



Trail memories (Costa Rica Ultra Trail 2016)

As I run my footfalls are absorbed by the soft spongy ground. Around me everything is a luxurious green. Turning the corner I am greeted by splashes of colour. Purple, red, pink and yellow flowers line the trail. Butterflies lift off and swirl around me. I slow down and eventually stop. I can't help myself but for some reason I start to laugh. The hill appears endless.

With a canopy of green on either side I follow a twisting brown track as it snakes its way up into the mist. Despite the heat everything is dripping with moisture. The air is so wet it appears to have texture. I feel like I am swimming when I should be running. The track continues upwards as far as I can see. I stop running, and start to walk.

A large raindrop hits my hand. I look skywards as more drops follow. They feel amazing on my flushed sweaty skin. Soon rain is pouring down. The track briefly becomes a multitude of mini brown rivers but these soon join together to form one. Cleansed, my suffering washed away, I quicken my pace and splash onwards. Cresting the hill the track suddenly drops steeply.

I start to descend taking care on the loose stones. With every step my quads scream out in pain. After days of long descents my legs are wrecked. I grit my teeth. How long did they say this downhill section was? Eight kilometres I think. I sigh and start counting my steps.

I follow Roiny as he descends rapidly along a wide grassy track. The footing is good and I take the opportunity to look around. The green of the land contrasts dramatically with the deep blue sky. Exactly the same colour as Roiny's shirt I muse. My eyes return to his red shoes dancing ahead of me. We are flying now. We slow briefly to cross a bubbling stream. I splash water on my face before scrambling up the other side and regaining momentum. My watch beeps. I smile in recognition. Not long until the next aid station.

These are some of my memories (highs and lows) from the Costa Rica Ultra Trail (or La Transtica), a six day (including the prologue) 200 km stage race across the wonderful country of Costa Rica.

The race is hard and full of ups and downs (both emotionally and literally (Costa Rica has some serious hills)) but that is also what makes it so special. Having competed in a number of stage races I can also say that the Costa Rica Ultra Trail is unique!

Firstly, it is small.

In 2016 we had fifty participants (separated into two categories; adventure and extreme). This means that you get to meet (and share experiences with) everyone involved but also provides ample opportunities for you to make genuine friends.

Importantly, it also means that you all stay together, adding to the collective experience.



Secondly, the support crew are fantastic and numerous. In 2016 we had, an almost, 2:1 ratio of participants to support crew.

This made for an extremely well organised and well supported event.

From massages to medical attention, photographs to transport everything was taken care of.

All you need to do is run.

Thirdly, unlike other races which are run like a business (and therefore turn a profit) the Costa Rica Ultra Run is all about giving back to the local community.

During the race we stayed in schools (who also provided us with meals).

While this facilitates cultural interaction it also provides an opportunity for the organisers and participants to give something back.

It was fantastic to be able to physically see how the schools had benefitted from previous iterations of the race (like the new playground roof).

Fourthly, Costa Rica and its people are amazing.

We saw so many different landscapes during this race (the Pacific and Caribbean Coasts, plantations, jungle, rivers, waterfalls etc.) and exchanged many “Holas” with smiling locals as we passed by.

The popular saying “Pura Vida” (Pure Life) sums up their attitude to life and it is hard not to embrace it.

Finally, while the Costa Rica Ultra Trail is a race it becomes so much more than that.

A journey might be a more apt description.

It is a physical journey across Costa Rica (from coast to coast).

It is a collective journey shared by awesome likeminded people (from very different backgrounds).

But perhaps most importantly it is also an individual journey.

All of us who participated in the race learned something profound about ourselves.

Personally I learned that smiles and actions can break down most other communication barriers (I was the only native English speaker).

And in terms of running, this experience reinforced the notion that while our competitive or individual goals are important, they shouldn't get in the way of us appreciating the simple joy of running (or any other form of movement).

I weave my way between the last of the palm trees and jump down the short drop to the beach.

Small waves roll in from the Caribbean Sea and wash gently up over the sand.

I follow the undulations of the beach, slowing momentarily on the softer crests and speeding up as I cross the firmer sand in the low points.

At times I splash through the sea, at others I dodge bits of driftwood washed up on the beach. I can see the white and green flags of the finish line getting closer.

My pace quickens as I hear cheering and clapping. I look behind me, the beach is deserted.

I have won today's stage and that feels good but as I approach the finish line I realise I have won so much more.

Waiting for me is a smiling group of people - a group of people that I had never meet just over a week ago and with whom I don't even share a common language.



But now these people feel like family, my trail family.

And it gets better – after crossing the line (and taking a refreshing swim) I get to share the elation as each of my (almost) fifty new friends also completes their journey.

A Massive thanks to all the participants in the 2016 Costa Rica Ultra Trail.

You made this an amazing experience for me.

An equally big thank you to all the support crew, local people and school children who made it all possible.

And to you Bernard, what can I say, thanks for everything, as you well know ... this is so much more than a running race.

Gracias amigos

Merci mes amis

Thank you my friends, and ...

Ka kita ano (Maori for see you later)

Joe Fagan (NZL), Rank 2 on the Extreme Race, 200 km and 9 200 m of D+, in 5 stages and 23h22'.























