

Trail running in Jersey is thriving and a growing community of runners are taking to the Island's cliff paths to experience Jersey off the beaten track. With spectacular views, stunning scenery and accessible terrain, trail running offers both experienced and beginner runners with incredible health benefits and variety. Martyn White provides a runners' eye view of the trails, as he tackles an organised ultra-trail run from St Catherine's breakwater to L'Etacq.

The breakwater at St Catherine's Bay extends into the sea like a crooked finger pointing towards the horizon.

The imposing structure on Jersey's east coast was built in the late 1800s to harbour large ships. Part of a proposed naval station protecting Jersey from possible French invaders, it was never quite finished.

On the day of my ultra-trail run, it was sheltering over 100 runners from a fierce easterly wind, as we prepared to embark on a first-of-its-kind race on the Island.

The inaugural Trail Monkey Double Top Ultra; 40 miles of gruelling cliff paths, steps and 7,500ft elevation!

A nervous chatter filled the air as we made our way to the start. Some runners were checking their water bottles, others adjusting their water proof gear or taking an energy gel.

As we lined up, we were told that we had a 12-hour cut off time. Anyone wanting to pull out whilst on the course would need to call the race organiser or a search party would be assembled. The chatter stopped. Unlike the building of St Catherine's breakwater, leaving the course without finishing was not an option.

I was at the start line with two ultra-runners, Jason and Mark, who had mentioned the Double Top to me a few months before. They were preparing to run almost 90km in the Comrades race in South Africa and saw this as a warm up. Was I interested?

The Trail Monkey website made the Double Top seem strangely enticing: "40 miles from starting at St Catherine's breakwater making your way to Grosnez via the beautiful and dramatic coastal path, a little loop out to L' Etacq and then heading back along the same route back to St Catherine's. One way is tough, but there and back is monumental!"

It was January. I needed a fitness goal. I had no prior ultra-running experience but saw the option of doing one leg of the run, so 20 miles rather than 40. I signed up.



Photos: Trail Monkey Jersey

Then immediately regretted it.

I had only run more than 13 miles three times before, and it was all on roads. How would I cope with running off-road? How was I going to fit in the time for training? I had 5 months to find out.

The Trail Monkey Jersey group was set up in January 2018 by Paul Burrows and Nicola Gott, who were also involved in starting the Jersey Park Run. They aimed to 'spread our love of the trails to all and show just how beautiful our Island is.'

Paul and Nicola created a real community with people sharing trails, running tips, photos and more on their Facebook page. The photos provided me with the most comfort though, as it was immediately obvious that the trail runs were completed by people of all abilities.

Those same trail runners lined up next to me now as we set off, offering words of encouragement to each other. Jason and Mark suggested getting a quick start, as the trail immediately out of St Catherine's narrows to a single track and they were worried about a bottleneck. They were serious runners and wanted to place well.

I kept up with them for the first five miles as we headed up and down hill paths towards

Bouley Bay. We were in the top 10 runners as we negotiated the steep steps that greeted us.

But I couldn't keep up. My training had been patchy to say the least, trying too hard, too quickly and injuring my calves, hips and smaller muscles behind the knee I didn't even know existed.

The hills and steps for those first few miles were tough, and people began to pass me after the first check-point. Ten miles in and I was really struggling.

What I understand now is that this is one of the most challenging places to walk in Jersey, let alone run. If it isn't the sheer elevation that gets your glutes screaming, it's the amount of steps cut into the cliffs. It was like being on a gym step machine on the hardest possible setting without being able to get off. To make it worse, a force 6 wind was blowing me into the cliffs and it began to rain.

Still, my slower pace meant I could look around and appreciate the truly stunning view from my lofty vantage point high above the cliffs. Long, sweeping cliff paths full of gorse and grasses, deep blue water lapping against the rugged granite shoreline, the sandy beaches of France shimmering in the distance. ▶