



IN THE GOBI DESERT. IMAGE: RACING THE PLANET

TAMING THE 4 DESERTS

HE BEAT THE HEAT AND THEN WENT FOR THE FREEZE. **DR INIA RAUMATI** FROM KUMEU, NZ DOESN'T DO THINGS BY HALVES, AND BACK IN 2014 HE TOOK ON THE 4 DESERTS GRAND SLAM, BECOMING THE FIRST (AND ONLY) KIWI TO COMPLETE IT – TAKING HIMSELF ACROSS THE SAHARA IN JORDAN, THE GOBI IN CHINA, THE ATACAMA CROSSING IN CHILE AND LASTLY, ANTARCTICA. SINCE 2008, ONLY 89 INDIVIDUALS FROM AROUND THE WORLD HAVE COMPLETED THE EPIC GRAND SLAM OF ALL FOUR DESERTS ONE AFTER THE OTHER, AND TODAY HE RECAPS THE EXPERIENCE IN PREPARATION OF A NEW BIG ADVENTURE HE HAS PLANNED FOR HIS 50TH BIRTHDAY NEXT YEAR.

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Staggering through the heat haze of the salt flats like a cowboy from an old Western movie whose horse had died long ago, I spotted the white dome of the aid station.

Well, I hoped it was the aid station and not a mirage, but typically mirages don't sing happy birthday, do they? I'd planned on doing something memorable for my 40th birthday. I didn't count on not being able to remember it, but that's what happens when you run 250km in the heat of Chile's Atacama Desert – a place so inhospitable that they use it to test the Mars rovers.

The Atacama Crossing race was the hardest of the events; with altitude and heat combining to literally cook you. The sun not only beat down, but reflected up off the salt plains, which crunched like coral under foot. With long stretches of no shelter, you ran first thing in the morning when it was cool, tried to survive the midday heat, and

if still out in the evening, picked the pace up again.

It was the best birthday I have ever had. Luckily a film crew was making a documentary on a fellow runner and I somehow got interviewed, so at least I have some footage of the event. It hadn't started out this way, and I never planned it, but I was midway through my third ever 250km self-supported ultramarathon and almost (because at the time, I was running my 3rd out of 4 events) becoming the first ever Kiwi to complete the Racing the Planet 4 Deserts Grand Slam.

Completing four desert ultras – the Sahara, Gobi, Atacama and Antarctica – all in a calendar year (once finishing, I did become the first to complete the Grand Slam). 1000km of self-supported Type 2 fun in some of the most testing conditions of any race, all with the added bonus of carrying

TRAVERSING ACROSS THE SNOW AND ICE IN STUNNING ANTARCTICA.
IMAGE: RACING THE PLANET.



all your food and supplies you need for seven days. With very little ultra running experience, and even less sleep, I happened to be working one night shift at work when I decided it would be a great idea to enter my first ever multi-day ultra. A couple months later with a dodgy Achilles that my physio thought would either be 'sweet as' or rupture, I was in Jordan spending my first night in a survival bag under a Bedouin tent as it rained for the first time in years.

I wasn't the only one who looked out of place at the start line. My pack was way

too heavy and my kit was a hodgepodge of gym and tramping gear, but at least I didn't show up with a red 'Jordan' souvenir cap on, sideways. That was Atul Patki from the USA, and by the end of the series we would become good mates. I liked him from the start, and it wasn't just the fact that he was obviously more clueless about these events than I was. It was because the night before while everyone else was complaining about the cold and the wet, he had been snoring like a train, oblivious to it all.

Attitude is everything in these sort of

events, including your ability to accept that things won't go to plan, shrug it off and move on. After my first day I emptied out most of my pack to ditch as much weight as possible. Atul came in almost last and quickly displayed the Kiwi slang he had learnt by announcing to everyone, "This sucks, bro".

The next day I broke out the poles and accepted that a large portion of my day would be more hiking than running. By the start of the third day I had a solid routine going – eat, poop, run, eat, sleep, repeat.

DR INIA RAUMATI (LEFT) AT THE FINISH LINE WITH TWO OTHER PARTICIPANTS OF THE 2014 ANTARCTICA LEG OF THE 4 DESERTS GRAND SLAM. IMAGE: RACING THE PLANET.



At the start of the long stage on day five, which was more than 80km, of which some people would be running through the night or sleeping on the course; Atul was still there, unlike some more experienced runners. In fact the night before when someone asked why his pack was still so heavy, Atul pulled out a stash of chocolate bars he had been carrying all that way to offer to everyone; legend.

The long-stage was tough. We climbed the 'Turkish Road' over the mountains towards Petra, and I passed lead runners vomiting in

the altitude and heat. We went the wrong way, after local kids removed the marking flags and I had to race to keep up with a faster runner when my head torch died. To this day I can't remember crossing the finish line that night. What I do remember was how swollen my feet were, and how after a deep sleep other runners were still coming in the midday heat the next day. Including our mate Atul, still smiling and complaining how it "sucks bro", with an attitude that we would dub the 'Atul factor' whenever something went wrong. It turns out he was planning to run all four of the 4

Deserts races that year, because he wanted to prove something to his daughter. After a short run into Petra the next day it was time for pizza and a few beers. Maybe it was the fact that Atul was going to run all four races, or maybe it was one too many beers, but it didn't take long before I'd put my hand up to try and be the first Kiwi to complete the Grand Slam.

I wish I could say that with my experience from Jordan that everything became easier in the year's subsequent races. Flying into China for the next race in the Gobi



Desert, the Gobi March, the airline lost my checked luggage, which contained all my race food and most of my clothing. With a rapid connecting flight into the middle of nowhere, I showed up to race check-in planning to run in my boxers and try and convince the organisers I could live off a packet of biscuits.

I put a sign up on the check-in board with a list of kit, my room number, and a message requesting donations, and actually managed through the kindness of the other competitors to have enough kit to start. The only problem ended up being the food donated was mainly from the Asian competitors, and was a lucky dip for every meal, as I had no idea what was in the bags.

A breakfast of rehydrated rice and squid (I think) saw me constantly visiting the toilets on day one. I was still running to the bushes at day two, almost being unable to continue when I couldn't eat or drink anything without an attack of the squirts. I managed to survive, and by the long stage was feeling good and actually managed to climb into the top 20, with a couple new mates Rob Trepa and Brett Foote, who kept an eye on me when I was sick.

Having a good long stage would turn out to be a recurring theme for my races. In truth looking at the race timings, all I ever did was stay consistent while others either slowed down or pulled out from injury.

INSIDER KNOWLEDGE: Dr Inia Raumati isn't a fast runner, but he is a fast eater, so the natural fit was for him to run multi-stage ultras to truck on stubbornly while carrying all his snacks. Inia trains in Riverhead Forest with his coach Doug the Huntaway and is planning to achieve his second 4 Deserts Grand Slam in 2024. He loves type 2 fun, coffee, scenic poops and petting dogs.



By the time we hit Antarctica at the end of the year for the Last Desert race, all the Grand Slam runners were pretty fatigued. So I decided to team up with Brett and Rob (with Atul as team mascot) to help get each other through. The weather that time of year was uncharacteristically poor and on day one I had to take the liner out of my right hand glove, insert an instant heat pack, and shove it down the front of my pants, to literally stop my nuts from freezing. I had long since ceased to be able to feel my feet and now arguably more vital parts of my anatomy.

The wind had picked up, stirring up the ice and snow, making vision at times almost impossible. Even with crampons attached to the outside of my running shoes gripping the ice, forward momentum was hard to come by. We had spotted penguins earlier from the ship and now they seemed to be mocking us. As we ploughed forward as a team of three, a group of three penguins followed behind in the tracks we had made, copying our every move. Stopping when we did, looking at us with heads held sideways, then continuing to waddle on behind when we moved on, easily keeping pace.

It reminded me of something out of a Three Stooges or Benny Hill skit. And since the race rules had clearly stated that 'penguins have right of way', there was nothing we could do about it.



In typical Kiwi fashion at the end of the final stage, the first port of call on returning to the ship was to hit the bar for a beer, followed by some less thought out semi-clothed photos on the bow of the ship. Arguably it topped off the best year of my life and set me up to look for further challenges including volunteering on rescue helicopters, reenlistment with the army, and most recently being one of the handful of competitors that managed to complete the Ice Ultra in Sweden this year. There are so many unique race experiences to be had, both at home and abroad.

Next year to celebrate my 50th, I'm aiming to complete a self-supported 250km multistage event on every continent within a calendar year. I'm aiming to raise funds for a scholarship for Māori students interested in a career in the health sciences to be able to run one of these races as a team, as I truly believe that the opportunity is life-changing. I'll be starting in New Zealand (because hey, we are our own continent now), and finishing in Antarctica. Eight races in all, 2000km, a lot of dehydrated food, lost toenails, new mates, and hopefully catching up with some old ones. **RUN**

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: DR INIA RAUMATI CAUGHT ON CAMERA BEFORE THE START OF THE 2014 SAHARA RACE; THE SAHARA DESERT CAN BE A BRUTAL AND UNFORGIVING PLACE IN THIS WORLD; THE ATACAMA CROSSING IN CHILE ISN'T ON MOST PEOPLE'S MINDS TO RUN THROUGH, BUT IT WAS FOR DR INIA RAUMATI IN 2014. IMAGES: RACING THE PLANET.