

## Ethiopian altitude training trip

28 January – 10 February 2026

“What about an altitude training trip?” Steve mused

“I’ve always fancied one with a bunch of like-minded similar-ability mates” I said.

And so, it began. I was initially sceptical that anybody else would buy but it turns out that when Steve floats an idea, everyone buys. We soon had a plausible schedule from Richard Nerurkar which added several bells and whistles along with an unimpeachable seal of authenticity.

“Treat it like a Saga holiday” I said. “They say it takes 3 weeks to fully adjust to altitude so we’ll arrive and will be incapable of more than a shuffle. Climbing over the step into the shower will leave us breathless. Getting up for the usual 4<sup>th</sup> pee of the night will leave us dizzy. After 4 days we might be able to break into a jog. After 8 days we might just be able to run without a cardiac arrest, only to find we need to taper before a half marathon that none of us really want to do. Then we come home....”

“Sounds great. I’m in.” They all said.

Build it and they will come....

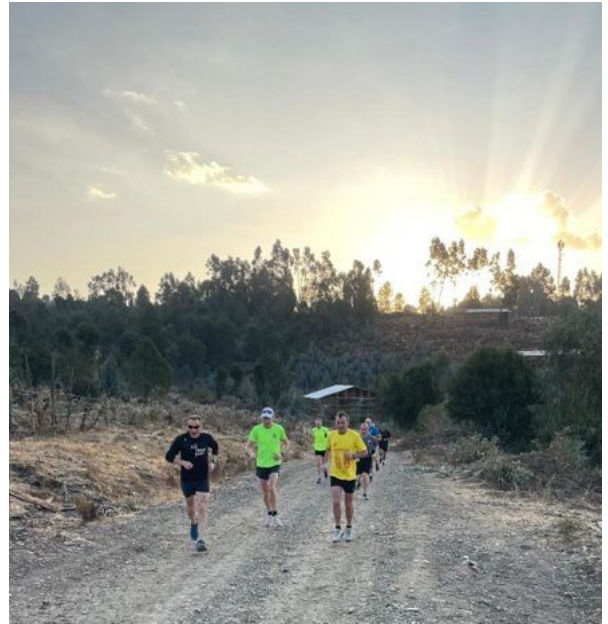
Ethiopian Airways has a daily overnight flight to Addis Ababa from LHR. Most of us took this and arrived in time for breakfast and were immediately whisked off for our first group run at Jan Meda Park. This is the Ethiopian equivalent of Parliament Hill and is the spiritual and physical home of



their annual cross country champs which is one of the most competitive races in the world. It turns out to be a flat bit of urban wasteland with a gravel path round the edge. There were loads of athletes loping about in the warm sunshine (a welcome contrast to the UK) but they kindly ignored us as we broke into a shuffle and immediately started panting/gasping. The effect of 2,700m altitude was extraordinarily debilitating. I got dropped by the group and gave up after just 3.5km at 5:06/km hoping for better things on subsequent days.



Day 2 began with what became our usual Ethiopian-style 6.30 am early start with a bus ride up into the hills above Addis for a trail run at about 2,800m. The hills looked great in the early morning light and we managed 10km but once again I was dropped even though the pace was only 6:00/km. In what became a familiar pattern, I made up ground on the downhills, I just about held on when flat but the moment it went uphill, I waded in quicksand and treacle. I usually casually say I dropped Richard Nerurkar on this one but in truth the real cause for his dropping off the back was his need for a pit stop. Everyone finished delighted with their morning's work and looked forward to the hotel buffet breakfast.



Richard fixed up a visit to his Great Ethiopian Run team's office. He was coy about the underlying purpose but it soon became obvious when one of the running GOATs appeared in the form of Haile Gebrselassie. He burst in to the room bubbling with trademark energy, cheerfulness and positivity. He cut us cake and chatted. He even seemed impressed by Paul's British M65 2:47 marathon record as witness the fact that later on the same day, when hosting a visit from ex-Arsenal footballer Bacary Sagna, he pulled Paul forward to showcase the art of the possible in old age! After the obligatory group photos with Haile, he moved on leaving us star

struck and elated. By staying in 3 of his 7 hotels and buying his coffee, we were more than happy to contribute to the Haile finances.



Food was a bit of a struggle throughout the trip with hotels mostly offering unimaginative stodgy pub food (meat and fries, pizza, burgers). We were also conscious of the need to be careful with uncooked vegetable, salads and ice if we were to avoid tummy trouble. Traditional Ethiopian cuisine is mostly built around injera (a sort of pancake made with teff which is a nutritious variety of grass) which was good when well presented but was hard going when not, even when accompanied by good traditional musicians and dancers. Amongst the dancers, a signature move seemed to be a shaking of the shoulders which required much more looseness of joint than any of us possessed!



Mixing things up a bit, we all went for a 4-hour mountain bike ride on Day 3 starting at about 3,000m on very fancy MTBs. The dirt roads were plenty challenging for most of us and there was lots of wheel spinning and some gentle falls. We spotted a monkey and were amused when Steve thought he was swapping first names with some locals only for Richard to translate the local 'first name' as 'keep going'. We had a great lookout over a thicket harbouring a pack of hyenas and



could see further out towards the Ethiopian highlands. Topping out on the ride we joined a spanky newly-tarmacked and mostly traffic-free road for a ludicrously fast descent down to Addis where we joined a newly-built but barely used cycle-track. We all avoided the open man-holes that were sprinkled generously across the cycle-track but, disastrously, one of our number failed to negotiate a fat irrigation hose that snaked across the track. He went down with a sickening bang to the shoulder and head. This is not the place to recount the traumatic ensuing hours but suffice to say he was eventually air-ambulanced back to the UK with a broken collar bone, shoulder and several ribs. Thank goodness for good insurance. He's now in recovery and is doing well. As an aside, it turns out that many standard insurance policies have an exclusion clause for competitive running races. It would seem I have relied for the last 17 years on insurance that wouldn't have worked. You've been warned!



If you haven't read 'Out of Thin Air' by Michael Crawley, you might find it an interesting read. It's about how elite Ethiopian athletes think and train. One distinctive feature is their predilection for zig-zag recovery running in the Eucalyptus forests above Addis. We tried this out on Day 4 and I found it as batty as I expected. Others loved it. I couldn't hang on to the group and when we emerged into the same clearing for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time, I thought I'd take a breather and wait for their reappearance. Sure enough, they reappeared and I hung on until I could see the light of the forest edge when I made a break for it. I only managed 5km and 30 mins whereas the rest relished their 10km in 60 mins. The spirituality of the Entoto trees was lost on me but made some converts in our group.



On our last day in Addis we returned to Jan Meda Park and I was pleased to find some progress was being made. While I was dropped by the faster members of the group, I lasted the full 12km at 4:51/km. I even mustered a reasonable canter for the last 500m albeit it was downhill.



In humbling contrast to our running obsession, we were taken to visit a Podoconiosis clinic that Richard's wife, Gail, is connected with. 'Podo' is an endemic, lower-leg Elephantiasis non-infectious disease caused by exposure of bare feet to particular soil types typically found in volcanic areas. Left untreated, it results in swelling and severe disfigurement of the lower legs and feet. We were introduced to some patients and saw them being assessed in the clinic and then witnessed the sight of their feet being tenderly washed by the nursing staff. The tragedy is that the disease is entirely avoidable by wearing shoes and is entirely treatable through regular washing and hygiene. Culturally it's hard to persuade rural people to wear shoes and once someone has podo they are often ostracised and end up beggars which means washing and hygiene are impossible challenges. We left in pensive mood but full of admiration for the work of the clinic.

Lurching to another aspect of Ethiopian 'culture' we were treated to VIP tickets for an Ethiopian premier league football match. St George vs Fasile Ketema. There was lots of honest, athletic endeavour but the hard pitch and thin air meant that ball control was hard. The ball spent much of the time bouncing about and there were few goal scoring opportunities. The two sets of supporters on the other hand were entertainingly enthusiastic and vocal so we all enjoyed the match including the half time visit to the outside broadcaster's truck facilitated by our well-connected guide, Tamy.



We then transferred to the Yaya training village which was at a slightly higher altitude than Addis. The resort looked tired but it was clean and functional. We did our morning run on a new road climbing up to 3,000m through forest, accompanied at one point by a hyena which prompted a lone female Ethiopian athlete to join our group for safety and company. Once again, I was OK on the downhill and flats but was woeful uphill. As I noted on Strava, it seems I forgot to bring my glutes on this trip. Andy Leach (the fastest of our group) stuck with our running guide to the top but everyone else ended up walking at least for a while. I actually kept running throughout but was slower than the walkers! Daringly I tried a second session that afternoon on the dirt path round the football pitch in the resort. I managed a princely 5km @5:24/km but viewed it as progress – baby steps and all that.





Day 7 dawned on our first track session at the Kenenisa track next door to the Yaya village. To our surprise the track was in bad condition with the inside 2 lanes worn through to the substrate. We were excited to see Tigst Assefa (the women's world marathon record holder) cruising round the track wrapped up in her track suit looking substantially better than we looked or felt. It seems curious to us that with the whole world to choose from, some of the best athletes in the world choose to run on

scrubby waste ground and worn out tracks. It just goes to show that facilities aren't key to success. Running in lane 3 to avoid the gravel of the inside lanes I attempted an ambitious 3x1km with a 1km recovery. Best I managed was 4:21 which was unimpressive given my 6 min recovery but again I felt it was progress.



We had optionality on Day 8. Converts to the zig-zag Eucalyptus regime disappeared into the forest for an hour and saw a baboon that had just snatched someone's lunch but generally they enjoyed the 'conditioning' (Out of Thin Air concept) expected from such a session. The less spiritual amongst us opted for an out-and-back along the new tarmac of an unfinished road. I was under-dressed in a t-shirt so got quite chilly in the brisk wind on the exposed ridge but we all enjoyed the view down to Addis. We topped out at 3,150m, the

highest of the trip so maybe my 5:26/km pace was acceptable.



Our second visit to the Kenenisa track was a bit of a highlight for me because we witnessed a large group doing their warm-up drills in effortless, perfect synchronisation. Would that I was as coordinated and flexible! I was pleased to repeat my 3x1km session and find I was 10

secs quicker on average. Something good is happening at last and not before time with our half marathon fast approaching.



After the flight down to Lake Hawassa (1,700m) and the bus ride round the lake into town where we saw a different lifestyle with most people in the countryside living in circular mud huts, we enjoyed the comfort of Haile's smartest hotel yet with great views over the lake. As part of the weekend package we were taken to a pre-race



barbeque which had good food and drink and was enlivened by some happy dancing round the fire. We were impressed by the desire to dance with the national flag and sing traditional songs. No chance of that happening in the UK. We were also impressed by the way the organisers let in some local children for a bit of food/drink and dancing before ushering them out of the compound and then dousing the fire as a signal for everyone to go home.



The day before race day the package also included a dawn hike up to an overlook. About 100 people took part accompanied by camera drones and a lot of posing for photos with promotional banners. The dawn didn't come to much but we enjoyed the scramble up the hill, the chat and the view over the lake.

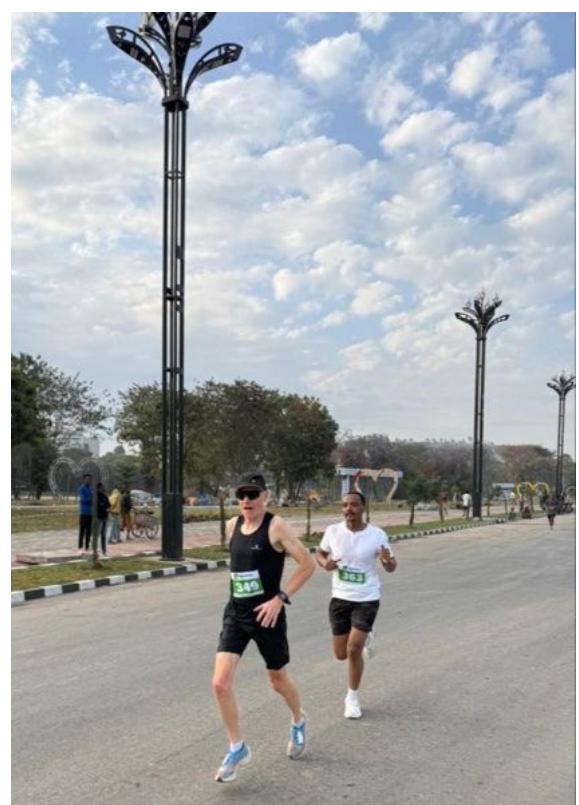
Race day began pre-dawn with a swift 05:00 am raid on the kitchen for bananas and coffee before the bus shuttle to the race start. Richard had told everyone in the pre-race briefing that there was only one toilet (the unlit hole-in-the-ground variety) for the 350+ runners so some planning was required. Arriving at the start still in the dark, we warmed up amongst the elite



runners who were starting 10 mins before the mass start ('mass' meaning about 250 runners). The elites seemed to start in the dark but almost instantly after their start it became light. Our team of Ancient Britons sporting a natty all-black kit then lined up for a photo call with a hastily arranged team of Ethiopian masters.

We rather suspected them of being 10-20 years younger than us but it made for a good photo opp. The course started with a significant downhill so we tried not to overcook it. The Ethiopian

team started out confidently with all 6 in the top 10 with Paul leading the way for us shortly behind them. Rich, me and Terry followed with a gap then to Steve and Jon (who had made a last minute decision to toe the start line despite a stomach bug). Sadly our best runner Andy hadn't recovered from his stomach bug sufficiently to run at all.



Richard and one of guide runners, Zak, passed to and fro on mopeds brandishing cameras and we tried to look the part or smile in desperation. I was amused to see on the back of a moped heading towards the start, an American called Jim who had arrived on the Awassa plane with us but ultimately had come straight from Chicago. He had overslept and missed the shuttle bus.

After arranging his moped transport he eventually started the race 75 mins late but still managed to avoid finishing last!



One of the Ethiopians dropped off their group and we passed him. Rich was feeling good and pressed on to catch Paul and they moved through some of the Ethiopian masters team. Terry took station between them and me. I drifted gently back through the field and was overtaken by the lead woman but I kept a little in front of Steve. Jon started very cautiously but found he had enough in the tank to move through and finish just behind Steve albeit he was in a bit of a state as he crossed the line. The elite course and the mass course differed slightly in the closing stages and unsurprisingly there was a little confusion on the route taken by the first few runners. Rich probably didn't take quite the right turn down to the lake but the total distance covered was right so who cares. The surface of the lakeside path wasn't the greatest but someone was pouring gravel into the patches of mud when I went past so the majority would have kept their shoes clean. I was



delighted when a stork/pelican flew low over my head. They're huge! Local support on the course was often rather bemused but always good humoured. There seemed to be people with long sticks ensuring stray dogs weren't a nuisance.

Final scores on the doors?

5 <sup>th</sup>	Richard Johnson	1:23.18
7 <sup>th</sup>	Paul Thompson	1:23:38
16 <sup>th</sup>	Terry Booth	1:27.22
24 <sup>th</sup>	Ben Reynolds	1:30.40
33 <sup>rd</sup>	Steve Watmough	1:34.32
34 <sup>th</sup>	Jon James	1:35.22

Everyone was pretty happy with their runs given the circumstances. With the altitude being 1,700m, Richard N had warned us to expect to run 5-10 mins slower than at sea level. Steve found the whole experience one of the best of his running career. Paul confessed to some emotion in re-discovering joy in his running and racing. Rich was chuffed to get on the podium

for the veterans race. Jon was relieved to come through his longest race for years despite a heavy mileage week (for him) and a dodgy stomach. Terry enjoyed the whole trip so much that he immediately started plotting another visit with his wife. I enjoyed the whole experience: good people (and some great ones), good chat, good running, good sights, good organisation, cultural enlightenment – what’s not to like? I hope to repeat similar trips.

