

MOROCCO

Running through my mind in Morocco

Could meditation improve your London Marathon time? Jeremy Lazell tests a new retreat that gets joggers thinking on their feet



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I am on a hilltop in the desert outside Marrakesh, singing a song by an 11th-century yogi who turned green after too much nettle tea. “I bow at the feet,” I intone, “of the genuine guru.” Minutes later, I’m performing a Tibetan yoga move called the Dancing Warrior Laughing at Appearances. “Ha-ha!” I shout, thrusting my arms like a grinning Travolta towards the cloudless blue. “Hee-hee!”

It’s all good fun. I’m just not sure how it’s going to help my running.

I’m here to learn the art of mindful running. My teacher is Brian Hilliard, who once spent three years meditating while confined to a solitary chair in a Buddhist retreat. He now teaches Running with the Mind of Meditation at retreats in Morocco, Greece and Finnish Lapland. “At some point during my own five marathons,” he tells me, “I realised that mindfulness could really help runners get into the zone — free from many of the annoying thoughts and worries that usually accompany a run.”

The base for this unconventional training camp is La Pause, a boutique oasis hotel marooned on a rolling sea of parched, dusty hilltops known as the Marrakchi Desert. It has no electricity, no wi-fi, just a handful of Bedouin-chic ensuite tents and 10 simple but stylish mud huts, festooned in Berber rugs and lit by a gazillion candles. “Life-changing experiences in tranquil, stylish settings,” runs the tagline. Too early to comment on the “life-changing” claim, but “tranquil, stylish settings”? It’s a yes from me.

Not everyone is here for the running. You can just come for the meditation, as most in our group have. That leaves Brian’s morning runs to me – plodding 47-year-old jogger with one marathon under his belt and zero inclination to improve on his time of 3hr 58min – and Becky, a Midlands GP who used to love running, but has lost her marathon mojo. “I need to find it fast,” she tells us. Not kidding: she’s scheduled to be running the London Marathon this morning. Whether she hits the wall near Shadwell probably depends on Brian.

Our first run is at 7am. Bulbuls chirrup in the trees, frogs croak in the river bed below, the snowcapped summits of the High Atlas blaze ochre against the rising sun. If we can’t find Becky’s marathon mojo here, it’s time for her to hang up her running shoes. Brian encourages us – he’s way too gentle to tell us – to focus on the feeling our feet make each time they strike the ground, or to count our breaths in groups of 10. But not to think. Start thinking, he tells us, and time drags; focus on the present and time flies. I remember a line in Haruki Murakami’s book *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. “I run in void,” he writes.

We head off for what will be a gentle 50-minute jog, Brian setting an even pace on Becky’s shoulder, me trying hard to focus on my feet, but instead fixating on why Murakami’s translator went for “in void”, not “in a void”.

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I focus on my feet, one pace, two paces, then it's gone: I'm wondering whether I brought enough toothpaste

We climb up through a dried-out river bed and onto a 4x4 track that dips and rises towards the High Atlas. I focus on my feet, one pace, I am doing it, two paces, I am focusing on my feet, three paces

— suddenly it's gone. I am not Running with the Mind of Meditation, I am Running with the Mind of Someone Thinking About Toothpaste. Did I bring enough? Do I need to buy more?

I go back to the feet. One pace, doing it, two paces, nailing it, three — again, it's gone, my mind suddenly hovering over a water bottle in my tent. Don't ask me why, just know that the inside of my head is not a very interesting place.

The days follow a familiar pattern: morning runs where I strain to focus on my feet; Tibetan yoga where I struggle to locate my heart centre; then meditation in the morning (2½ hours) and afternoon (1½ hours), where only fleetingly do I “come into the breath”.

Yet I pretty rapidly love it all. On day four, I am padding around barefoot in the dust during a walking meditation session, the purr of nesting pigeons echoing in the cliffs below. Suddenly I become rooted to a sandy spot. I don't have a clue what's happening, I just know I am frozen in time and place by a delicious vibration, channelling up through my left foot and into my stomach and chest. “Check out that dude in the grey shorts,” a young American guest chuckles from a veranda nearby. “What the hell's he doing?” What I'm doing is getting into Brian's zone.

Next morning, we head off on our run, this time accompanied by La Pause's two gentle-giant mastiff guard dogs, who earlier rushed to Becky's aid when she slipped near camp, and now refuse to leave her side. I feel crazily strong, and fly up hills beside the track. On one, I fly too fast, losing my breath and rhythm. I feel ragged, tired. I hear Brian's voice inside my head: "Go back to the breath." One, two, three, I am counting breaths. By four, I am calm again. I feel smooth, strong, and fly once more towards the summit. I am touching Murakami's void.

Then pop! Aaaaah. I have torn my achilles. I hobble down, still counting the breaths in tens, singing that 11th-century yogi song in time to my limp: "Feels so good that feeling bad feels so good." Game over.

So what have I learnt about Running with the Mind of Meditation? Well, on the down side, it won't stop you screwing up your achilles. On the plus side, that feeling I glimpsed before my achilles popped? I think it lets you experience your run, not just endure it. Hell, I'll go so far as to say it helps you enjoy it. A union of emptiness and bliss is what Brian calls it. Six days in Morocco is probably not long enough for that, but blimey, it's worth sticking with.

On my last day, nursing my leg over a cup of mint tea, I spot a flash of Lycra zigzagging up the hill behind my tent. It is Becky, off for her second run that day, all on her own. I can't say whether it's Morocco, her mastiff mates or Brian's words of wisdom that have done the trick, but one thing's for sure: she's found her marathon mojo. Killer achilles or not, I know exactly how she feels. London 2017? Try to stop me.

Jeremy Lazell was a guest of Retreats. Brian Hilliard's next retreat is at a private villa on Lefkas, Greece, June 12-19. Prices start at £1,335pp, full-board, including daily meditation, yoga and optional running, but not flights (retreats.pro)

