

unning

RACE TO THE TOP

AFTER TRAINING FOR SEVEN MONTHS WHILE LIVING ON PEMBA ISLAND, THE KILIMANJARO HALF FINALLY ARRIVED FOR PIPPA HEATH

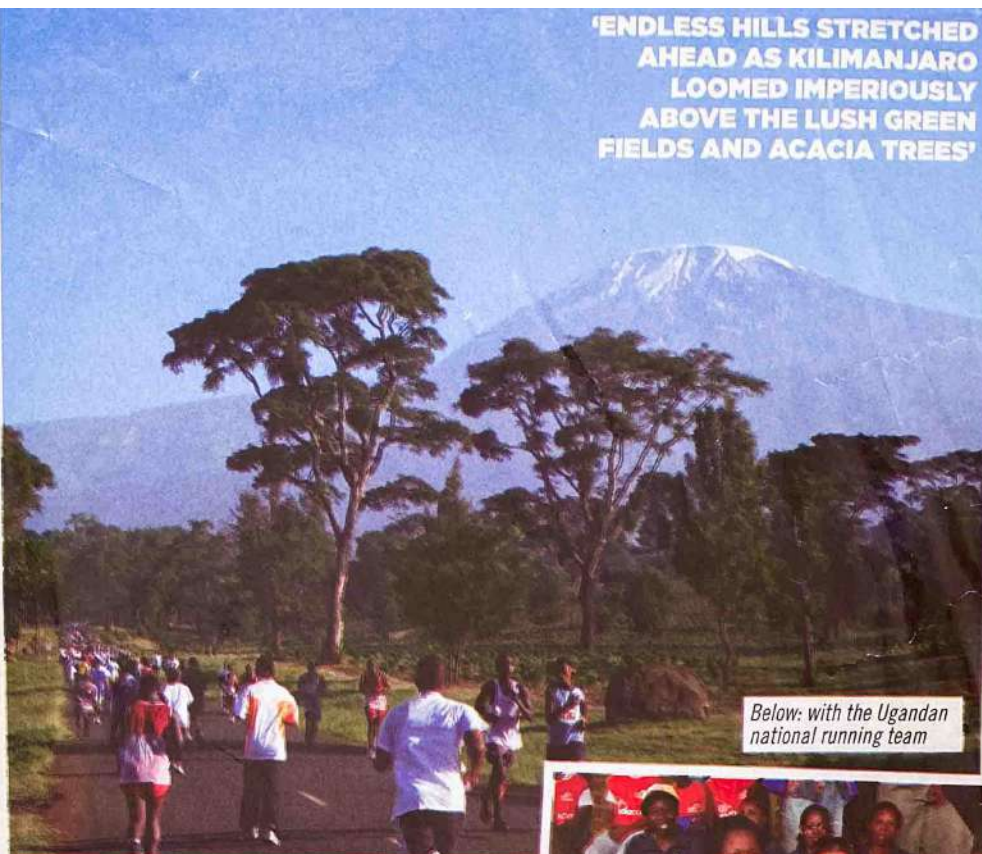
If ever there was an occasion to remind myself why I run, the Kilimanjaro Half Marathon was it. At 6.30am on race day, I stared up in awe as the rising sun kissed Africa's tallest mountain and, as if on cue, she bared her snow-capped soul to all who gathered beneath her. The race I'd been thinking about for months was about to begin.

Pemba Island has been my home for the past seven months, and also my training ground. A tropical island with an unforgiving climate and unpredictable local reactions, it's been a tough grind at times and I often wondered if I'd ever feel ready to run a 21.1K race, which incorporates a 10K hill – at altitude. Thank goodness for race-day adrenaline and an incredible festive atmosphere. It was a world away from Pemba and I felt like the rural kid catapulted into a state of sensory overload.

SPECTACULAR CLIMB

But here I was, on the start line, standing among 4,000 runners in Moshi, northern Tanzania. The race attracts a variety of competitors, from locals to 'tourist' racers, but it was the sight of a large band of elite East African athletes that gave me goosebumps – I'd never have imagined lining up alongside such a star-studded field. Prime athletes aside, we were all there with one goal in common – to run Kili.

We left the stadium, immediately hitting the 10K hill that offered uninterrupted views of a cloudless Kilimanjaro. I was grateful for tarmac roads (what a treat) and regular water stations, sponges and run-through showers. As we left the initial roaring crowds behind, we were soon running through waking villages, with people staring on the side of the road still brushing their teeth. The scenery was



'ENDLESS HILLS STRETCHED AHEAD AS KILIMANJARO LOOMED IMPERIOUSLY ABOVE THE LUSH GREEN FIELDS AND ACACIA TREES'

Below: with the Ugandan national running team



Kilimanjaro stands majestic as runners get ready to race



© PIPPA HEATH

spectacular. Running alongside coffee and banana plantations as the morning haze of smoke rose from villagers' mud huts was incredibly atmospheric. Endless hills stretched ahead as Kilimanjaro loomed imperiously above the lush green fields and acacia trees.

I loved having flip-flop clad youngsters unintentionally masking as pace setters throughout the race. As quickly as one tailed away, another nimble little person would join, smiling brightly and enjoying what was probably nothing more than a regular Sunday morning jaunt up the road.

STADIUM SUPPORT

With so much to take in, the hill challenge – although tough – was soon over. At the halfway turn, staple African snacks were on offer (plain cakes and bananas) before we headed back down towards the stadium, where the singing, chanting and beating drums were in full flow.

My highlights came when I saw the Ugandan national running team in action

– I'd met them on the 20-hour bus journey to Moshi. Being lapped by the two leading full marathon runners was also a memory-banking moment. As the police escorts heading the pack neared, I turned to see two international Kenyan runners, at the 33K mark, heading towards me with steely determination. In my deluded yet enthusiastic state, I thought I'd take the chance to gauge their pace and run beside them. Turns out there's a fine line between humbling and humiliating.

A rush of emotions overcame me as I ran back into the stadium and crossed the finish line in just over two hours. The race was a PB – not in terms of time, but experience – and the day was nicely capped off having a celebratory dinner of rice and beans with my new friends, the Ugandan elite running team.

It feels great to be back in Pemba with my medal. Now I'm off to do what every other self-respecting islander would do. Absolutely nothing. ■

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'As local swimming pools go, the Indian Ocean is up there with the best'

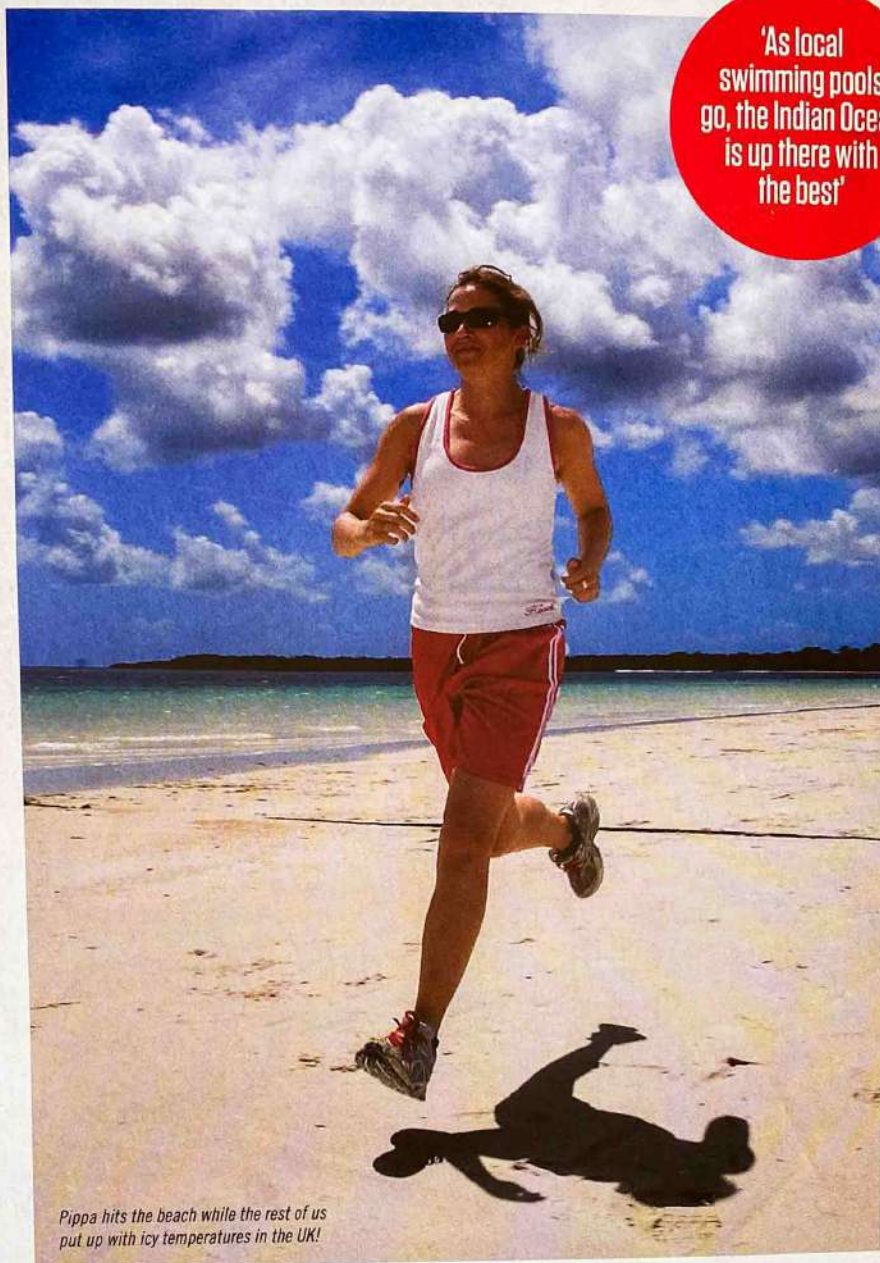
This month has seen me make some much-needed running progress. I can now clock up 80 minutes and enjoy it – even with the customary blood, sweat and tears. To many, this won't sound like a great feat, but it makes me feel euphoric, considering the conditions.

I'm a good few months into my teaching assignment on Pemba island, in East Africa, and overall I have no regrets about continuing my running here. Each run is different in terms of how I feel physically and what I see or hear. I can be running one minute, then sitting in a villager's mud hut the next, watching a chicken about to be sacrificed. Never doing the same run twice helps keep the motivation up when enthusiasm wavers.

MAKE MINE A HALF

In breaking the one-hour barrier, I now have a definite goal in mind. I'm opting for the half, not full, Kilimanjaro Marathon. What with the lack of hills and altitude in Pemba, plus my quest for enjoyment over purgatory, the decision suddenly felt easy. I'll still have to endure a 10K incline during the half, but I can dwell on that later (i.e. on the day).

My progress is mostly to do with my toes fully recovering from their blisters



Pippa hits the beach while the rest of us put up with icy temperatures in the UK!

CLIMATE CHANGE

KEEN RUNNER PIPPA HEATH'S KILIMANJARO HALF MARATHON TRAINING IS HOTTING UP

– which must be something to do with the small beach I empty out of my trainers in my hut after each run – and I'm happy to be running again with nothing to focus on but the punishing heat, relentless flies, children, ox carts and rocky surfaces.

Despite reaching a decent distance now, the lack of energy I feel on some runs has meant I've perfected the art of ventriloquist Swahili. To summon the energy to shout 'Jambo, habari?' [hello, how are you?], sometimes seems so impossible that all people get is a quick jerk of the head and some pathetic attempt at lip movement. Within that lip movement, however, flies manage to buzz

straight in. I average about five per run. In order to put a positive spin on this unpleasant recurrence, I've decided they must surely have some nutritional value.

SEA BREEZE

I've also been enjoying the perfect antidote to running. Living on the shores of the Indian Ocean provides the ideal alternative training, to give my knees a break, and as local swimming pools go, it's up there with the best.

Rewards for getting fitter are tenfold here. Firstly, I can now make it to the incredible forest and back and enjoy the shade from the canopy trees; and

secondly – my biggest trump card – I've begun to out-run (and possibly bore) the children. I seem to be generating *slightly* less interest nowadays, although by UK standards, the chasing and shouting would still count as harassment. Perhaps the slightly less pained running look is not as fun to mock? People still call out all the time and some kids find it funny to throw oranges at me, but I've been upgraded from 'Mzungu!' [white person] to 'Teachal'! It's also great to run through the village and be stopped by people I know for a chat (and a rest!).

So, as I head slightly closer to the half marathon, my next goal is to reach tarmac. From where I live, a round trip to the road will mean approximately one hour 45 minutes – close to my adequate training distance. I wonder how it will feel to run on smooth surfaces again... and will the new-found distance bring new-found attention? ☑

running diary

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Keen runner Pippa Heath left her nine-to-five routine to work in East Africa. Here she reveals how she keeps up her half-marathon training

At last – I was returning to my favourite continent. But would I be able to continue running under African skies? How hard would it be to run in a different climate and culture?

I'd recently been made redundant and was leaving the drudgery of nine-to-five for a new life on an island in the Indian Ocean. Running, however, was something I didn't want to leave behind. I began four years ago and despite completing (and enjoying) one marathon, I'm now happy sticking to 10Ks, with the odd half marathon thrown in. Having said that, I don't do hills. My body doesn't believe in inclines as a source of enjoyment.

ALL CHANGE

It had been five years since I set foot in Africa, but as I stepped off the plane, the sights eclipsed any doubt this was the right move. The Africa I know is captivating.

I'm based on the predominantly Muslim island of Pemba, in East Africa. Traditional

lifestyles remain intact, while tourism invades neighbouring Zanzibar instead. The diving is spectacular, and I work at one of very few dive centres on the island, teaching English to local staff. It's an untouched, picture-postcard island and one I'm keen to explore in my Asics.

My journey here gave me an idea of what that might be like. Civilisation as I know it slowly vanished as I progressed through each stage of my journey – London to Dubai, Dubai to Dar Es Salaam, Dar Es Salaam to Zanzibar, Zanzibar to Pemba... as I made my way from the local air strip to Swahili Divers, it didn't go unnoticed that the tarmac roads ended some miles before I reached my new home. I didn't feel too enthused about running on deep sandy tracks through forested uneven paths in high temperatures – especially as a white woman, who would undoubtedly be a strange sight.

Local perceptions about running, I was told, would probably centre around two thoughts. Why would you choose to run unless a) you're being chased or b) you're actually going somewhere to get something useful? With this in

mind, I prepared for my first run with a degree of trepidation.

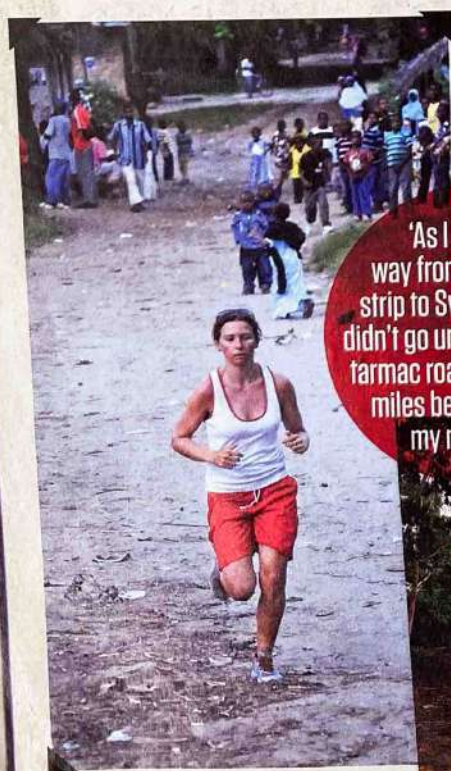
THE GOAL

I've come to Africa with vague plans, but a definite desire to achieve. I've heard about the Mount Kilimanjaro Marathon, which takes place next February in Tanzania. I've also discovered there's an 18K incline – see aforementioned dislike of hills to account for my re-think to do the half marathon instead. Half the distance, half the incline. The crazy part of me isn't going to rule out the full 26.2 miles, though. I love a challenge, but I have taken note of the raised eyebrows when sharing my plan. For a start, my training will be at sea level. Secondly, the heat is only going to intensify over the coming months. This doesn't translate well for completing a marathon at altitude.

I set off for my first run one morning at 8.30am. The sun was already beating down and before I'd reached the end of the plot my legs felt like lead. It reminded me of when I first began running.

Then suddenly a bunch of barefooted children appeared, running ahead of me screaming 'Mzungu, mzungu!' (Swahili for 'white person'). It was hard to distinguish whether it was friendly or not, but it felt quite intimidating.

I managed 25 minutes on my feet. The mixture of the heat, shouting and lack of fitness didn't make for a great first run, but it couldn't get any worse. Right? More next month on my progress. ☑



'As I made my way from the local air strip to Swahili Divers, it didn't go unnoticed that the tarmac roads ended some miles before I reached my new home'



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FEELING THE HEAT

Pippa Heath left her nine-to-five routine to work in East Africa. In her second diary installment, she shares the challenges of her new running environment

Surrounded by flies, sweating profusely, my toes covered in blisters, being shouted at, chased by children, and dodging ox carts, cows and other local traffic, I sometimes wonder why I decided to keep up my running on a remote African island...

I'm living in Pemba, Tanzania, teaching English for six months. To maintain my fitness, I decided to keep up my running, with the view of doing either the full or half Kilimanjaro Marathon early next year. After my pitifully short first run, the majority of which consisted of walking and talking to local children, I realised it was going to be a long road ahead.

ODD ONE OUT

I wasn't sure if the shouts of 'Mzungu [white person] bye bye' (never hello, always bye bye) on my first run were meant endearingly or not. A few more runs in and it's still hard to tell.

The peculiarity of what I'm doing is spreading like wildfire around Makangale village, although this isn't the first time the locals have seen a white woman running. My predecessor tried, but gave up, because of the incessant attention. Her first tactic was to disguise herself in a Michael Jackson-esque ensemble. When that (shockingly) failed, she started to run around our plot – a round trip of five minutes. Neither of these approaches seems appealing, so I've decided it's

a case of familiarity breeds acceptance, not – hopefully – contempt.

With an increasing understanding of local culture, I appreciate why women would pigeonhole me into the slightly deranged section of resident *mzungus*. To them, expending energy in this way is unfathomable. Women here do not participate in sport of any kind. It would be an oddity to see a woman riding a bicycle (sitting on the back without having to straddle it is far more respectable). I feel conspicuous and even obtrusive running through the village – not to mention naked against the traditional Muslim dress. So far, I'm experiencing baffled and wry looks from the women, indecipherable looks from the men and hysteria from the children.

'So far, I'm experiencing baffled and wry looks from the women, indecipherable looks from the men and hysteria from the children'

PIED PIPPA

With the heat and humidity, I'm finding it challenging enough just running, without having kids mocking and mimicking me at my side. I regularly recall the game, 'If you could have one superpower, what would it be?' *To be invisible* was always my answer – and now a genuine plea. The mimicking feels especially punishing when I'm struggling – other times I tend to laugh



at their *mzungu* impressions. After all, I must look pretty ridiculous! It must also be amusing for the young men in the coconut trees to see me running with a trail of children behind. I'm re-naming myself the *Pied Pippa* of Pemba.

I've discovered (by bike) three different runs – the village run; the beach run; and the forest run. However, on a physical level I'm still finding my feet – in more ways than one. Slowly, ten toes have become ten blisters. After a few rest days I strangely missed running, so I plastered them up, ran too soon and paid the price. One day it will be nice to see my toes again, but who knows when that will be. At this rate, I'm wondering if I'll even make the 5K Kilimanjaro race, let alone the half or full extravaganza. Just to confirm, though, I am secretly enjoying this self-inflicted pain. And with that, I'm off for my next run. ▀

Things seldom run smoothly in Africa and this month was no exception. Despite achieving my goal of reaching the tarmac road, I also experienced my first African parasite, got caught up in Tanzania's election fever and witnessed the rainy season. All this hampered my running, but as they say – TIA (this is Africa).

Living and working on Pemba Island continues to be an exciting adventure. My days of running in normal climes feel long gone as I look ahead to my imminent challenge – the Kilimanjaro Half Marathon. It's striking how fondly I sometimes feel towards the island when running is going well, while at other times I loathe it. It can quickly go from being a place of beauty, where I'm chasing stunning equatorial sunsets, to a place of hot, insect-ridden torture, which makes me want to scurry back to normality.

BEAUTY AND THE (MINI) BEAST

On the whole, however, I feel hugely fortunate to be running on such an amazing island, especially through the Ngezi Forest, where monkeys swing through the trees above me and the dappled post-rain sunshine creates incredible reflections. But living in the bush has consequences, and mine came in the form of a jigger (a flea that burrows into the toe, creating egg sacks). After an unsuccessful attempt to remove it, and with no adequate medical care on the island, I had to fly to Dar Es Salaam, where a safe pair of tweezers was able to



'Temperatures are now averaging 35°C and the rain has meant a lot of soggy, bedraggled runs where I'm constantly caught in tropical downpours'

TAKING THE ROUGH WITH THE SMOOTH

KEEN RUNNER **PIPPA HEATH** DISCOVERS THAT, WHILE BEAUTIFUL, ISLAND LIFE IS NOT ALL PLAIN SAILING



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get rid of it. Thankfully all ended well without the loss of a digit. Once back on my feet, election voting was taking place. I mistimed a few runs and got caught up in election rallies. It highlighted to me once again just how conspicuous I am, as shouts of, 'Mzungu [white person], go away, not for you, get away,' were directed at me. It was intimidating to say the least.

ROAD RUNNER

On a more positive note, I'm up to one hour 45 minutes of running, which is something I never thought I'd achieve – especially as temperatures are now averaging 35°C and the rain has meant a lot of soggy, bedraggled runs where I'm constantly caught in tropical downpours. Reaching the tarmac road was a great feeling, though, and running on concrete felt like running on air compared with the usual fare – and, of course, there were new experiences along the way. If there was a world

record for the number of times someone can shout, 'Jambo' [hello] in a minute – while raising the octave each time – the kids here would win. There's also a man who occasionally decides to run with me. We say absolutely nothing to each other, and each time, after about 30 minutes, he suddenly stops and walks away without a second glance at me.

THE ONLY WAY IS UP

It will be a massive contrast when I cross back to the mainland, to join the thousands of runners participating in the Kilimanjaro running events. I'm planning on running somewhere hilly beforehand, as the looming 10K incline is going to be a killer no matter how pretty the views of Kilimanjaro are. I'm aiming for a PW (personal worst) – I figure it's probably wise not to set too high a goal beyond crossing the finishing line. Having said that, medals and T-shirts are awarded to the first 300 and 1,000 finishers respectively, so perhaps I have something to aim for after all... ■