

One-man race

In a bid to enjoy the ancient statues of Easter Island in his own unique way, trail runner [Dan Slater](#) organised a race around the coastline of the small Pacific island, locally known as [Rapa Nui](#).

Words Dan Slater Photos Miguel Carrasco

Steaming into the halfway point, Dan passes the striking ceremonial platform of Ahu Tongariki.

I'm running hard, legs pumping, sweat beading on my forehead. I expected this; after all, I've travelled halfway around the world for a trail run.

What I didn't expect was to be dressed in jeans and a fleece and have a 20kg duffle bag over my shoulder, or for my route to take me through crowded Santiago de Chile airport, but the irony is lost on me as I weave through tourists and trolleys towards the check-in counter. It looks deserted, and I'm not fluent in Spanish but I'm pretty sure that Cerrado means 'Closed'. This is not good.

Fast forward 22 hours and I'm standing in the pre-dawn glow at Ahu Tahai, a ceremonial platform just outside Hanga Roa, Rapa Nui's only town, awaiting sufficient light to start running. I'm lucky to be here: with my worst fears realised and the airline employees singularly unsympathetic, I'd only made my flight by demanding a boarding pass and leaving my entire luggage behind. Stuffing my running gear into my carry-on bag and my running shoes onto my feet, I'd virtually thrown my duffle at the 'Left Luggage' clerk and sprinted through security to the gate, one of the last to board the Boeing 787 Dreamliner to Easter Island. It was an inauspicious start.

The coral eyes of the Moai glow menacingly from inside its silhouette, the only sounds the crashing of the Pacific Ocean on the jagged shoreline and the juddering of my nervous left leg against the soft earth. It doesn't look as though anyone else has turned up but, then again, no one else was invited. There's only one sure way to win an ultra-marathon and it has nothing to do with strict training regimes, nutritional plans or being lucky on the day. The secret is to be the only entrant, and that usually means organising the event yourself. Though it was unlikely that some random running enthusiast would fly out and join me, I made it an invitational just to be on the safe side.

As my watch ticks over to 8.30 and I judge it light enough to begin, I can hardly believe that I am actually here. The whole thing seems so improbable, and yet all it took was booking a flight and getting into training. The idea for the Nui Ultra Trail Run (NUTR) came to me late one night. I'd been given the opportunity to visit Chile for work and had immediately begun thinking how I could justifiably crowbar in a side trip to Easter Island, long on my bucket list. On the cusp of sleep, it came to me — I'd run around the coastline. It's possible nobody had ever done it before; I mean, why would they? Sleep became impossible as my restless mind imagined all the possibilities and went on to plan minute logistical details. It was ridiculous really; I had no idea how far it was, for a start. Was it even possible? The furthest I'd ever run before was 50km.

I set off at a gentle jog. Come on legs, do your thing! The first part of the route is relatively flat and the weather good, some scattered cloud keeping the temperature comfortable. As long as I keep the sea on my left I can't really get lost, and I soon settle into a rhythm and begin to enjoy myself. Although this is the only part of the coast that is regularly walked by tourists, there isn't much of a trail to follow, just lightly worn rocks and grass, and my enjoyment is marred slightly by conditions

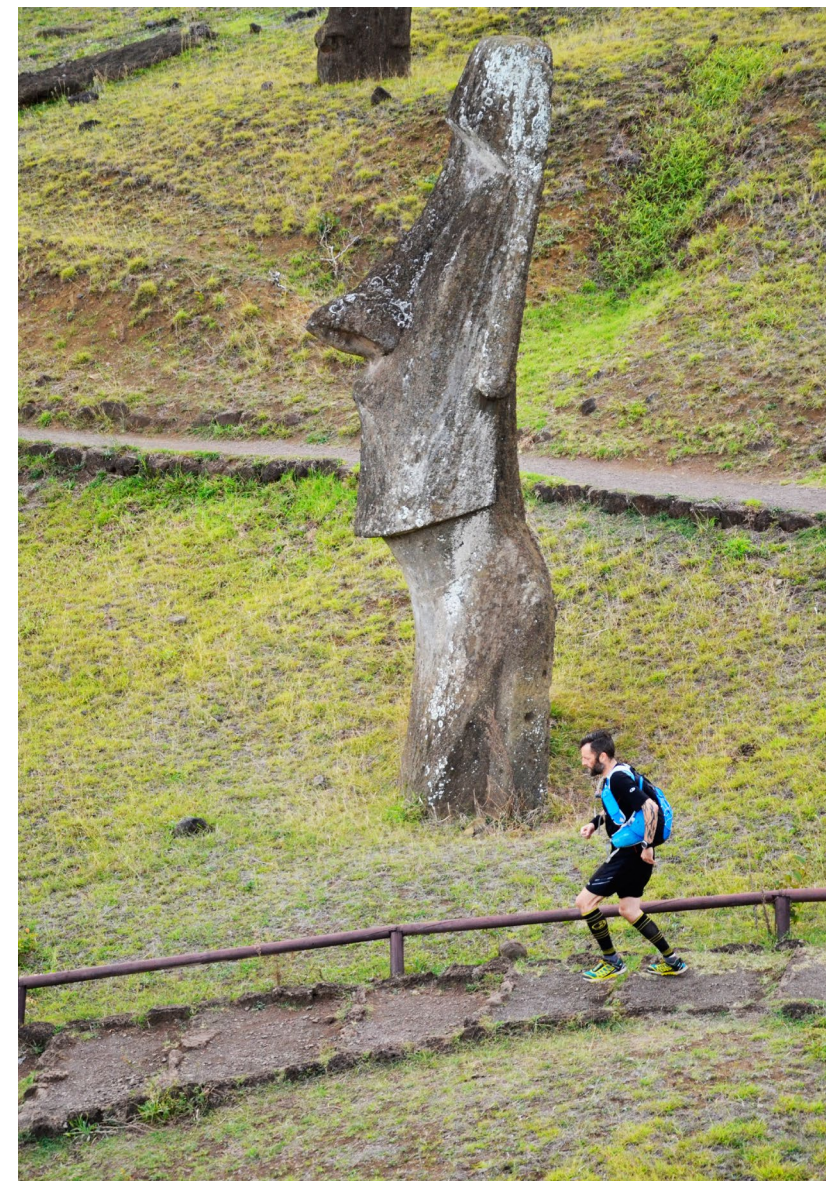
underfoot. Being a volcanic island the ground is scattered with old lava, both boulders and smaller rocks hidden in the long grass, and the regularity with which I kick or skid over them is alarming. Even forcing myself to slow down and watch every step doesn't prevent the frequent trips, and a couple of times I end up crashing headlong to the deck.

Fortunately there isn't another soul in sight to laugh at my clumsiness as few of the 6000-strong population live outside Hanga Roa, and I've only a few isolated Moai for company. Horses and cows roam the island freely but lupine, a plant originally introduced to control erosion, has proven sadly poisonous to the equine and bovine residents. Bleached, scattered bones are commonplace and a tragic number of fresh and semi-rotted carcasses litter my path as reach the northernmost point of the island and turn east.

After about two hours I reach Anakena, the only real sandy beach on the island, which I'd estimated to be about a quarter of the way around and earmarked as a rest stop. My original plan had been to run unsupported so I'd asked my hotel, Explora, if they could help me drop off some water at three strategic points along the route. They were having none of it, however, ➡

Right Now into the home straight, Dan skirts the beautiful marshy crater of Rano Kau.

Below Ahu Tongariki from the sea.



Above One of many victims of the introduced lupine weed.

Left One of the half-buried moai at the quarry site of Rano Raraku. And yes, they all have bodies.



He wouldn't be smiling if he knew how much longer it was going to take!

The Essentials

Where Easter Island aka Rapa Nui aka Isla de Pascua, Chile
When to Go There isn't a bad time. It's busiest in February around the Tapati Rapa Nui Festival and Jul/Aug may be chilly for the beach but should be fine for hiking/running.
How to get there LAN fly a Dreamliner daily from Santiago. Fares from \$600 to \$1300 return.
The Trail The Ara Mahiva is not an official trail therefore it is unmarked and crosses some fences and private land. There are plenty of short and enjoyable hiking trails on the island though, including the section of coast from Hanga Roa to Anakena Beach and the rim of Rano Kau.
Accommodation The Explora Rapa Nui was comfortable, beautifully-situated and eco-friendly and the staff were amazingly helpful when confronted with my strange requests and missing baggage.
Running Tips Take running shoes with plenty of cushioning and preferably some ankle support, a light waterproof jacket for brief showers, and a head torch in case it takes you longer than it took me. It's hard to get lost - just keep the sea on your left!
Contact www.forwardtravel.com.au

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and insisted on sending a staff member to meet me at each location with bananas and chilled mineral water. It seemed rude to refuse. In fact, after the debacle with my luggage, the team at Explora rose to my needs with gusto, lending me everything I'd left behind in my rush, from a head torch to strapping tape to the exact model of Julbo sunglasses I was missing. From a state of near panic on arrival they got me calm, collected and able to focus solely on my goal.

The morning after I came up with the NUTR I checked some basic facts — the circumference of the island was about 70km and I could find no reference to anyone having run it before. Could I really complete a world first? No. One of my spoilsport running friends discovered one Susie Stephen, who had the exact same idea two years previously. Susie had found reference to the Ara Mahiva, an ancient walking track around Rapa Nui's coastline, and decided to run it as part of a larger project she was undertaking following in the footsteps of Katherine Routledge, an English archaeologist who initiated the first real survey of Easter Island's treasures.

Initially I was a tad disappointed that my thunder had been so swiftly stolen, but I came to realise that Susie's experience would be very useful to my own planning and I made contact with her. While knowing the statistics for her run proved that it was possible, I had no other yardstick against which to measure her performance. Was she a wannabe run blogger or a total trail weapon? Also, I could find no other references online to the Ara Mahiva and I just had to trust that she hadn't made it up. On the other hand, I was worried that running the Ara Mahiva would turn out to be a regular event on Rapa Nui. I half-expected the first islander I met to say "Oh yeah, the Ara Mahiva marathon was a couple of weeks ago. Young Riu Turakiu broke the five-hour barrier!" As it was, all I got were blank stares and "The Ara Ma-who-va?"

I'm feeling pretty good as I resume running from Anakena. The remainder of the north coast is quiet save the pounding waves, the screech of disturbed falcons and the regular burst of expletives as I skate over another lump of lava. Rapa Nui is roughly triangular with a volcano at each corner, the larg-

est of which, Terevaka, I've contoured already. The first real challenge is Poike, which constitutes the eastern nub of the island. As I gain altitude, majestic cliffs rise to my left, broken by gullies, and I steer away from the absolute edge which often looks like it could give way at any moment.

In stark contrast to the rest of the island, the Poike Peninsula is a red desert, a baking Martian landscape devoid of life and rutted by numerous ravines. Susie had become distracted near here and strayed inland, inadvertently cutting off the easternmost point, and I'm determined not to make the same mistake. As I round the grassy cliffs I'm treated to an amazing view of the entire south coast abutting an endless blue ocean, and for the first time the true isolation of Rapa Nui, five hours flight from anywhere, is fully apparent. The next volcano, Rano Kau, is just about visible through the haze and, my God, it looks a long way away.

I've been running for over five hours by the time I reach the halfway point at Ahu Tongariki, one of the biggest ceremonial sites and home to 15 standing Moai. I'm tracking slightly slower than I'd hoped but feel good nonetheless; I'm still ahead of the pack, after all! Although the famous monolithic statues were still standing when Europeans first arrived on the scene in 1722, most were toppled during later civil conflicts and remained so until restored by archaeologists last century. In fact, almost half of the statues still lie in and around the quarry where they were carved from volcanic tuff between 1250 and 1500, and contrary to popular belief they all have bodies attached to their heads.

Easter Island



Annotated map

- 1 Start/finish
- 2 First fall
- 3 Plague of dead cows
- 4 First rest
- 5 Mars
- 6 Hectic descent
- 7 Halfway point
- 8 Rain squalls
- 9 Last rest
- 10 Start of second wind
- 11 End of second wind

The third leg is flat again but a metal road follows the length of the south coast and the presence of cars is distracting. I keep my feet off the tarmac wherever possible but my dedication to following the true coast is constantly tested by its jagged course, which lengthens my route as I am rapidly tiring. My fallen arches are beginning to complain loudly now, a couple of brief downpours slow me down further and my ankles are twisted and tired. I'm limping by the time I reach Vinapu, the final water stop.

My body is grateful for a brief rest as I sit and guzzle electrolytes. I'm fairly confident now that I'll complete the circuit, albeit a couple of hours slower than Susie (her status as Trail Weapon is no longer in doubt), but the sun will begin setting in a couple of hours and the biggest obstacle is still to go: Rano Kau — the last and most beautiful volcano and at 315m the run's highest point. Amazingly, the steep climb coincides with that most unpredictable of pace mates — the second wind. I forget my pain and speed-stride up to the crater rim, where I'm treated to a spectacular panorama.

Slightly out to sea are three Motu, or islets, the furthest of which was the outpost of the ancient Birdman Competition. In this fearsome precursor to modern adventure racing, competitors had to down climb the vertical cliffs of Rano Kau and swim 1.5km through shark-infested waters to Motu Nui to procure the first egg laid by the colony of sooty terns that nested there each spring, before presenting the egg, unbroken, to their tribal sponsor.

Many athletes died every year and the competition was

suppressed by missionaries in the 1860s.

Unfortunately the sheer cliffs prohibit a traverse of the outward rim of Rano Kau, which would be necessary to follow the coastline exactly. In truth, a crossing may be physically possible but would be an insult to the local people, for whom it is a sacred site, and anyway the run around the extinct volcano is one of the highlights of the day. The views of the opposite rim, a mile away, of the marshy crater lake hundreds of metres below and of the Pacific stretching uninterrupted all the way to Brisbane, more than 9000km to the west, sustain me until the final downhill charge into Hanga Roa.

The final few kilometres through town are punishing. With one eye on the sun, lowering by degrees to my left, I'm alternately jogging and walking. It seems like all the townsfolk are out enjoying the pleasant afternoon yet none spare me a second glance, for which I am grateful. The seafront of Hanga Roa seems endless as I limp towards Ahu Tahai, set on a stunted headland just the other side of town. Apart from the hotel driver, there's no one there to greet me, to cheer me on, to even know what I've just done, but that doesn't matter. In the dying light I stagger to a standstill, hands on hips, breathing hard. My legs may feel like they've been beaten with an iron bar, but I've made it. I won! Although I realise with a start that I also came last. Still, it won't say that on the trophy!

Dan was a guest of Forward Travel www.forwardtravel.com.au