

RUNNING ON FULL: A JAMAICAN RUN-TO-EAT ADVENTURE

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It's 5 am. I'm at the start line of the Reggae Marathon, bouncing from foot to foot among 1,800 bleary-eyed runners. Tiki torchlight takes the edge of the darkness. There's only a cereal bar in my belly, and I'm already dreaming of carb-reloading at the end.

I eat (a lot), therefore I run. While booking a culinary getaway in Jamaica, I registered for a 10-K at Negril's Reggae Marathon, in the name of pre-emptive calorie burning. Looking back, I suspect my 600 calories expended barely covered a side of plantain, but the run-to-eat combination meant double helpings of island hospitality.

At 5:15 am, the starting pistol pops. We're off! The Silver Birds Steel

Orchestra—a Kingston youth steel-drum band—swing their hair and dance their white pants off, as they thump out Bob Marley classics and Lady Gaga anthems. They're my double espresso.

Excited, I fly past strips of ghost-white beach and moonlit ocean; palm trees rustling in the dark; a cloud of reefer smoke and disembodied giggles. By 7-K my knees are screaming. I hobble-jog on, past roadside DJs playing dancehall hits and families out front of their houses, hosing down runners and passing out refreshments. The support of these locals who've sacrificed their last few hours of sleep, spurs me on. By the 9-K mark, the streets glow pink.

As someone whose first job was a paper route, I suddenly remember how much I love this time of day.

10 K: I stagger over the finish line. The cheering of strangers makes me feel like my massive finisher's medal—with its green disco-glitter palm tree—is Olympic Gold. Also, I get to eat now.

At the recovery station, I grab a honey-sweet banana and freshly hacked open coconut, then head straight into the Caribbean ocean. The waves soothe my throbbing calves. I reunite with my running buddies and make some new ones: a Japanese teen dressed as a kitten; a German couple who once ran eight days and 18 hours nonstop on a treadmill (world

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record); and Graham Junior, from Kingston, Jamaica, whom my friend Rebecca buddied up with for the half marathon. Maybe it's the endorphins—or those fumes at kilometre 5—but I feel blessed to be here, bonding with these crazies, all willing to rise at 2 am for the thrill of running through this gorgeous beach town as a new day dawns.

I've already been up for seven hours when I return to Grand Palladium Resort, Montego Bay, for my second breakfast. I head to the beachside Jerk Shack, for paella scooped from a village-sized pan. It's full of saffron-infused rice, green peppers, mussels, clams and prawns in their shells, and wedges of juicy lemon. I eat enough for a team of construction workers.

After poolside naps-of-the-dead, my gang returns to Negril in time for

sunset, to sip cocktails at Rick's Café as kids plunge into the Caribbean from a 35-ft high cliff. Just watching restores the post-race Jell-O feeling to my legs.

Next up, Pushcart Restaurant, for street-food inspired dishes, like steamed fish with bammy—a grated-cassava flatbread that's fluffy as down and God's gift to gluten-avoiders. We end with Drunken Coconuts—or maybe these rum-doused cocktails in coconut shells end *us*. Back at the resort, twerking ensues.

Sunday afternoon, we're crossing the mountains from Montego Bay to Treasure Beach, on Jamaica's south shore. Ladies returning from church in cobalt-blue and fuchsia dresses, with flower-pinned hats, share the narrow roads with our van. To block out the sheer roadside drop into jungle oblivion, I focus on details like the donkey, pig and goat hanging out under a tree, like school chums waiting for their bus, and on the tropicalized cover songs playing on a loop in our van. Reggae "Que Sera" delivers us round a series of sharp bends to a roadside farmer's stand at Middle Quarters.

A soft-spoken 18-year-old feeds us fresh, moist peanuts in their shells and June plums, whose green-mango-like flavour intensifies with

a shake of salt. We crack open hot crawfish seasoned with salt, pepper and Scotch bonnets, from her charcoal grill. For dessert, we suck the creamy pulp from around the shiny black seeds of sweet saps (a.k.a. sugar apples). This local delicacy tastes like passion fruit, vanilla ice cream and pineapple, all rolled into one.

This is the perfect prelude to our final culinary experience: we're in Saint Elizabeth's Parish, known as the breadbasket of Jamaica. Here, we strike tree pose in the alfresco yoga studio, a trio of cabbage butterflies flitting between us; we walk through orchards with Chef Dockery Lloyd, crunching rhubarb-like sorrel petals; and we sip banana daiquiris by the saltwater pool.

On our last day, we take a cooking lesson outside at the grill, waves breaking in the background. Hummingbirds hover close, seemingly as curious as us about how Chef transforms breadfruit into a dish like roast potatoes and the buttery flesh of ackee (Jamaica's national fruit) into a dish like scrambled eggs.

Eating these sides, with firm salt cod and tender callaloo greens, for my final breakfast in the morning sun—I decide it's all enough to race back for. Reggae Marathon 2015, Anyone?

PHOTOS

1. Maya lets us sample the fruit at her mother's roadside stand in Middle Quarters
2. Sun-up, just beyond the finish line, at the Reggae Marathon
3. Freshly grilled peppa shrimp from Maya's stand at Middle Quarters

