.



**W** I want to sit down. I want to rest. I can't bear it. I'm not going to make it anyway and if I sit down and rest at least I'll enjoy the last part. Nobody cares if I am within the time limit. I hate this mountain. I hate myself. Why didn't I train more? Why didn't I lose half a stone? I want to sit down. "Keep going, keep going, keep going, keep going, step, step, step, step."

I am pretty sure that every runner, hiker and cyclist in the world has had this conversation, or something very like it with themselves. I was on the third and final ascent of the Ultra Trail D'Atlas Toubkal, Atlas Marathon (UTAT). Time was very, very tight and I was desperate to finish within the limit but by this stage, mind and body were weak and wavering.

UTAT is an annual race, which takes place in the High Atlas Mountains, about an hour and a

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half from Marrakech. There are a number of distances from 105km to 26km, but one thing unites them all – they are all very tough, with a lot of climbing. The beauty of UTAT is that you are running over high, jagged passes, through forests of ancient juniper trees, passing tiny, golden Berber villages clinging to the rock. It's God's own country.

I had been talked into taking on the

marathon distance Atlas Trail by my friend Charlie Shepherd, who runs a company called Epic Morocco – and to be honest the marathon distance was quite epic enough for me. This route loops out from Oukaimeden, Morocco's ski resort, and features a whopping 2,600m of ascent. Daunting. The other factor is the altitude. You start at 2,700m and go up to 3,230m. That air starts feeling thinner as soon as you pant your way up.

The moon was shining and it was cold as the three hundred or so brave souls who were running the marathon distance and the 105km lined up together on the start line. My heart was thumping and I felt slightly sick with nerves. All the other runners looked well prepared, professional and focused and imposter's syndrome set in with a vengeance. "Trois, deux, un," we all shouted and then we



## GO THE DISTANCE

- There are four races as part of UTAT: 105km, 42km, 42km+26km and 26km.
- UTAT takes place annually in Oukaimeden in Morocco in October.
- There are multiple daily flights to Marrakech and transfers to the race bivouac.
- Competitors arrive one or two days before to get acclimatised to the altitude.
- There are workshops, training sessions and trips to local villages and prehistoric cave paintings on the acclimatisation days.
- The Race Director, Cyrille Sismondini, gives free entry to Berber contestants from the surrounding villages and is passionate about promoting and sponsoring young Moroccan runners.
- Information, dates and prices at [www.atlas-trail.com](http://www.atlas-trail.com)



were off. The field snaked out across the plain leading to the first col, a long line of glittering head torches, magical in the darkness. Nerves and high altitude are not a great aid to breathing, and the first couple of miles I had to really concentrate on just getting enough air in.

Then I hit the first hill I live in Morocco, so had done some training on the route itself, and hiked the whole thing over two days. The first checkpoint was at 19.5km and I had four hours to get there with about 500m of ascent and 1000m of descent on the way. On the three occasions I had done this part of the route previously, I had never even come close, so I knew I had to push myself.

I found a little group who were going at roughly the same pace, and we worked together, quickly getting into a fast walk. My

## MOROCCO TRAIL RUN

breathing calmed and the fierce joy of being out in the mountains set in as we crested the first hill at sunrise and saw the High Atlas rolling out ahead of us. I was 15 minutes ahead of schedule, so I knew if I kept this pace up, I was going to make it in good time.

A long descent on a piste followed, through the crazy shapes of ancient juniper trees sculpted by the wind, then plummeting down to the village of Agouns. Endorphins rushed as I stormed it, passing runners on the way and generally feeling like Superwoman.

There it was. Checkpoint one - and I had made it in good time. Coke! Coke is the ultimate sports drink, I don't care what the nutritionists say. It was 9.28 am and I had until 6 pm to get to the finish line. 2000 or so more metres of ascent over 23km and Bob would be my uncle.

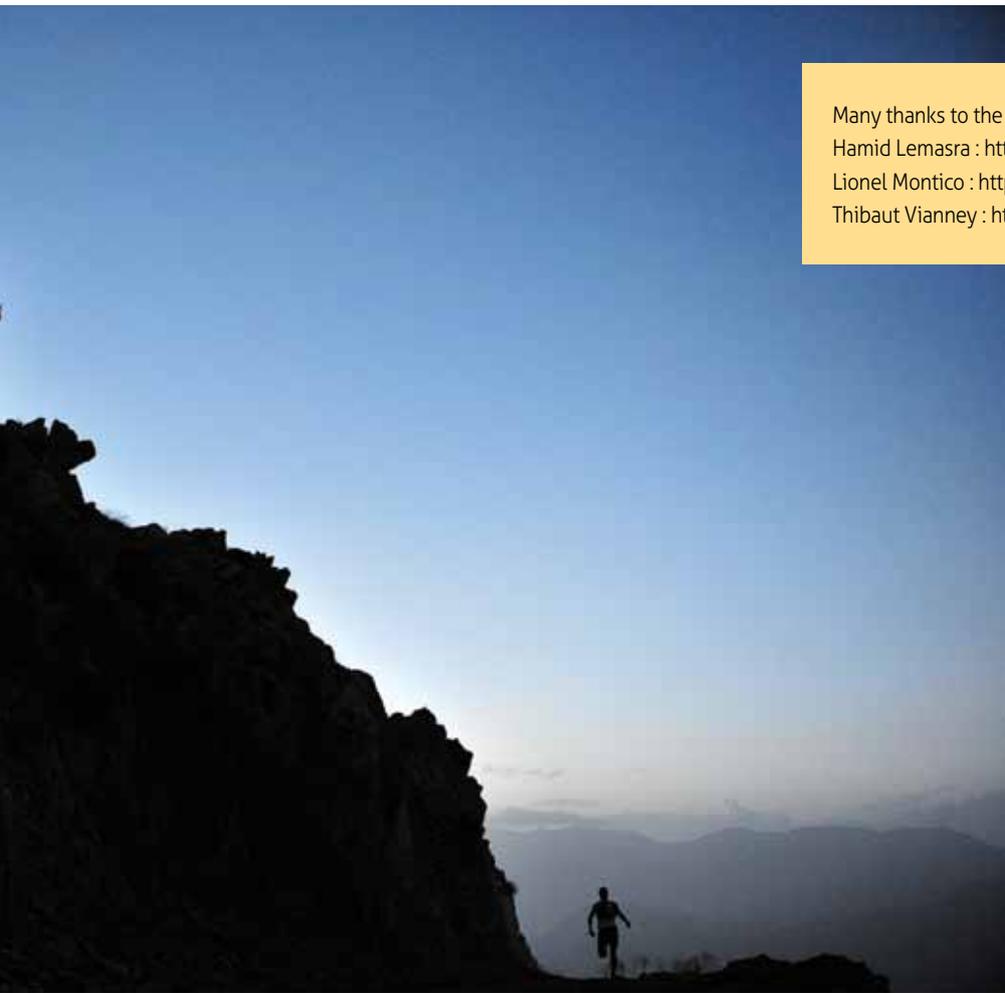
The middle section of the race is up the colossal Tizi n' Tacheddirt. Tizi means "pass" in Tashlaheet, the local Berber language, and this one lies at 3,230m and is the highest point of the course. It is a killer, a slog, a breaker of men and women both. The first hundred metres or so, you are climbing almost vertically, but then are lulled into a false sense of security by a rolling, wide-ish path curving round the mountainside.

By this time, the sun was up and hot and the sky was a cerulean blue. The mountain glowed gold or red, punctuated by flashes of green, where tiny terraced plots had been cultivated, or a lone tree stood. On the way up, we passed through the hamlet of Labassene. The villagers enjoyed the spectacle of lycra-clad foreigners toiling up the hill and cheered and waved from their windows and rooftops as we passed. I got stuck behind a Berber woman leading her cow for quite some time, but managed to pass after exchanging greetings and kisses. I could hear her chortling behind me.

After Labassene, it gets steep. Time to get the poles out, get the head down and trudge up the zig zags. The endless zigging and zagging, with no consideration for my burning calves and suffering glutes. The sun hit full strength and I felt like every sip of water I took just went straight out in sweat. Finally, the route flattened out a little towards the top of the pass where the medics were waiting to see if we were ok to continue.

The views from Tizi n' Tacheddirt made the climb worth it (almost). The mountains undulate endlessly in front of you, fading from red and gold to silvers and blues in the distance. We were on top of the world. But





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there was no time to stop and reflect, I was on a mission. It was at this point that I made a big mistake that was to add to my stress and make the whole rest of my run uncertain. I blame the fact that I was already tired and a bit heady and I wasn't thinking straight. My Garmin was almost out, so I swapped it over with my reserve, but didn't check the time or distance properly before I switched one off and the other on. When I turned my new one on, it wasn't on local time and after I had sorted out the menu, I was not absolutely sure what time it was. I set it, but maybe a bit fast, maybe around 10 minutes. I had also completely forgotten what kilometre I had got to. All my crucial information was missing. What was worse was that I was relying solely on the Garmin info, because I had left my wristwatch at home.

I cursed myself but it was done. The one thing I did know was that I wanted to get to checkpoint two by 2 pm to give myself time to

do the last (and steepest) climb and make the cut off of 6 pm at the finish line.

Not too worried at this stage but knowing I had no time to waste, I started on the descent towards Tacheddirt village. This is a really fun descent. The gradient isn't too steep and the ground feels slightly softer underfoot as you dodge between the tufted heather-like shrubs. I used my poles for balance and concentrated on not tripping and face planting, but I felt good and it was a relief to be going down. It is a long descent, though, and 2 pm came and went and I was still a long way from that second check point.

At the check point, I grabbed some coke and a handful of nuts and pushed on to the third climb. This is a shorter, sharper ascent of 600m. It is mainly over black, edgy rock with plunging drop offs. The poles were a blessing and a curse – sometimes I needed them to aid my wobbling legs, sometimes I needed to hold the rock more. I noticed that the air was

cooling as the sun started to sink. The views behind me were wide and wonderful.

This is when the demons set in. I was desperate to stop and rest. Mentally, it was incredibly hard to resist my body's screams for mercy. I knew that if I stopped and rested, I wouldn't make the cut off but that if I kept going, I just might. I had to reach the top of that final pass by 5 pm to give myself an hour to get down the last 6km. A little cluster of supporters were sitting at the top of the col shouting "Bravo, bravo". My watch showed 5.10 pm but I knew it was fast. "What time is it?" I yelled to them but they couldn't hear me.

6km of downhill and flat to go and about an hour to do it in. Now, there was nothing in the world for me but that time limit. My legs were cramping and stiff but I forced them into a trot and I stayed there. My little group was nowhere to be seen by now, but that didn't matter. All that mattered was getting there before 6 pm. Weirdly, I started chanting to myself, "Balls out, bring it. Balls out, bring it."

At last, ahead of me I could see the arches of the finish line. There were people clustered around and I could hear my name being shouted by the compere, "Alice. Aliiiiice, Aliiiiiiiiiiceeeeeee." I didn't know if I had already failed, but if I hadn't I knew I had to race it, the time was that tight. In my frenzied state I couldn't work out where the actual finish line was because there were two arches. "Where is it, where is the finish?" I screamed at a woman standing by the first one. "Turn right," she shouted.

I did, and sprinted for the line. I collapsed through it and got my race bib scanned. "Did I make it?" I asked the organiser, but they didn't understand what I meant. Then I saw Charlie, jumping up and down and pointing to his watch.

"5.58 pm. You made it! You just made it. Amazing!" 📷