BALLOONS & BUDDHISTS

A marathon in the high Himalaya

by Keith MacIntosh



8 September At 6am, as the sun caught the snows of Stok Kangri, I stood at the start line and tied on two balloons.

Surrounded by high Himalayan peaks, I was waiting for the start of the second Ladakh Marathon, an event that was set up in 2012 as part of the long process of recovery after devastating floods in 2010.

Ladakh is a remote region in northern India, perched on the far side of the main Himalayan watershed between Kashmir and Tibet. Normally, it doesn't rain – clouds can't pass over the mountains. But just before I was there in 2010, there was a 'cloudburst' near Leh, the main town – in the middle of the night, four inches of rain (a year's worth) fell in just 30 minutes, leading to huge mudslides that tore through homes and lives.

This high-altitude desert is home to a Tibetan Buddhist population who have pulled together after the floods and are steadily recovering. And to show themselves, and the rest of the world, that they are back on their feet again, they set up a marathon festival – which also includes a 10k, a half marathon, an ultra, and a lot of traditional dancing.



After my time there in 2010 I was keen to go back, and I knew the people organising the event, so I got in touch to see if there was anything I could do to help. It's not a place with much of a running history, and in the previous event, most people had shot off at the start and ended up, inevitably, struggling to finish. The idea of a pacer seemed like a good one – and so there I was at dawn, balloons attached, ready to run.

I'd acclimatised over the previous couple of weeks, walking between remote villages, helping with the barley harvest, and climbing a few mountains above 6000m – but still, even at the relatively 'low' 3500m where the race takes place, there's only about two-thirds of the oxygen compared to sea level, and the slightest bit of uphill was going to be tough.

After climbing 500 steps to reach the start, I was thoroughly warmed up and ready for the early miles which head steeply down to the River Indus. Crossing a bridge beneath the monastery of Spitok, the route heads up the wide valley through barren hills, with snow peaks to the south, before crossing the Indus once more and turning back west along rough tracks to the 'Holy Fish Pond' below Shey Palace. Passing a residence of the Dalai Lama, the route then reaches the Tibetan refugee settlement of Choglamsar (which had been gutted by the floods) and turns right for an agonising final five miles, all uphill, back to Leh.

After a very steady first 20 miles, with lots of stops for photos, it was becoming clear that nobody was following me – so I decided just to run the remainder on feel, rather than worry about trying to keep to a particular pace. A lot of the frontrunners were discovering that it's all about the last few miles, and were heading backwards rapidly, so I gave what encouragement I could, and battled up the hill myself

The spectators were already entertained by the sight of a foreigner running through their villages, and I could hear even more laughter when they caught sight of my balloons (one purple, one pink). Without anyone following me, and no explanation of what I was doing, they naturally concluded that I was mad.

However, I did make it to the finish with some dignity intact, coming a respectable 4th in 03:38, about 10 minutes behind the winner and out of the way of the podium prizes, which were intended to go to locals.

Prize-giving, speeches and dancing took place for the rest of the day – a friendly mix of politicians, soldiers, schoolchildren, and monks, and a few random foreigners like me, all enjoying the afternoon together beneath the mountains.

It was fantastic to have the chance to be a part of it. The Ladakh Marathon is a wonderful example of how a running event can contribute to a community, strengthening bonds and helping to rebuild lives that were shattered when a cloud fell from the night sky.
www.ladakhmarathon.com















The Ladakh Marathon in pictures *(opposite page): A pace group near the start; pacing equipment, balloons. This page (clockwise, from top left): An orderly queue for drinks; a mid-race view; the spectators; Spitok Monastery; the finish; the Ladakh Marathon flag*