

Running for a Cause

CHARLIE NORTON SIGNS UP FOR ONE OF THE MOST GRUELLING MARATHONS IN THE WORLD AND FINDS THE EXPERIENCE LIBERATING

The savannah starts to steam as dawn breaks. Behind me are the stunning peaks of Mt Kenya and Lolokwe; above me choppers are frightening the wits out of any man threatening mammals; and beside me Paul Tergat, the former world record marathon holder, is jostling for position, though not for long of course. The Safaricom Tusk Marathon through the Lewa conservancy in Kenya is a liberating experience. Where else can you run through stunning African bush teeming with game and alongside some of the finest long distance runners that have ever lived? It's also one of the most gruelling marathons in the world. There's the altitude (5,500 ft), the stifling heat (35 degrees C and plus), remorseless rolling hills of the bush and a psychologically murderous two laps. Not to mention that, despite all the top notch course security, you're always wondering whether a lion might leap out from behind a bush and eat you alive on the course along with your Lucozade.

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This is the tenth marathon run through the game park at Lewa, a genius idea formulated in 2000 by TUSK charity chief executive Charlie Mayhew. All the runners who compete raise money for local conservation. The run has gone from village jaunt in the bush to a top social event like a Kenyan Henley or a polo match in Delhi, but with 1,000 participants. It attracts top politicians and celebrities and some of Kenya's finest athletes, many of whom use it as a training run to show their support. There's an international feel to the crowd, from the corporate iPod-wearing brigade to the likes of Benson Kaptikou, the marathon winner for the last two years. Last year, he sold his only goat to pay for his travel expenses, a gamble that paid off with \$2,000 in prize money.

The start is surreal. I suddenly realise that the tall Kenyan posing for photos next to me is Paul Tergat, the first human to ever run under 2.05 for the marathon. The race starts on time at 7.15 am unlike 2008, when there was a delay of 15 minutes because a lion was sunning itself on the marathon circuit and tried to pounce on a helicopter before it was ushered away.

Tergat saunters off at the sprinting pace that the Kenyans have perfected and leaves me trailing in his wake. It's hard to get a rhythm going in the bottle neck at the start but then I fall into a good slow pace for the first 8 km, concentrating on picking my path around the other runners and monitoring my breathing in the altitude. Water stations appear every 2.5 km, serving spring water, fruit, Lucozade and, most achingly satisfying of all, cool wet sponges.

There is a winding hill at 8 km. But just as I make it to the top, my stomach goes. There is no pleasant way to describe my feelings as I am forced to nip off the trail and squat in the bush grass, paranoid about snakes, spiders and creepy

Local colour comes, fittingly, in the guise of the marathon's master of ceremonies



The runners work through the swamp and bush grass in the stifling African heat and an altitude of 5,500 ft



THE TUSK MARATHON ATTRACTS THE COUNTRY'S TOP POLITICIANS AND CELEBRITIES AND SOME OF KENYA'S FINEST ATHLETES, MANY OF WHOM USE IT AS A TRAINING RUN TO SHOW THEIR SUPPORT

crawlies. I'm forced to walk a little to recover. I lose my rhythm and am only a quarter of the way round the course. Runners trail by me and the sun starts to heat up. I'm quickly forced into a shrub again and soon I feel the first signs of cramp in my groin and calves. To cap it all, though I've brought my camera and snacks, I've forgotten to put on any sun cream or bring a hat, an idiotic oversight in the African sun.

It takes me two hours to complete the lap and I only just manage to make myself turn right to start another circuit. Nearly 1,000 runners are doing the half marathon but only 100 or so are doing the full so I'm suddenly on my own, not a million miles away from tears.

From a crowded race to a lone trot, my imagination starts to play havoc. With my black and white top, my loo stops and my painstaking slow pace, I am worried I look like a lame zebra separated from the herd. Fortunately, I see nothing worse than a large ant that security seems to have missed but I can feel the presence of elephants, rhino, impala, zebra, giraffe, cheetah and lions that I saw the day before on a game drive.

It is around 30 km that I decide to down an energy rehydration drink called Orbana, given to me by the race director, the legendary Sixties British runner Bruce Tulloh who rates the marathon as one of the toughest in the world. "The course, the climate and the altitude make this very hard work", he says. Fortunately the drink, which Tulloh has developed for no less than Paula Radcliffe, gives me another lease of life and wards off the cramp. So, for the last 10 km of the race, I finally have the chance to look around and enjoy the landscape of hay coloured savannah grasses and acacia trees. I even manage a brisk scamper. But I feel like a joke runner being cheered in by lean Kenyans who have come in over 2 hours ahead of me. I have seen how early their commitment starts—in the children's 5-km race. Six finishers were carried away after collapsing on the line unconscious.

Running is a way of life here. And you can struggle along and be part of the earth and the culture. 🌿

Charlie Norton travelled as a guest of Kenya Airways (www.kenya-airways.com) and The Ultimate Travel Company (www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk)

FACT FILE

The Safaricom TUSK Marathon is run on dirt roads, through the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy. It includes a half-marathon, a full marathon and a five-km run for children. Next race is on June 26, 2010. Go to www.tusk.org for more details. You should be super fit before you come here. Due to the high altitude, it's worth spending 4-5 days acclimatizing before the race. Beware of the heat. Use sunscreen and a hat and drink a lot of rehydration electrolytes.