



AMY FALLON

On tackling the Source of the Nile Trail Run Challenge



Picking myself out of the mud on the banks of the Nile for the third time, I realised there's a reason why trail running has a 'trail' in it.

I'd started running regularly on the streets of Uganda's capital Kampala, where I'd lived for nearly five years. It's an inspiring city full of serious but friendly local runners and many expats, but potholes are ubiquitous and traffic is notorious. I'm still sporting souvenirs (scars) on my legs from falling down a drain while walking one night. Then there's the other hurdles, like harassment while running.

My training of nearly six months culminated in the Source of the Nile Trail Run Challenge in Jinja, a town about 70km outside Kampala boasting picturesque views of the Nile. The event has been organised by Activate Uganda since 2011, a company specialising in running, mountain biking, swimming events and sports tourism. In 2017 they introduced an ultra category, which is the first of its kind to be held in Uganda. Nearly 300 participants from Britain, Sweden, the US, India, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Kenya and Uganda competed.

There are 5km, 12km, 25km and 50km categories, and I signed up for the 12km. When I first began running again last March after a two-year sabbatical, I was barely able to do 5km. But thanks to Activate's Mpanga Trail Run, through a lush forest 40km outside Kampala in April, I met some other lovely fellow female runners – both locals and foreigners – and began training regularly with them. I'd been to a running club session before but a few people seemed a tad more interested in drinking – Ugandans can party just as well as they run!

With my new training buddies I soon got up to 12km, albeit in a second-hand pair of Asics shoes I'd unearthed at the local markets that I later discovered were designed for sprinters. Nor did I take advantage of Kampala's few grassy patches that are great for training, but soon I'd progressed to 15km.

Dark clouds greeted me when I woke on the morning of the Nile Trail Run Challenge. When I stood at the starting line

WHO IS AMY?

Amy Fallon is an Australian journalist who's lived and worked in Uganda for the past five years. After a two-year break she started running again to boost her fitness and mental health, culminating in completing the 2017 Source of the Nile Trail Run Challenge. www.amyfallon.com

listening to Uganda's national anthem with flags from all over the world in the background (including my home, Australia), I felt claustrophobic.

I'd run only a few steps after the starting horn when I fell – even after all those months of training on potholes!

I got up and took a few deep breaths because I felt like I'd winded myself, but I was determined to keep going so off I ran. The sight of a Ugandan woman walking the trail in heels – who hadn't fallen – spurred me on, and I quickly made up time.

The route isn't technical, but the weather made it challenging. By the time I reached halfway there was rain, thunder and lightning. My shoes were so wet it felt like I had weights strapped to them. Others had given up wearing theirs, but the children giving me high fives and the locals cheering as I tore through villages compensated for all of it.

When I crossed the finish line my face was caked with mud and I'd cut my legs. I was one of only two people to see the ambulance attendant during the race, but I had finished.

There were 18 people who ran the ultra, with Uganda's Bernard Brian Monisak and Balidawa Amuza finishing first and second, followed by South African Keith Reynolds. Laura Dove, a 26-year-old teacher from Bedfordshire who lives in Uganda did the 25km. "Due to the rain, the route was hard work in parts," she said. "It was very muddy, but it was stunning."

Keith Reynolds, 50, who's lived in Uganda for nearly three years and has completed over 100 standard marathons and nearly 100 ultras, said: "We were cheered on by local families who tagged along with us for a while."

"I loved the atmosphere, the terrain changes, the beautiful views of the Nile, the support from the athletes around me – specifically Ugandans – and the sheer joy of running in such an awesome location."

■ Event details: www.sourceoftheniletrailrunchallenge.com
The 2018 race takes place on 23 September

