

THE *Rum Wadi Diaries*

✦ A MAD MISSION ✦

A TRIPLE-LAYER OF GRIEF, SOCIAL MEDIA MEANDERINGS AND AN UNEXPECTED PRIZE WIN DELIVERS NEW ZEALANDER, HANNAH JOHNSTON, TO THE MELTING HEART OF THE WADI RUM DESERT, IN THE MIDDLE EAST, FOR HER FIRST, EXOTIC CRACK AT BECOMING AN ULTRA RUNNER.

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"GRIEF HAD TAKEN A MAMMOTH TOLL ON MY BODY. IT WAS STILL IN SHOCK"

It's dusk in the desert and I'm captivated by the first stars appearing as the soft evening light dims. With the bustle of the Bedouin-style camp behind me, mesa silhouettes on the horizon, and red sand under my feet, it strikes me how painfully far away I am from my comfort zone of homely paradise in New Zealand.

The following morning I'm set to embark on a five-day, 250-kilometre meander through the stomping ground of Lawrence of Arabia, the Wadi Rum desert. The Wadi Rum is tucked away in the far south of Jordan, on the fringe of the Arabian desert. It will be my first ultra marathon – what a way to pop the ultra marathon cherry. After several years of racing in various multisport events, this time I'm not out to prove anything, to myself or anyone else. I have no expectations around results, I'm not running away from my problems, and yet I'm not here just for the experience either. I actually won the opportunity to participate in this adventure.

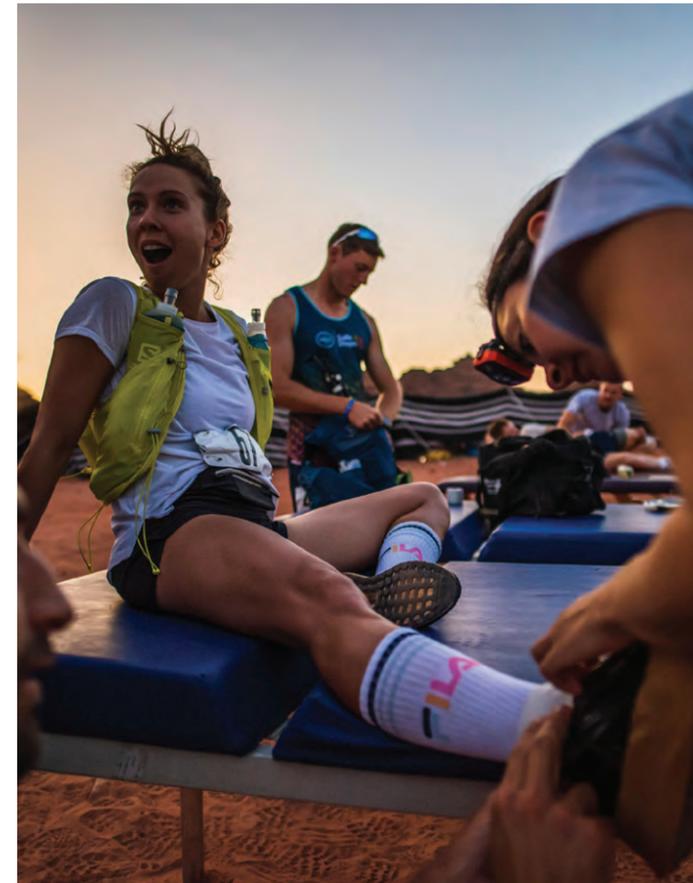
Let's rewind. Rewind to the wee, small hours one sleepless night seven months prior. My world had been upturned by the death of both my father and a close male friend, within a matter of weeks. This was added to, just a few months later, with the passing of my grandfather. The loss of the solid masculine guidance in my life was a huge upheaval. A long season of sleepless nights ensued as I struggled with the grief triple-whammy. Being a self-proclaimed 'well-being woke woman', I diligently tried all the healthy go-to-sleep measures – chamomile tea, no screen time after dinner, early to bed, gentle yoga, reading, breathing exercises, and meditation. If none of that proved to be effective, I resorted to the tried and true distraction for my monkey brain – yep you guessed it – mindless scrolling on social media. This night in particular, I was only a few minutes deep on Facebook when I saw this: "Win an entry to a 5-day ultra

marathon in Jordan — Click Here".

Here's where I need to pause and make something abundantly clear. At this point in time I was as far from wanting to run an insanely long way as I could possibly get. Grief had taken a mammoth toll on my body. It was still in shock — my legs were weak, and my muscles were chronically low on energy. It was as though all my gusto had blown away into the never-never. During that time, even a short walk left me utterly exhausted and ready for a nap. Needless to say, the idea of an ultra marathon didn't spark any enthusiasm for me. But, hosted in Jordan, that was like teenage-boy-Lynx to a flame. The concept of an adventure in Jordan was something my late friend, Caleb, and I had eagerly and excitedly discussed once upon a time. The fervour with which new adventure concepts are hatched is something I'm sure almost all trail runners can relate to. More than just another adventure buddy, Caleb was a best friend. During the period where I struggled most with mental illness he was the only person I truly trusted. He had a generous heart, an unquenchable thirst for adventure, a wicked sense of humour, and in the words of his partner "he was also ridiculously spunky – and he knew it."

Caleb was killed in a tragic recreational accident last October. His sudden exit from this life left myself, and many others, devastated and heartbroken. The fact he died doing what he loved, in a place he loved, brought little comfort in the weeks following his death. Yet I could still hear him saying, "Yea girl, get out there and chase new adventures!"

So here I was. Staring at a screen in the middle of the night and, for the first time in months, I felt a genuine fizz of excitement. Buoyed by the thought that Caleb would say a big "hell yea", I put my entry in. UltraX, the organisers of the event and competition, asked why you think you should win. I shared my story about Caleb, our Jordan dream, and concluded by saying that the chance to participate in the ultra marathon would be a tribute to his "get dressed fucker we're going on an adventure" attitude. A month later I heard from Sam Heward, co-founder of Ultra X. I was in! Out of over 400 entries they had picked mine as the winner.





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With the passing of my three wise men I had effectively put my life on hold. It had taken all of my strength simply to get out of bed each day and stay afloat. It's bewildering when your own world has shattered, but the earth itself keeps on turning. There were consecutive days I spent wondering if I would ever function properly again, or if it was worth the effort to put on a brave face when I all wanted to do was fall apart. In the months after the funerals, after the sympathy cards and messages cease, and you're back at work, it's like you're pretending life is normal. Those days are tough too. Writer, Anne Lamott, describes it beautifully as this: "You will lose someone you can't live without, and your heart will be badly broken...It's like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly—that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with the limp."

Winning the entry is ultimately what flipped my energy and psyche switch to "on". The prize package included coaching from Rob Jones at Inner Fight, a gym and endurance coaching business based in Dubai. Rob crafted a training programme that had me best prepared to tackle the epic ultra challenge. After several years training for multisport I found the focus on one discipline refreshing and was pleasantly surprised by how quickly I

made progress. There were definitely days when I didn't feel like putting my running shoes on, but I knew if Caleb was there he'd be kicking my butt to go out and enjoy the fresh air!

Logging time on feet is crucial for ultra marathon preparation and it was a great excuse to explore new places and trails. I did the bulk of the kilometres solo. Often I whiled away the hours listening to podcasts or simply daydreaming. But, inevitably on some long runs I was forced to peel back some layers of the grief onion. Nature has a way of holding space for us (if we let it) to stumble through the weeds of our pain. The mountains, flora, lakes and rivers are in no hurry to go anywhere and will sit with us for as long as we need. Time spent outdoors is a salve for many who experience hardship and I'm sure there are countless tears and shadows left behind on the trails. However, on other long runs I rediscovered the feeling of genuine joy. The braided river valleys, crisp mountain air, exquisite silence, and first light on the hills reminded me that there was still a little bit of magic in life.

Despite the intimidating start line of Day 1 facing out towards the vast, endless desert, I felt prepared – physically, mentally, and emotionally for the week ahead. I knew Caleb would be proud that I was paying tribute to our friendship by

embarking on the Jordan challenge, and for pressing play on life again. The 44 km of Day 1 was the perfect desert initiation. The temperature cracked 40 degrees, as it did every stage that week, and we encountered short sections of soft sand, a feature that we got to know intimately as the race progressed. The first 10km sped by in a daze of awe and excitement. Way too fast, in fact. It took some real focus to reign my pace in.

In a conflict that subsequently occurred each morning, it was a balance between covering kilometres quickly while the temperature was still cool (note that I use the terms "quickly" and "cool" loosely, it's all relative here) and conserving strength for the kilometres later. In the final 10km of the first day, the heat forced a slower pace, and it was at this point that the nagging voice in my head began to question what I had gotten myself into. Apart from feeling like a cooked kiwi, I crossed the finish line that day quite content. Until I took off my shoes. I was dismayed to find that 9 of my 10 toes were sporting at least one blister and I hadn't felt any of them while running. Already I'd blown a sacred law of endurance running. The blisters certainly added discomfort, but I wasn't going to let that stop me from finishing.

That evening while my dinner was

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brewing, I laid out my gear and packed nutrition and hydration for the following day. Seems logical, right? For this my tent mates dubbed me "little miss organised", and it became a running joke as they saw the light and adopted the routine themselves. It's a title I chuckled at given my motivation was to gain extra time sleeping in the morning, not for the fact that I have exceptional organisational skills.

Day Two, and a 49km loop from camp was our real introduction to the energy-stealing soft sand of the Wadi Rum desert. I made peace with the fact that due to this sand, and the heat, there was a considerable amount of walking. The hours floated by as I marched onwards, breaking the distance into 10km chunks, the distance between each checkpoint. With 73 runners there was a great friendly vibe throughout the entire event, partly due to the efforts of the UltraX crew, but also simply because ultra runners are cool people. I loved this aspect, but the relatively small field meant that many of us spent almost the entire race on our own. Thus I approached each checkpoint with eager anticipation – a welcome patch of shade, friendly grins, and the chance to speak with someone other than myself. I really settled in on Day Two, taking in the big skies and dramatic landscape, gawking at camels, and genuinely appreciating the experience.

Day Three of 71km was the Big Kahuna, the one we had all been apprehensively waiting for. This was the day I became to have full faith in my mantra "my pace is the best pace", which I'd adopted to avoid getting carried away thinking I could 'race'. It paid off as later in the day I reeled in competitors who had literally left me in the dust that morning. The day also brought my first tears, albeit through big smiles. I was weaving along a dry riverbed and imagined that Caleb was trotting along beside me. "This is such a hoot. What a ridiculously awesome adventure you're on!" I heard him say. This spurred me on, more floating on the vision than running, and having as Caleb would want it, a fabulous time.

Unfortunately, the bubble didn't last. Slogging through soft sand and the unrelenting heat eventually took the wind out of my sails. Still, I had a trick up my sleeve for a time like this. A surprise playlist my partner had made for me went on at the 50km mark to put a boogie in

my step. It was full of country rocking and sing-your-heart-out tunes, and I had that thing on repeat all the way to the finish.

Many competitors battled both physically and mentally with the distances, and so it was during the 41km of Day Four that the wheels fell off for me. At roughly halfway I hit what I've termed "peak sand". I was exhausted, on all levels, from trudging in the heat of the day. I realised that I wasn't enjoying myself, it wasn't even so-called "Type 2" fun.

"What advice would Dad, Caleb and Grandad offer to cheer me up?" I pondered.

Normally, when they entered my thoughts during the week, I could spin it into a positive. I knew they would be absolutely chuffed to see me out there getting stuck into a new adventure. But

"NATURE HAS A WAY OF HOLDING SPACE FOR US TO STUMBLE THROUGH THE WEEDS OF OUR PAIN"

on this day, I just couldn't. I was in tears, broken, sobbing at the thought that I wouldn't get to share with them my tales and photos from this epic outing. I had expected to encounter some emotional pain out there, what really surprised me was that once I started, I completely unravelled. It was a sight to see for the crew at the next checkpoint. They were genuinely and incredibly caring, offered everything an emotional wreck could ask for, and sent me confidently on my way to complete the stage.

Day Five, the 37km 'sprint' to the finish, served up another hearty helping of fierce heat, soft sand, and other-worldly vistas. I had felt inexplicably confident all week that I would complete the entire course, but on this day I felt it more and more keenly with each kilometre I ticked off. In the final two kilometres, I felt again the pure bliss of running, and marvelled at the wonder of the whole adventure. I felt Dad,

Caleb and Grandad there with me too, in full party mode. I'd emptied my tears the day before, so I crossed that final finish line immersed celebrating the triumph of achievement. I relished in the satisfaction of the challenges overcome, not just for that week but also in the previous 12 months.

I had been on my feet for 43.5 hours, which is more time than I spend staring at my computer screen during a working week. I'd had grand intentions of nutting out a ten-year plan, or maybe even to "find myself", during my hours in the desert. But when all you have to do is run, eat, and sleep, in a hostile environment where it rains less than three days a year, it strips back our concept of life to what is actually important. It's a reminder that life does not need to be so tricky, and it's what we do in the present moment that counts.

The evening of Day Five as I lay in bed enjoying the sweet ache of satisfaction in my legs, again I gazed out at dusk in the desert and let my mind wander. It dawned on me that the thousands of steps I took through the heat and sand are a symbol of the thousands of steps I'm about to take in this life without my three wise men. It won't always be easy or straightforward, but it is possible and my soul will smile once again. What I've lost in them, I'm discovering in myself and in other new wonderful people in my life.

Whether we're trudging through yet another kilometre of soft sand in the insufferable midday heat, or stumbling around in an oppressive cloud of grief, it's difficult to believe that there will ever be an end to the unrelenting pain and discomfort. It doesn't even need to be a heart breaking experience like the loss of a loved one, as humans we find darkness in other places too. The end exists, and we can get there. One step forward, then the next.

While we are struggling we must also embrace what is sent to help us, and it can arrive in the most surprising packages. It might be chilled water from a friendly Bedouin local in the desert, a meaningful conversation with a fellow passenger on the plane, a smile from a stranger on the street, or, perhaps, an unexpected prize and the willingness to accept it. **RUN**

Follow Hannah Johnston and get a good insight into getting started in multisport and the outdoors in general at www.makeitdirt.com