

Yo, Soy un Transvulcan bebé - by Richard Butterwick

It was just before 8am on the steep upward slope of Calle de Volcanes in the small town of Los Canarios, a young girl was ushered forward by her mother. She stood there shyly half holding out a clenched hand unsure of what to do. Her face lit up with excitement, as 'Todmorden' reached down to gently tap her hand with a grinning "Gracias". Her mother squealed with delight then joined in with the shouts of "Animo" and "Vamos" as the girl ran back to her arms.

After the water station, the crowd funnelled in towards the top of the climb, Tour de France mountain style, with just enough space for one runner to squeeze through the deafening yells. The pavement plaques commemorating every male & female winner of the Transvulcania Ultramarathon hidden under hundreds of feet.

Surging forward up a quieter path, still climbing, a beautiful woman picked out his name from his race number with her dark sultry eyes. Her lips glistened in the early morning sun, as she quietly urged him on "An-i-mo Ri-shad An-i-mo" barely louder than a whisper but firmly penetrating through the noise of the crowd below.

He breathlessly hesitated as their eyes briefly locked, but then pressed on, remembering this was the race report for the Transvulcania Media Maratón not the opening lines of a new romantic novel, 50 shades of volcanic black!

After following the spectacular Transvulcania race on the Canary Island of La Palma since it started in 2009, I finally dared to enter the fun run version. At 24.1km (or 26.8 pre-remeasurement) it was longer than I had ever raced before, but 2014 had been a good year... up to 10 miles (16k).

A winter of viruses did little to help preparations in upping mileage but 2015 would be the year of half marathons, with 5 completed in the lead up, including 3 in 3 weeks in April. In March I'd also notched up only my 2nd ever long fell race at Heptonstall, a confidence boosting well-paced effort over 24 km, but with less than 1000m of height gain, the Mediamaraton had more than double the up.

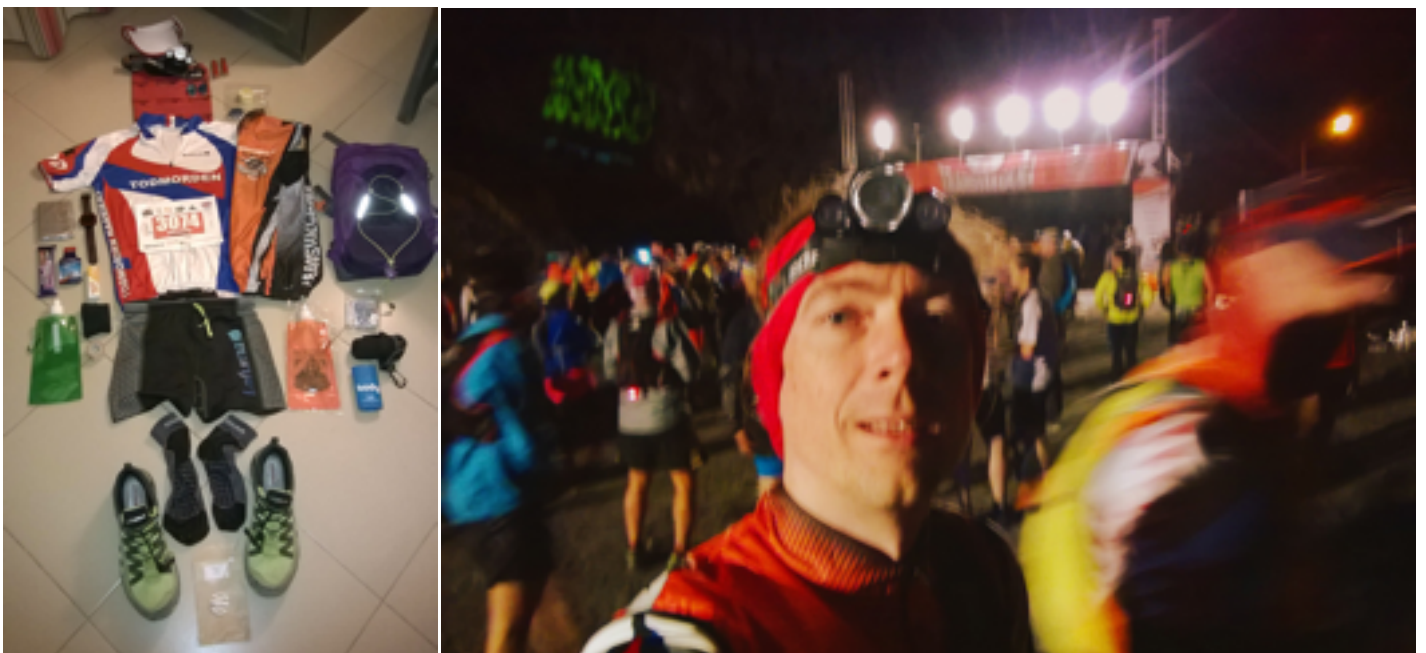
Arriving on the Thursday evening before the race was a shock from the cold British spring, only a week since I'd last touched snow and now straight into 80' near tropical sun. To make things worse the chest infection that I had for a couple of weeks morphed into a cold just days before. Apparently flying with a cold is a bad idea as it makes landing very painful and affects hearing & balance, I googled queasily later.

Friday was a busy day, hiring the last spare car on the island, crossing the mountains (more ear problems) to Los Llanos to collect my race number and pick up some

souvenirs at the runner's fair. Down to the southern tip of the island for a 5k acclimatisation run, then check out the hairpin roads to find the finish, so that Myra knew where to pick me up after the race, hopefully.

I laid out every item of race kit ready, checked, double checked, and went to sleep. Maybe not, too excited. Browsed Transvulcania tweets for a bit, and finally got to sleep just after midnight. The alarm went off at 3am. The hotel had kindly laid on a 'runners breakfast' between 2-3am but I wisely decided an extra hours sleep to be preferable.

At just after 4am we were on the road south, which was in the midst of major roadworks and regularly involved driving off the now non-existent road. By 5am we were parked on a windy volcanic cliff just 700 metres from the start. Having heard tales of freezing winds I was pleased to find it was actually relatively mild, to me, nice for now but meant it would only be hotter later.



At 6am the Ultra marathon was underway and the river of ~1500 lights made its way around the Faro de Fuencaliente lighthouse and up along the path like a reverse pyroclastic flow. The speed of the frontrunners was incredible, only 73km to go for them.

I then made my way down to the starting pen for the Mediamaratón, loud rock music & a manic PA guy battled the crashing waves a few feet below. A giant green countdown clock was projected on the rock face. I resisted joining the extremely athletic looking crowd toeing the line with 30 minutes still to go and attempted a

warmup jog between the back of the crowd and the 3 portaloos at the other end of the pen. So glad I had skipped breakfast and had no need for them!

The others warming up looked like serious athletes, all matching kit, poles & everything Salomon. At least I looked the part with my matching Lafuma shoes, shorts and bag teamed up with a cheeky glimpse of a Tod vest peeking out from under my Transvulcania gilet – this was no fell race in a farmer's field, this was a proper continental fashion race!

With 10 minutes to go, everyone was bouncing to Rage Against the Machine and Metallica. I reflected that 20 years ago I was actually probably doing the same thing to the same songs in the early hours of a Saturday morning in May, but with a day in bed with a hangover rather than 24 dusty kilometres & a hot sun to look forward to. As Thunderstruck literally shook the foundations of the island, this was it DIEZ-NUEVE-OCHO 413 starters SIETE-SEIS 24.1 dry and dusty kilometres CINCO-QUATRO over 100 volcanoes to run past or over TRES-DOS-UNO... VAMOS... this was Transvulcania bebe!!!

I resisted the urge to sprint the first hill but still rocketed off as though it was a 5k near the back. After a crowd pleasing loop around the lighthouse it was onto a narrow volcanic sandy path and up. 1800 metres up in the first 18km to be precise.

There wasn't too much queueing to scramble up the rocks with only a quarter the runners of the main race and within a km I was settled. It was hard going but I was getting the hang of picking out the bumps in the volcanic sand. I grew up playing on Formby beach and dunes, so instinctively knew the secret was always to place your foot on sand sloping away to gain a bit of extra purchase. The sun hadn't yet risen but there was enough dawn light to see, I left my torch on as the light spot on the ground made overtaking easier by alerting those ahead.

After the noise at the start, it was quiet, eerily quiet, very little talking just breathing. Thirty minutes in and I was still gaining places. I used a steeper slope to walk, drink and swop headtorch and the freebie gilet for a cap. The sun was still hidden behind a volcano but it was already warming noticeably.

After a decent section of dusty track, the approach to the town of Los Canarios and the first water station was up a steep winding path. For the first time it felt like I was working flat out as I struggled for meaningful traction in the deep loose sand. Onto the road by the visitor centre and around a corner the sun came into view, as did a steep climb. I ran it. I didn't mean to but there were lots of people encouraging us on and I felt guilty to walk. Most others obviously didn't, as they walked. Then I went round the next corner and saw the real crowd! The whole town was up and had been cheering for nearly 2 hours. I kept running and smiling.

[6.1k Split 98th – 1:01:55]

Arrived at the first of two water stations in good shape, for some inexplicable reason I ignored my planned hydration strategy. (i.e. drink lots). I had two 0.5l bottles for the race but one had leaked so I ditched it before the start. I'd started well hydrated and had drunk a third of it but forgot to top it up. I drank just 1 cup at the water station, and 1 poured over head. I only had 11km ish to the next water station so should be fine. I often have run longer with no food/ water in a morning. But not usually under a sub tropical sun, up big mountains, on tough sandy terrain, in a big race, oops!

The next 3-4km was still difficult running, much harder than the first section, and harder than I had expected here. Despite the addition of pine trees to the landscape the soft deep sand continued but I was still progressing up the field, probably now into the low 80's position wise and on for a sub 4 hour time. Sometime around 10k I started feeling different and had stopped picking off places.

On a particularly steep climb I had eaten a cake bar and had to wash it down with water but was now down to about two mouthfuls left. The uphill was relentless with only brief flats or even downs, the only other relief when the deep sand occasionally alternated with more rocky sections. The relatively new volcanic rock (less than 400 years, with the last eruption in 1971) being very sharp and grippy demanded 100% concentration every step, a fall would not be pretty.

After a big climb past the impressive San Martin volcano we reached a hellish hot open section of black sand that seemed to drain every drop of liquid in my body straight out of my feet. Surely it wasn't far to the next drinks station? It was. I'd switched from race mode to survival mode, the two mouthfuls of water reserved for if things got serious. It was five or so of the longest hottest hardest kilometres ever, down to over 20 minutes for 1km on the steeper sections, struggling for grip, sand slipping backwards, sun getting higher and hotter. One of the hardest mental battles I've had to stay positive and focused on just keeping going.

Finally, after a few false hopes, what I thought was the final climb before the water station came into sight and I decided I had to drink half my water as I was overheating and losing my head. Still saving a mouthful in case of real emergency. A slight down allowed a rare bit of easier running and as I rounded a corner a big white tent thingy full of drinks appeared before the climb like a magic oasis. Orange, water, energy drink, water over head, repeat. Oh! go on, then just another cup. 2 litres later and I think I was rehydrated enough to know I wasn't hallucinating!

[16.5k Split 131st – 3:09:29]

Despite the refreshment and the knowledge this was the last climb, it didn't make it any less steep or easier and more places were lost before I reached the top as I was struck with cramps at the back of my knees. As long as I didn't lift them it was bearable, not easy on a big hill. For the first time I could also detect the effects of the altitude, subtle but definitely less oxygen, about 20% less.



Finally, it was all downhill now, almost, there were still 3 climbs within the down. At least the paths were getting rockier in places, although I did delight in a long sandy/ loose rock descent taken at full effort. More and more places gained and also catching back markers of the Ultra who still had over 50km to go.

Increasing amounts of trees and I knew the finish couldn't be too far. The question was how far, as there seemed to be conflicting race information as to whether it was 24.1 or 26.8km that I didn't resolve until afterwards. The excellently marked GR131 trail signs didn't help either as it appeared there was some kind of re-measuring exercise going on and the two sets of marker posts gave different distances as well.

It didn't matter, I was running again, I was racing again, and I was really enjoying it so the more the better. At that point I'd have kept running the whole island if I could have. Music started filtering through the trees, then shouts and cheers so I knew I was getting close. Hit my fastest km of the race. Managed one last overtake on the final

twists and turns and then there were people, lots of people and a huge orange banner appeared. Completely forgot about my planned triathlon style hi-5 weave finish as I saw the clock and sprinted straight across the line in 4:14:21 and 124th place (16th male vet).

My first overseas race was an amazing experience, I expected hard and it was so much harder. Good lessons learnt. 90% of me would do it again tomorrow, but 10% remembers the hell in the middle and thinks never again. It's probably that 10% that will see me back on La Isla Bonita with its wonderful people and scenery sometime soon though!

Yo, Soy un Transvulcan bebé (Translation: I am a Transvulcan, baby!)

