

Trail Menorca Cami de Cavalls

Friday 17th to Saturday 18th May 2019

Pre Amble

Just in case this has gone viral and you're not aware of the Cami de Cavalls (CdC) here's a synopsis. The CdC is a 185km (115 miles) footpath round the island of Menorca. Each year in May, there's a number of different races organised by Trail Menorca along different parts of the path. One of them is the full thing, starting in Ciutadella in the west, running clockwise round the island, finishing (if you actually finish) back in Ciutadella. I had a stab at this one last week. I was running to raise money for Northumbria Blood Bikes. This was a bucketlist race for me. Dream stuff.



About 220 people started the race, with some opting for an 8:30am start and the faster runners (me – lol!) departing at 2:30pm. Katherine, my wife, was supporting me throughout the race. I'd told people I was aiming for sub 24 hours. Actually I was aiming for closer to 20. Had kidded myself I was there to purely get round. All I really wanted to do was race it. Great plan that. No risk of not finishing then.

Before



I arrived in Ciutadella an hour before the start to grab a coffee and take in the atmosphere. But mainly to grab a coffee. Posed for a quick pic at the start line. Cue a thunderstorm and torrential downpour. Talk about a sign of things to come. Everyone dove for cover.



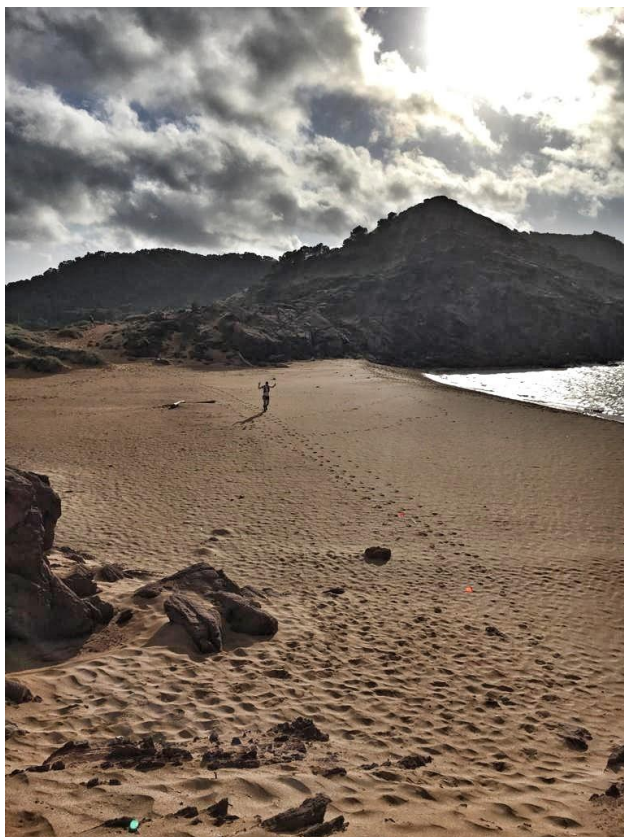
There was the usual pre-race stuff. Lots of shouting over the mic, bombastic music and people doing wheelies on horses (not so usual). All very nice but this was only delaying the inevitable. I just wanted to get going so I could get back for another coffee.

The Start – 0 to 35 miles

First it's a three mile stretch along the roads to get out of Ciutadella before you hit the CdC proper. Thought it would be a good idea to ignore all my own advice and run this bit way faster than planned, along with a group of about 20 other runners. I mean, how wrong could it possibly go?

Then it's onto the trail. About 50% of the entire route is essentially a massive trip hazard. Jagged, sharp, face shredding rocks sticking out of the ground. Think, surface of the moon. On steroids. No problems bounding from rock to rock though. When your legs still work.

Have I mentioned the wind yet? Gale force. People taking detours to chase their caps along the cliffs. Not me though. I was busy developing a stitch (which would last for the rest of the race). I was also finding it difficult to catch my breath for some reason. Off to a flyer then.



Things then start getting pretty hilly along the north coast. Spectacular, but hilly. It also started raining. Having trained in the Lake District I felt right at home. All the time I was doing a pretty good job of ignoring the fact both my quads (thighs) were already feeling pretty stiff despite just being 15 miles in.

The next checkpoint was at mile 35 where I was allowed external help from Katherine. Boy did I need it. Things continued sliding downhill. More wind and rain, legs of lead, my head in a bad place and still unable to catch my breath. I caught up with the leader of the woman's race (she appeared from behind a sand dune - you know why). For a couple of miles it was like being chased by the paparazzi. Photographers racing around us to get a decent spot for a pic (of her) as we ran neck a neck. I made sure not to smile. Possibly why she then accelerated away. She'd had enough of the miserable Englishman.

I lurched into the checkpoint. I just wanted to stop. Katherine looked shocked. I looked like death. Genuinely wasn't sure how I could make it round. I'd come to compete but was already 99% spent. I realised it would now take everything I had just to make it round. I had to make that remaining 1% go another 80 miles? No massive talking to. Just a solemn resignation to getting it done. Come on then.

The Middle – 35 to 80 miles

A bit of blur this next bit. It got dark shortly after I left the checkpoint. Somehow I was still catching people? I quite enjoyed picking my way through the deserted resorts at night. Surprisingly my mood improved and I started to show some fight. Katherine made a surprise mid-checkpoint appearance and we walked a hill section up the road together. I was optimistic and talked about how I would catch people once it got light. It had been a bad day at the office. Luckily I was at work tomorrow too. I'd sort things out then.



Here came the rain again. This time the proper stuff. I looked at the weather app on my phone. <1% chance of rain it said. Hhmm. I soldiered on with little idea of where I really was other than following the course markers as my head torch lit them up one by one. There was an odd loneliness to this. Bless.

Suddenly I noticed a hoard of head torches spilling over the hill in front of me. I couldn't work out what was going on. After a few minutes I realised it was runners coming towards me. These were the people who had set off from Mahon at 1am and were running to Ciutadella in one of the shorter races. There's that bit in Jurassic Park where the fleeing humans are overtaken by herds of fleeing dinosaurs. The dinosaurs pay no attention to them as they swarm past. That was me right now. I felt like Sam Neill. Very Hollywood.

The checkpoint in Es Castell at 63 miles could not come soon enough. I was about 2 hours down on schedule by now but was sensible enough to realise I needed to take some time here to refuel and get warm otherwise I wouldn't last the night. There was a relaxed atmosphere. It was 3:30am. People just quietly sorting themselves out ready for the rest of the night. Two plates of pasta and some coffee (from a Nespresso machine no less) pepped me up. Some encouraging words from Katherine, a quick change of clothes and it was back into the night. Whilst burping.

The next few hours were simply about waiting for it to get light. This took forever. It was good to switch off the headtorch when it finally came. I realised I was in Menorca again. Like waking up without having been to sleep. I spent a while walking one stretch along the road just listening to the dawn chorus. Walking felt nice. And tempting.

The first checkpoint in the light was Cala'n Poter. There were a few runners taking a breather here. Some were in bad shape and needed medical attention on their feet. By now I was seeing the funny side of my predicament. It had gone so wrong so early. Didn't know why. Endurance running is about enduring. I was just suffering. Silly me.



Leaving the checkpoint involves a descent down a steep road. Steep descents were now out of the question so I walked, despite encouragement from onlookers.

“Vamooooos, Crreeees!!!”

“Vamos mate? You must be f@*ing joking.”

There followed an extremely rocky section through to Cala Llucalari. So more walking. I stopped for a bit with my head in my hands, eyes closed, leaning against a rock. A sorry sight. That 1% I had left was running out. It was starting to get hot now. At least I knew the route for the next 20 miles. Had run it loads before. I dreamt of cruising along it again.

The 85 mile checkpoint at Sant Tomas was like entering A&E. Paramedics, oxygen masks, people under blankets staring into space. I wanted to stop, but without ever thinking about actually stopping. More spag bol, a quadruple espresso, some encouragement from Katherine and I was off. In the loosest sense of the word “off”.

The End – 85 to 115 miles

I'd told myself beforehand that the race doesn't really start until 85 miles. People start to crack about now and if you're still in decent shape you can make real gains. Thought I'd have been in amongst the gainers. Turns out I was a proper cracker.

The next section is stunning. Secluded coves, white beaches, turquoise water. You know the thing. Paradise. Only 30 miles to go too. It genuinely didn't seem that far. I could even see the lighthouse at Cap d'Atrux, the last checkpoint. But doing the calculations in my head I somehow had another seven hours to go. My legs were failing too. Couldn't really lift my feet off the ground. My top speed was now a shuffle. What a great advert I was for running to all the holiday makers I passed. “It's OK everyone, I'm doing this for charity”.



I left the penultimate checkpoint at Cala Galdana accompanied by Katherine. She scampered up the initial rocky climb out of the bay in flip flops. I hauled myself up using any available tree or rock. I managed to smile as she took pictures. The last of the big climbs was over. Great. But back came the super jagged, trip hazard on steroids, sections. I couldn't run across them safely so had to walk. Checkpoints were never as close as I thought despite always "just being round the next corner". My head was going.



At the final checkpoint there's just seven miles to the finish. Someone said it was all road. Wrong. Three more miles of rocks. I was now broken. I could only walk, so would only walk, until the road. Making that decision was a weight off my mind. Got to the road. After all the walking, running was now out of the question. My legs were so painful and stiff. I was sure I'd torn both my quads. People were going past me now and I didn't care. I just wanted it over. And a finisher's t-shirt.

Ciutadella crawled into view. I decided to give up running completely. It made no difference to my pace anyway. Why would anyone do this for fun? I have another 100 mile race in just 10 weeks. The thought terrified me. I'll cut my losses and pull out as soon as I cross the line. Sod the money. I hate this.

There was no excitement as I approached the finish line. Just a long walk into the main square. Just what I need. They'd moved the finish line further away too. Thanks. I decided to give running one last go. Finish in style. Ouch. I could barely get down a kerb without assistance. Crossed the line. 27 hours and 26 minutes after starting. Somehow in 27th place. No emotions. Too exhausted. Nice t-shirt though.

Aftermath

Cue some serious 'processing'. Walking was not easy. Neither was showering. Or sleeping. I don't often give myself much credit for stuff but I realised that this was an achievement. Cruising round in a quick time would mean no struggle. No lessons learned. I had to do it the 'other' way. Work for it. No choice about it.

Only 50% of the people who started made it to the finish. Even the front runners suffered. Some had hypothermia. Others dropped out with just 15 miles to go. I don't know how I kept going. Just did. No massive talking to or steely show of determination. Just got on with it. Hard to see how I'll ever complete anything harder. Anything harder would mean I couldn't complete it. I found my limit. Hopefully people will feel they got value for their sponsorship money.

Me and Katherine had a couple of days to relax and reflect. She wishes she'd brought warmer clothes and an umbrella. Once out of race mode you see why you did it in the first place. I love Menorca. I love running. I thought of the hard times. You don't remember the suffering but you do remember the experience. I begin to realise it was amazing. A real adventure – for us both. Monday morning dozing on the beach in Cala Galdana I suddenly felt the urge to run again. Put all those lessons I'd learnt into action. A shot of running 'mojo'. It's back. Here we go again.

I'd hated every second but loved every minute.

I really hope it doesn't rain when I come back next year.

There's still time to make a donation towards Northumbria Blood Bikes too. They do amazing things.

Here is a link to my [fundraising page](#).

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