

The Tenzing Hillary Everest Marathon is like no other — here, 42 kms of running is to be done not with the encouragement of cheering crowds on a tar road, but to the accompaniment of stunning, ice-capped peaks, oxygen-light air and on a terrain that's all rocks and little road, as STEPHEN CUNLIFFE discovered

Ready to race across the Roof of the World?

Type: **ADVENTURE**
Best from: **KATHMANDU**
You need: **15 DAYS**

The Tenzing Hillary Everest Marathon is a truly unique event. Everest, Lhotse and Nuptse tower above the start line as the world's highest marathon gets underway inside the notorious Khumbu Icefall, a stone's throw from Everest Base Camp. The high-altitude adventure course criss-crosses the highland Sherpa trails of the upper Khumbu valley, forging a route across slippery glaciers and rock-strewn moraines. The trail traces the historical route to Everest pioneered by the late Tenzing Norgay Sherpa and Sir Edmund Hillary when they first climbed Everest back in 1953. The marathon takes place annually on May 29, the anniversary of their successful summit bid, and serves as a fitting tribute to these two great mountain slayers.

Age no bar

Participating in the iconic Everest Marathon is a surreal experience. After following a 14-day acclimatisation trek to the starting point, the main event finally kicks off at Everest Base Camp. We find ourselves encamped on the Khumbu Glacier: a frigid waste of cold blue ice and fluffy white snow. We are a cosmopolitan crowd of local Nepali runners (who traditionally dominate this event) and adventure-seeking international competitors who've signed on for a rare opportunity to race across the roof of the world. As we were to undergo mandatory pre-race medical checks, I bumped into Mala Honnatti. Having travelled from Gurgau to the stark wastelands of the high Himalayas, she is a doughty woman in her late fifties with the prestigious honour of being the first Indian woman ever to compete in the Everest Marathon. "Being a keen trekker and devoted marathon runner, I thought

why not club my two passions together and challenge myself by competing in this exciting event," she explained to me. There is no doubting that Mala is a remarkable and determined lady, but she is not nearly the oldest competitor in the race. Eighty-four-year-old Dave Webster from the USA had that distinction until he was unceremoniously run over by a yak and forced to withdraw from the 2011 event. Nobô Mori, 71, of Japan then inherited the oldest participant accolade; however, the brutal weather conditions would force him also to retire midway through the marathon. I suddenly find myself at the front of the queue and undergo my medical check up; the doc gives me the green light to compete the next day. Later that night, I lie in my tent and listen to



An elephant-back safari in search of the prolific Indian one-horned rhino in either Chitwan or Royal Bardia is the perfect recovery option after completing the gruelling Everest Marathon. PICS/STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

the gurgle of water flowing through the glacier beneath the camp. The neighbouring icefall creaks and groans ominously before being drowned out by the thunderous roar of an avalanche tearing down a nearby mountainside. But, even without the unrelenting disturbances of mother nature, it is nigh on impossible to sleep soundly in the thin air above 5,000m. It's cold up here; very cold indeed. **Cold and crazy** I am roused before dawn by the heavenly sound of a friendly Sherpa bringing tea. It's 4 am and I hammer the ice off the frozen tent zips and open up. Cooned in my sleeping bag, I gladly accept a cup of hot chai and slurp down the warm sweet liquid, which immediately begins to thaw out my heat-

starved body. Today is the big day and it's time to get ready. In the sub-zero temperatures, it takes serious willpower to crawl out from the sanctuary of my sleeping bag and pull on my running kit. Outside, flurries of snow swirl around the mist-shrouded camp. It's a foreboding scene: a white world with thick grey clouds tumbling ominously off the surrounding Himalayan peaks. A light snow is falling and it refuses to abate. Along with the other 113 competitors, I wolf down a big bowl of porridge and drain a cup of energising hot chocolate in preparation for the long day ahead. At 6:30am we make our way gladly accept a cup of hot chai and slurp down the warm sweet liquid, which immediately begins to thaw out my heat-

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Watched over by gigantic snowy peaks, the Tenzing Hillary Everest Marathon is simultaneously exhilarating and exhausting. PIC/TENZING HILLARY EVEREST MARATHON

TOOL KIT
WHEN TO GO: The race is held each year on **May 29** — the anniversary of the historic first successful summit bid by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay.

GETTING THERE: The nearest airport is perched atop a cliff at Lukla. The scenic hour-long flight from Kathmandu deposits you at 3,300m in the Solu-Khumbu region of northeastern Nepal. From here, a 10-14 day acclimatisation trek takes competitors via the panoramic viewpoint at Kalapatthar (5545m) and on to Everest Base Camp. The gradual ascent rate ensures problems with altitude sickness are avoided so that everyone arrives at base camp in good health, ready to compete in the race.

WHERE TO STAY: Hotel accommodation is provided in Kathmandu and Lukla as part of the event package. Thereafter participants are accommodated in two-man dome tents. Wholesome meals are served as buffets. Hot showers are only available at the hotels and

teahouses. Toilets are in the form of rustic, environmentally friendly, dry pit latrines. For safari arrangements, consult the reliable Tiger Tops www.tigermountain.com, as they operate a selection of Nepal's finest safari camps.

WHAT TO DO: Aside from the acclimatisation trek leading up to the race, visits to monasteries (such as World Heritage-listed Tengboche Gompa) and Himalayan villages (like Pangboche) add a fascinating cultural dimension to this Himalayan odyssey.

WHAT TO BRING: The Himalayan Expeditions team provides all equipment, tents, food and porters. In addition to your personal items and running kit, bring a sturdy pair of hiking boots, wind/waterproof jacket and headlamp, as well as a hat, sunglasses and sun block. Warm clothing, thermals and a cosy sleeping bag are essential.

For further information, check out www.everestmarathon.com or email the race organiser, Shikhar Pandey, at eventmanager@everestmarathon.com

The end is near
At the 32km mark the track disappears abruptly down a mountainside as it loses 800 vertical metres in the space of barely a mile; the course then climbs uphill for 250 vertical metres to crest a ridge at a checkpoint alongside the World Heritage-inscribed Tengboche Monastery before dropping back down another equally steep, long and taxing mountain slope. At the bottom, I cross a swaying suspension bridge and a 400 vertical metre climb confronts me. It's a steep, soul destroying path up through a colourful pink rhododendron forest. By this point I'm utterly spent and my fuel tank is empty. All I want to do is lie down and cry. It takes all my reserves of stamina and dogged determination to grit my teeth and drag my weary body up the slope to Sanasa, capping off the most brutally exhausting five kilometre section of a punishing race. Thankfully, from Sanasa I find a contouring trail that winds its way around the mountain to the finish line in the Khumbu's Sherpa capital of Namche Bazaar. After 42 exhausting kilometres on rough Himalayan mountain trails, the finishing banner is a sight for sore eyes. As I accept my finishers medal and congratulate my fellow runners, I learn that the Nepali athlete Sudip Kurlung Rai won the 2011 race in a blistering 3h46, which is so fast that it almost defies belief and makes my 6h34 look positively slow. Later as I hobble towards my hotel in search of a much-needed shower, I see Mala cross the finish line in a respectable 10h21. I know it is slower than she was hoping for, but just completing this epic event is an incredible achievement in itself. Mala is proof incarnate that it's not just physical strength that's required to compete in this tough race. Sure, participants need to have some tough terrain trail running experience, but self-belief, strength of mind and tenacity are the real qualities needed to conquer the Tenzing Hillary Everest Marathon.

The run of a lifetime
After completing the race of a lifetime, why not head off to either Chitwan or Royal Bardia national parks for some well deserved rest and recuperation? Both reserves offer comfortable safari lodges, superb wildlife-viewing of wild elephants, rhinos and tigers aplenty, as well as a whole host of entertaining activities including jeep drives, elephant-back safaris, walking excursions and tranquil river cruises in search of marsh muggers and Gangesic dolphins. And where better to recover from the rigours of mountain running than on a relaxing nature safari, exploring one of Nepal's premier wildlife parks in the lowland Terai. Nepal, Everest and the world's most spectacular marathon await you.