

# Heather Does Death Valley Trail Race

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By Heather Macdonald (Mountain Madness Trail Running)

Incredible scenery, friendly people, casual race, and a magical setting added up to a very memorable race in the heart of Death Valley, California. I went thinking that the desert was flattish, gray and uninviting; I couldn't have been more wrong.

With no race day registrations, you have to sign up well in advance because all 250 spots filled up every year.

The race was organized from the Furnace Creek Ranch where most of the runners stayed. After picking up our bibs in the Saloon, Dave from EnviroSports gave us the lowdown on the race: we had to finish to get the t-shirt, don't expect mile markers, there are aid stations every 5 miles, and we'd be bused over to the start. For people who wanted to take photos, just stop your watch! My kind of race.

The trail is actually a narrow jeep road that runs through Titus Canyon. The marathon route starts in a valley and climbs 2000 feet on a gradual yet gravelly road to the start of the 18-mile portion. I was in the 18-mile group, and we had the advantage of starting in the mountains.

The park ranger gave us a stern warning about littering and said we had to make sure there was no evidence that we had been there. Easy for him to say; the ground was rock solid, there were no porta-potties, nor trees, just puny shrubs.

To start us off, Dave said, "When you see my taillights go out, you can start." We laughed and headed out in short sleeves and sunscreen, enjoying the 10 C temperature at 9:30 a.m.

The route started downhill for a short while then went uphill on a switchback for about a mile and a half. At the top of the switchback, we rounded a curve to an incredible view. Photo op! We all started taking photos, sharing disposable cameras. After this, it's all downhill for 5000 feet. Wahoo!

One foot in front of the other....  
You call that a HILL!





I hardly noticed the first 15 miles because I was amazed at the mountains climbing on both sides of the road. No buzzards, no coyotes, no spectators, but plenty of inspiration. I met some great people (especially Sheila and Bob who had done Dances with Dirt) and encouraged them to come to Canada and do our trail races.



"Most look up and grab stars.  
A champion climbs a mountain and grabs one."  
Heather, you are our champion!  
Way to go.  
*Leslie*





I think I can, I think I can...(Heather I know you can!)

Thomas the Tank

Somewhere along the route, I heard footsteps and knew that I was being lapped by a marathoner. He quietly passed by in his 3:15 winning time. Then a few more passed by. One said, “Good work runner,” and I remembered why I liked trail runners; they are so supportive.

Without mile markers, I had no idea where I was but when I saw a few spectators, I knew I was near the end of the canyon. Abruptly, the mountains were behind, and the valley opened up below. The buses looked like kiddie toys in the distance. The temperature was now 24 C. At the last aid station, they said there was only 3 miles to go. After so many miles of downhill, my toes were starting to hurt and I had to pull out the stops to keep the pace. (I later learned to buy trail shoes a half size bigger to allow for toe room.)

I thought about my marathon running buddies Maria, Leslie, Lori, Shelley, Louise, Kathleen and Gail and their encouragement kept me going. I kept opening up the amazing motivational laminated flyer they made for me and read a new expression each time. Definitely the next best thing to a running partner.

There’s something about a finish line that is so satisfying. This was wonderful.

The awards were given out in the saloon at 5 p.m. and everyone showed up in the coveted race t-shirt. My new American friends invited me to dinner, and we shared stories about races and next events.

Would I do it again? For sure. Maybe I’ll pick another unusual race somewhere else in the world. I heard about the Catalina Marathon, and it sounded great.

Back In North Vancouver, at North Shore Athletics they congratulated me on the race and I got to thank my buddies and marathon coaches. That was so special.

Link to the [Envirosports](#) race.

*Postscript. I ran this race before I started offering trail clinics (2004) and before I took on several local races (Dirty Duo, Iron Knee/Tender Knee, Hallow’s Eve and The Phantom Run). It was in 2010 that I first hosted Fat Dog 120 ultra and later added The Brigade Race in 2017.*

*Back in 2003, for photos we carried lightweight disposable cameras (not cell phones) and we hadn’t started using the GPS technology like Garmin or Strava yet.*



## Inspiration from My Friends

"Most look up and grab stars.  
A champion climbs a mountain and grabs one."  
Heather, you are our champion!  
Way to go.

*Leslie*

When the going gets tough,  
it's just one foot in front of the other.  
You Go Girl! You Rock!

*Maria*

"It's a funny thing about life;  
if you refuse to accept anything but the best,  
you very often get it"  
Somerset Maugham

"Angels fly because they take themselves lightly"  
G.K.Chesterton

LIGHTFOOTED DESERT THONG MAMA ROCKS  
*Gail*

One foot in front of the other....  
You call that a HILL!  
*Louise*

I think I can, I think I can...(Heather I know you can!)  
Thomas the Tank  
*Lori*

"Oh my God I woke up with a snake tattoo,  
Oh my God, and I think that my tongues pierced tool  
Oh my God, Oh my God  
And I seem to be out in the desert too!!  
It's the Saturday morning trail race..."  
Just keep on cruising,  
think of the stories you'll tell!  
*Kath*