

The Ultra-Trail Australia 100K by Matt Flaherty

Majell Backhausen and I were chatting over coffees—specifically, flat whites, in local style—at a small shop in Wanaka, New Zealand. It was February, and I had been traveling around New Zealand after the Tarawera 102K. Backhausen, an Australian Salomon teammate of mine, had likewise been drifting around the country after racing the 60K at Tarawera. We’d met up briefly in Wanaka before another reunion at the Old Ghost Ultra a week later. As we discussed future race and adventure plans, he suggested I should come back down for the Ultra-Trail Australia (UTA) 100K in May.

Backhausen had recently taken on a role with the UTA race organization helping to attract and coordinate the elite field. I had been so struck by the affability of those in the New Zealand and Australian ultrarunning community (the two are closely linked and involved with one another, so I got a good exposure at Tarawera), that the prospect of returning so soon strongly appealed. Experiencing and engaging with these cultures, not to mention taking in the incredible natural landscapes on offer, are among the many compelling reasons to race abroad.

Americans already slated for the competition included Sally McRae, Rob Krar, and Mike Wardian. After corresponding with the race organizers, I decided to join the fray. Tim Tollefson added his name to the start list soon after as well, along with a strong international contingent from Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and France, among others. As an Ultra Trail World Tour race, UTA, like Tarawera, attracts one of the best fields among ultra races in Oceania, and this year would be no exception.

Taking place in the Blue Mountains to the west of Sydney, the race is now in its tenth year. These striking mountains aren’t really mountains in the common American conception—a spine of peaks rising from plains or rolling hills—but, rather, are characterized by plateaus and canyons. The landscape more closely resembles the American Southwest, though somewhat less arid.

Most mornings in Katoomba, the site of the race, an inversion left me looking down on a layer of clouds blanketing the canyon. This phenomenon leaves plenty of moisture inside the canyons, where one can find temperate rainforests. The higher canyon rim trails by contrast remained mostly dry.

The UTA course sees runners descending into and climbing out of these canyons multiple times. Its 14,000-plus feet of climbing are formidable. The steep cliffs and contours of the canyons mean that the descents and ascents are anything but gradual. Instead, runners encounter thousands of stairs (and even some ladders) to scramble in and out of the canyons. Some stairs are metal installations with railings. Others are irregular and carved into the landscape with rather significant height differential between steps. The worst, by which I mean the most maddening while racing, are the many stairs bulwarked by narrow boards. The earth behind these boards was often heavily eroded, leaving one trying to “run” up or down a series two-inch-wide edges. But it’s a small price to pay for a beautiful course in a national park.

In UTA’s nine prior years, weather had been near perfect. This year, we broke the streak as rain poured over the area the day before the race. At the last minute, both the 100K and 50K races had to be rerouted. Thankfully, UTA is a well-oiled machine with contingency plans in place, and the last minute switch was accomplished with apparent ease and

astounding efficiency. All sorts of spectators and even competitors from previous races (there is a 22K and stair race the day prior to the main event) stepped up to help change course markings and direct the several-thousand runners on race day.

Thankfully, we did not have to race in too much rain, though it was cool and drizzling for the first hour or so of the 100K. In the dawn light, we ran a few miles on the road, which helped to sort out the field a bit, before hitting a slick and steep trail descent full of stairs. I settled into the back of a conga line of eight or ten runners and focused on staying relaxed.

The course offers some nice variety, and after some technical trails and a stair-filled climb, we hit a long stretch of fire road that offered both speedy running and gorgeous vistas. Over the next hour or so, I gradually moved up, until I was told at the 20-mile aid station that I was in fourth place. After I left the station, I was thinking that that didn't seem right, but before I could give it much thought, I saw a flash of movement to my left. There, in a field, were several kangaroos of medium size intermittently hopping and eyeing me. I gather this is rather commonplace for Australians, but to me, as an American in the country for the first time, the creatures were rather striking.

Moments later, another striking creature came up behind me—Rob Krar, moving quickly with his slightly-choppy, yet highly-efficient stride. Apparently Krar had taken a wrong turn early in the race and had been working his way back through the field. This explained why I had been in fourth. Krar only missed seven minutes or so with his error, but even so, wrong turns can be mentally devastating in an ultra. Krar handled it with impressive aplomb, continuing to work his way up through the field.

As we passed the halfway point, a steep climb knocked me down physically and mentally—a difficult grind up the steps at Nellie's Glen. It's something quite different to climb 1,000 feet via steps as opposed to a hill climb where a high cadence and power hiking can help to break it up. I realized too late that I should have better heeded the pre-race advice to practice my stair climbing.

Cresting the climb, I ran back through the Start/Finish area in Katoomba around 57k and lost a few places. I tried to recover from the climb with a good nutrition break, readying myself for the third section of the course. This stretch roughly traverses the upper rim of a canyon, with short climbs and descents on the aforementioned maddening wooden steps. Typically, the course has a long, runnable descent from 80k to 90k before climbing and looping back to the finish, but this year's reroute would instead turn the race's last 43k into an out and back—less total vertical gain, but more of the seemingly endless steps and stairs.

The turnaround for the out and back was just shy of 80k. It afforded runners a view of their immediate competition as well as what was happening among the race leaders. I saw Tim Tollefson first, looking strong and headed back towards home. He had a sizeable gap on Rob Krar in second, one that he would roughly hold to the finish. The men finished in 8:52:00 and 9:11:15 respectively.

Reaching the turnaround, I saw that the fifth and sixth place runners were within a mile ahead of me, and also that there were numerous runners not far behind me. There would be no backing off the pace or even the mental comfort of having a time gap. I kept grinding and soon managed to move into sixth, which I was able to hold while running scared for the next several hours.

As I headed back, I saw Lucy Bartholomew, leading on her way to an impressive victory. Racing on her birthday at all of 21 years old, she handled the distance and course like a consummate veteran. She would hold her lead en route to a 10:52:35 finishing time. As for me, the final climb up the difficult Furber Steps put me across the line in 9:58:45. Another hard-fought race that didn't go quite to plan (do they ever?), but satisfying both in spite of and because of this. I looked up at the clock and realized with a smile that this was the longest duration I had ever run.