

Tom Parkinson Travel Writing Grant – James Rennie

Altitude training in Font Romeu, France, April 2024

The first thing I noticed was my heart. It's not something to be aware of most of the time, metronomically ticking along in the background. But there, up at 5500 feet, you can feel the pounding of every beat. And then there's the breathing. Sure, the drive up the mountain didn't feel too different, and wandering around the house was OK, but that first walk to the shops laid bare the magnitude of the tasks to come. Even a short stroll uphill was labouring. Though the immediate bodily shifts led to a palpable sense of anxiety, there was also excitement. Three weeks of training at altitude in the beautiful French Pyrenees, a stint of suffering that would lead on directly to a successful summer of racing on the track.

We were into a routine quickly. Wake up, coffee, cereal. Drive out to the forest for a run. A carton of chocolate milk in the car for recovery, followed by an obligatory stop at the boulangerie to get us through the rest of the morning. Then work, eat, work, run, eat, gym, eat, sleep – no one said the life of a runner was thrilling. By day 5 I was already exhausted, and contemplating my first mid-afternoon nap of the trip. Instead, I heeded the warnings of Phill, a Font Romeu veteran with nine altitude stints behind him. “In the first two weeks you can only nap after the hard sessions. The final week is about survival, at that point the rules go out the window”.

Our first track session was quite something. We arrived at 10am, hoping we had left it long enough for the overnight snow to have melted off. Instead, we arrived to find a white, icy track, with coaches and athletes using hurdles as make-shift broom to try and clear Lane 1. We quickly pitched in to help, and before too long had a safe and runnable track – time to get going. The track was pretty busy already, with a range of groups that could be easily identified. You have the casual runners, who either lived in the area or were here for a nice walking holiday in the mountains and decided to stop by the track and see what it was all about. You have the competitive amateurs (our university group being amongst them), clearly focused and committed to the task ahead, but recognising that, ultimately, this is all just a game to us – there are no contracts, livelihoods, and places in major championships on the line. And then you have the pros. Instantly identifiable, dressed head to toe in one brand, we knew many of them by name (not that they had the faintest idea who we were). It is the hard work put in on this cold Font day in April that creates the opportunity to run on a hot Paris day in August, not in front of a few fellow athletes, but in front of thousands of screaming fans. Perhaps the highlight of my training sessions out in Font was overtaking an unnamed British Olympic hopeful as I kicked to the finish of my final 300 metre rep (he may have been running a 1 mile rep, but the overtake will last longer in my memory than the details).

Continuing the assault on the senses that altitude training can be, the weather throughout our three week stay took us from sunbathing on the balcony in shorts and a t-shirt to wearing three layers, a hat and two pairs of gloves just to get through a morning run. One morning in the second week we awoke to snow cover so deep that we knew the

hard interval session we had planned would be impossible in Font. Not to be deterred, we drove down to Llivia, a Spanish inlet with a population of just 1,500. There was something inherently ridiculous in the idea of driving to another country just to get the required training done. But nevertheless, the trip was a success – at 4,000 feet, a chance to take in a little more precious oxygen with each breath, and a chance to validate the assertion that training in the absence of any more oxygen really was making a difference.

An altitude training camp in a new location is a curious prospect for the excited traveller. I yearned to explore the area around us in great depth, and yet we rarely spent extended time out of the house when not going to a run, running, or coming back from a run. My favourite running quote comes from the book *Once a Runner* by John L. Parker Jr. It reads: “A runner is a miser, spending the pennies of his energy with great stinginess, constantly wanting to know how much he has spent and how much longer he will be expected to pay. He wants to be broke at precisely the moment he no longer needs his coin”. We were all misers in Font, reluctant to expend ourselves on a lovely trail walk or an explore of the surrounding towns in favour of more miles in the bank, pursuing aerobic strength above all else. That is not to say that we did not have a good time. The truth of it is, whilst the life of a runner may not be thrilling, the simplicity of routine is a wonderful thing. Over the course of the training camp we went on some stunning runs, ate the very best French baked goods, played approximately a million games of Mario Kart on the Wii, and I even did a bit of work on my master’s thesis. Whilst three weeks of training in thin air was exhausting, at times I felt like I could stay there forever as the cycle of running and eating and working and playing and sleeping continued.

Yet all good things must come to an end. It was a sign that it was time to leave when, with just two days to go, I went on the only run of the camp that I did not enjoy for a single moment. Sure, there was runs that got hard, runs that were a bit miserable at the start and then became nice, and runs where I felt half asleep throughout, but this was the first that was truly unenjoyable. Time does some funny things when you are running: in an interval session a two minute recovery can vanish in seconds, whilst a two minute rep when your legs are full of lactic acid can stretch out for an eternity. On this occasion, the run was a sixty-five minute easy run. Not a run that would fill me with fear at the pain to come, but nor a run that would be done in a flash. It was simply one foot in front of the other for sixty-five minutes in cold, miserable weather. This is the side of training that isn’t shared on Instagram posts and in flashy Nike adverts: the daily grind of training that ultimately grinds you down. I was almost happy to have experienced a run like this in Font. After three weeks in the mountains, running through beautiful forests and on snowy plateaus, I wondered if the sport would never feel the same again once I left. Instead, reality hit just in time, and I was brutally reminded of the ups and downs of competitive running, a sport where success requires hitting your peak both physically and mentally for months in a row.

My three weeks in Font Romeu was a genuinely transformative experience. I lived the monotonous yet peaceful life of the professional runner, I pushed my body to respond

to physical stresses I had never before experienced, and I spent time in one of the most beautiful landscapes I have ever seen. I cannot wait to return there one day.









