

## Confessions on the La Luz Trail

by John Farrow

Let's face it. The La Luz Trail Run can be intimidating, especially to flatlanders like me who had always lived within 500 feet of sea level before moving to New Mexico. Nine miles straight up the west face of the Sandia Mountains east of Albuquerque, climbing through several vegetation zones and a couple dozen switchbacks, across a stream, over an ancient rockslide and up several flights of concrete stairs, ending more than 2 miles up with a view that reaches into Colorado and Arizona. My first encounter with the La Luz Trail prompted thoughts of *Beautiful country, but what do they do for oxygen around here?* Run up this sucker? Get real.

Actually, the thought of running it provoked a certain morbid fascination: (*How long will it take them to find the body after I careen off some switchback?*) But the reality was there were people I knew who were starting to thicken in . . . places other than their heads and who weren't in half the shape I was, but had completed the run in spite of themselves. It was always "How come you didn't do La Luz this year?" Hurt, sick, business trip, you name it. Now I was out of excuses. It was time.

Picking up my race packet, I found a penny heads up in the parking lot. Good luck? Who knows? I spent it later that afternoon.

Race day dawned clear and bright, cool in the foothills. A great day for running. At the start, the runners seemed a little different from the regular road race crowd, a bit leaner, more mountain goatish, with some even in high-tech, light-weight hiking boots. What did they know that I didn't?

The start seemed quieter than most. There was scattered applause and shouts of encouragement from onlookers, but hardly a sound from the runners. Some serious energy conservation going on here.

Friends had said that the first two miles were the toughest, and they were not kidding. Two miles straight uphill on the pavement from the last street in town to the parking lot at the foot of the mountain with no respite. "To string the pack out," I'm told, but my hamstrings have a different opinion.

Finally, mercifully, we were at the trailhead and then the whole character of the race changed. It was no longer the slow, cruel drudgery of an uphill road race. Now we could stretch out on the trail, lean into the turns and around the boulders and enjoy the quiet freedom of running in the wilderness, away from the sights and sounds of the city, with the clean smell of the trees and flowers in the air, and the boundless view out over the horizon.

Although I don't run with a Walkman, there is always music in my head, and sometimes my mind's song selection reflects the kind of run I'm having. This race was no exception. While the first 2 miles on the road produced

absolutely nothing musical at all (except assorted musings on why was I doing this on such a beautiful day,) once on the trail the sultry blues of Lou Ann Barton and Angela Strehli put me in a good rhythm, along with the rocking boogie of ZZ Top and the Fabulous Thunderbirds. Yes, this was shaping up as a good run.

Ka-chunk! I go sprawling after stubbing a toe on a rock. (*Gotta remember to pick up the feet, idiot.*) Fortunately, no damage done, but a good wake-up call.

A mile or so into the trail we enter the switchbacks. The "pack" becomes a single-file, multi-colored Chinese dragon snaking its way up the mountain above and below me through the evergreens.

Once out of the switchbacks, the trail levels off a bit and we cross a creek in a canopy of dense cool foliage and head back uphill. A quick stop for water and then a glorious downhill section where you can really open up. Flying almost out of control (*Careful . . .*) with an exhilarating rush of adrenalin at the chance to turn on some speed at 8,500 feet. I glance over. It sure is a long way down.

We hit the Rockslide a bit over an hour into the race, and it's slow tippy-toeing from rock to rock. More switchbacks, these hacked out of a jumble of sharp, irregular granite boulders. Not fun. The music has changed, too. Chain-saw boogie with Dogman and the Shepherds (*Jail in San Antone.*) A lone guy with water provides a nice touch with cups perched on jagged boulders protruding from the side of the mountain (*Watch the elbows.*)

Finally we're through the Rockslide and headed for home. The sun is shining brilliantly on the valley below as we make our way through flowers and waist-high grass near the top. It's steep and the legs are crying out with major oxygen deficit (*Take all I got and I'll owe you the rest!*)

Running with just two others now. We pass one final guy dead in the water and haul ourselves up the stairs. The legs aren't hitting on all cylinders now. Finally, the trail levels off and we finish in the bright sunshine at the end of a tunnel of trees and branches. People I don't recognize cheer. It's over and I'm too tired to do much of anything but stretch and find something to drink.

There is an immense feeling of satisfaction, and I've accomplished my two main goals for this run: not get hurt and finish standing up. Plus, a time under 2 hours isn't too shabby, either. Can't wait 'til next year!

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