

ACTIVITY REPORT



Tropic of Cancer Ultra Marathon

A tale of two runners

Words by: David O'Hara

When the eminent Max Calderan announces a running project, UAE trail runners expect an epic endurance event: like the first Tropic of Cancer Ultra Marathon. With routes set up for 10km, half-marathon, marathon and 50km runs somewhere near the Liwa desert, the essence of the event centers on Max uniting two seemingly divergent groups: UAE ultra trail runners and the desert driving group Dubai Offroaders.

Dubai Offroaders

Dubai Offroaders is a club of adventurers that brings spirit to the runners as well as handling checkpoints, water and safety. Because of the remoteness of the desert, everybody gathers the night before and camps out under the stars. Distinguishing Offroaders from Runners is easy: Offroaders have lots of fancy camping gear like tents, while Runners sleep directly on the sand.

Runners & Sand

About 75 runners showed up for the various distances in an informal 'fun run' approach. As we climbed over the first sand dune, I spotted a 4X4 getting pulled out of deep sand with a winch – making me smile and showing how serious this course is. If you aren't a runner, you may not understand the feeling of running in the desert. You do not run up sand dunes – it is counterproductive. You walk up sand dunes, like going up stairs where you must lift your knees very high, or you make no forward progress. If you stand still on a steep sand dune, you slide down. You must keep your feet moving, until you get to the top – then you glide down, with sand flying all around.

Salt Flats

In contrast, running on salt flats is like running on ... salt flats. I haven't figured out



Ya gotta love the Luna Sandals



50km finish

a good metaphor, but every step crunches on salt and the top layer is crusty, but soft underneath. There are not many salt flats around, so it was a new sensation to me; a surface with no good traction. The landscape looked like the surface of the moon. It was an endless expanse, with one saving grace: Dubai Offroaders parked at checkpoints every 2km or so. What a great feeling when you see those 4X4's in the distance, knowing that there are enthusiastic people waiting with water and words of encouragement!

Cramps!

I love running, because success results from training and mental toughness. Running is easy until it gets really hard, especially when the proverbial dark side of the moon sets in. Earlier in October I slogged through a Himalayan blizzard above 5,400 meters at noon – the antithesis of what I experienced at noon in the desert during the Tropic of Cancer Ultra, where it is over 40C and sunny. I climbed along the ridge line of big



Ramzi Darwish gets his Certificate from Max Calderan

dunes until my legs cramped. Cramps are debilitating and painful, causing me to worry about plummeting off the ridge. I did not fear the fall, but I dreaded starting the climb again from the bottom. As I struggled over the ridge, two runners passed me. Oh well – deal with yourself and don't worry about them. 25km done, and 25km to go.

Cat and Mouse

A cat and mouse game ensued with me and two other runners. We ran slowly and walked fast, frequently passing each other. At checkpoints, Dubai Offroaders

were simply glorious, despite the fact that I was a mess, with sweat and stink emanating from me. They provided water and their 4X4's became beacons along the way, breaking the distance into smaller manageable chunks. At 35km, two runners ahead of me dropped out, which motivated me to push a little harder. The third runner continued playing cat and mouse until he dropped out at around 38km.

Convergence of Trail Runners and Offroaders

Max played a cruel joke on the route, making the last 12km through deep, soft sand which was virtually impossible to run on after six hours. The temperature hit 42C, but I noticed the heat only on my feet, because I run in Luna sandals and the hot sand burns the bottom of my toes. With water and cheers from Dubai Offroaders, my cramps dissipated and eventually, I finished 50km. Max succeeded in creating an epic desert challenge bringing together trail runners and offroaders! Big shout-out to Albert, Ajay and Pari from Dubai Offroaders! Awesome!



Maya Petrova (42km finisher), David (50km finisher) and Olga O'Hara (21km finisher)