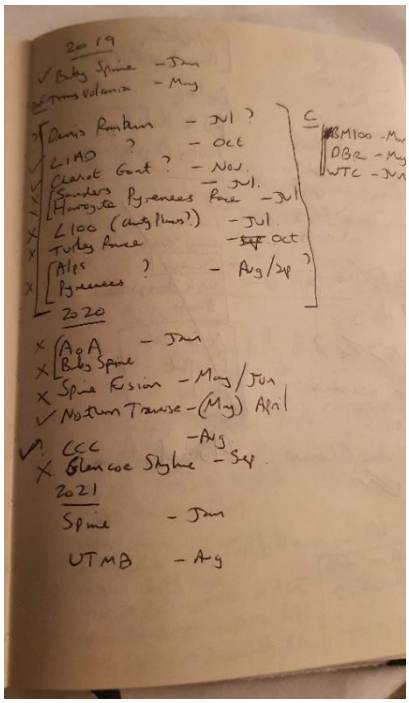
2022 UTMB-CCC Race

Simon Franklin

Back in the Autumn of 2018, I naively believed that years of certainty stretched ahead and I got out my Little Book of Adventures to map out my running plans. I thought my bucket list should include the UTMB and the Spine Race but wanted to make sure before I signed up to either.

For the Spine decided to test out my ability and motivation by entering the 2019 Spine Challenger (aka the Baby Spine) and the 2020 Northern Traverse (190 miles from Cumbrian Coast to Yorkshire Coast) to see if I liked the winter running and the nonstop nature and then I'd do the 2021 Full Spine. Simple.



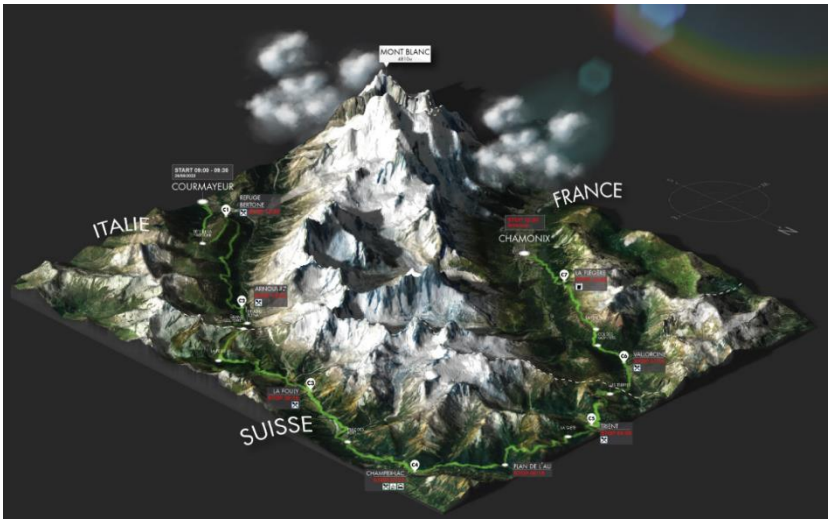
For the UTMB I'd just run the 2020 CCC, the 100km race that covers the last part of the 160km UTMB route in the Alps and then see if I felt the need to go back for the UTMB in 2021.

What could go wrong?

One global pandemic later, I'd somehow got through some of my plan, albeit delayed by 2 years. The 2019 Baby Spine and delayed 2022 Northern Traverse had been enjoyable but I felt ambivalent towards doing the Full Spine and it remained in pencil in the Little Book. The CCC had shifted away from me each year, but finally in 2022 it felt like it wouldn't be quite as irresponsible to pack into a crowded metal tube to fly out to France to give it a go.

Carol and I flew out a few days before the start and spent a fun few days meeting up with friends and eating hugely expensive croissants. She was injured but in any case had agreed to provide support at the last three checkpoints as payback for the work I'd put in on her Barkley Marathons and Wainwright Round adventures earlier in the year. Spoiler alert: her support was pivotal in my race.

Early on Friday morning after a chaotic coach journey I found myself dumped in a sleeping Courmayeur. The CCC route is a linear course, starting on the south side of the Mont Blanc Massif in Italy before heading east to Switzerland, and then back west into France to finish back in Chamonix.



The race started in an over the top, continental flurry of noise and music at 9am, the complete opposite of the last race I'd done before the CCC, a run up Seat Sandal with about 50 other people from a field by the A592 on a sunny Wednesday.

After a too-fast run through the streets of the town we headed to the first (and biggest) climb of the day up of 4,700ft up to the Tete de la Tronche and the Refuge Bertone. Obviously, a climb of this kind of duration and height suggests a need to do the same as all the other runners in the race and to use poles. I had mine in my hand from the start and as the ascent started I stepped to one side to put them up. And found the spring to keep them extended was stuck. I spent a long 30 or 40 seconds fighting them then gave up as I watched all the people I'd jogged past in the town overtake me again. Part of me (the blindly optimistic part) thought not using poles would make the race a purer challenge and after that I stopped worrying about them.



We climbed in a long queue up into the rainclouds above in single file for two and a half hours. I had been worried I would find this frustrating but apart from the odd idiot trying to overtake and then having to cut into non-existent gaps, it was a very good humoured, multinational snake, even laughing at the rumbles of thunder around us.

On reaching the top, the terrain changed to be more fell-like and I enjoyed the next few hours of gentle descending on good paths with stunning views towards Mont Blanc which hid in the clouds.

Despite the rain on this section it was still very warm and I tried to make sure I was still eating and drinking. When we reached the valley I had my first taste of the renowned salty "soup", which looked like old dish water but tasted great.

Another long poleless ascent followed, this time up to Grand Col Ferret, the pass that marks the border between Italy and Switzerland. As we reached the top and peeked down into the new country, the sun came out and, with a long descent ahead, everything seemed rosy.



Another checkpoint arrived soon at La Fouly, a pretty town with a spectacular waterfall between two mountains filling the view to our left.

Heading from here towards evening, I finally started feeling a bit queasy. Despite running quite a few long races over the years, I've still not perfected a method to avoid this. The route now followed the valley through impossibly beautiful chocolate box Swiss villages, but I was starting to worry. I was around the half way point and my legs were feeling strong but my stomach was on the edge of rebellion. Finally, on the sharp climb to the major checkpoint at Champex Lac, the gastrointestinal coup d'etat was unleashed. I had several stops bent double and dry retching by the side of the trail and tens of people overtook. Up until this point I had been on track for my most optimistic finish time, but I knew I would be starting to lose this buffer now.

I stomped into the checkpoint marquee to meet Carol for the first time. In my head I was calculating that to finish I probably had at least 10 hours of feeling this bad and it was hard to get motivated to leave. I could see outside it had started to rain again and the dusk had finally changed into darkness. I felt like I needed a sympathetic ear to tell me it was OK to stop and to put their arm round me and take me home. However, as

I threw up in a wheely bin, Carol said, “It’s not doing you any good being in here. It’s time to go. Put your coat and headtorch on and I’ll see you out the front.”

So 5 minutes later I was jogging disconsolately along the track by the lake wondering what had happened and why I was still out in the cruel night and not on a warm bus. Within an hour, jogging through dark forest, I was resigned to the fact I would not be DNFing as the next checkpoint was much too close to the finish to have any good excuse to stop. This made things easier. Just keep going at whatever pace I could.

The next section is called Bovine and, ironically, is a pig of a climb. To the right though there were fantastic high-level views down over Swiss towns in a flat-bottomed valley, and around me in the black I could hear cow bells from the cattle grazing on the high slopes.



The rest of the night repeated this pattern three times. Checkpoint, big climb, big descent, checkpoint. I still felt sick and had occasional stops, but the end was getting closer. Finally, as the sun was just starting to show itself, I reached the top of the last big climb, the Col Des Montets. Assessing my condition I found my legs were still strong and although it was hard to find anything I wanted to eat, I was still getting down the jelly fizzy coke bottles I’d bought in a hellish last minute shopping expedition in Chamonix. These were certainly better than the cashews I’d got at the same time that inexplicably smelled of beef.



At the final checkpoint of La Flegere, high on the mountain side above Chamonix, I suddenly felt great. With a remote possibility of getting in under 24 hours I started running as if I were in a fell race on the 5 miles descent to the valley. I imagine this really annoyed the people making their way sensibly down with their poles flailing, especially as they had probably all overtaken me at some point the previous day, but I was really enjoying it.

Arriving down on the outskirts of the town I kept up the running and showboated past the breakfasting crowds. This was a big advantage of missing my planned target time, as it was now 9:15am and the town was alive.

I crossed the finish line in 24 hours and 1 minute. The last hour of fun had made me forget the down patch I had on the middle of the race and I was on a high as I sat eating breakfast and drinking Fanta by the finish with Carol and a load of friends.

Over the next couple of days I recuperated with big meals out and beers and watched the UTMB race itself come to its conclusion. Watching people struggle in the heat that had been mostly missing on the CCC made me come to the realisation that the CCC was enough for me. I enjoyed the big race atmosphere and some of the route was great but I don't fell the motivation to come out here again for the big race.

So it's back to my Little Book of Adventures to start making new plans for the next couple of years.

