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Off the beaten trail

ONE of the things that I love about running is that it clears my head of the mundane things in life and creates a space that can be filled with blissful thoughts. Sometimes, when life gets too hectic, running takes me to a place where I can set my own pace. For a brief moment, I am free. Running is my form of escapism.

However, when I have a race around the corner and my running is almost entirely focused on my training, this space gets occupied with anything and everything about the event. Am I ready? Have I trained enough? Questions and doubts start to enter the so-called void. That can kill the joy of running for me.

When I need to break out of a training rut or simply take a breather, there is one place I usually head for: the trails. To me, there is nothing more invigorating than to be surrounded by nature. Trail running is a nice release from being too caught up with pace and mile splits. It reminds me of the reason why I took up the sport in the first place: to enjoy my dose of freedom.

MY FIRST TRAIL RUN

I first got acquainted with trail running two years ago when I joined a group of runners for a run around the Forest Research Institute Malay-

sia (FRIM) in Kepong.

As someone who had never even been to FRIM before, I had no idea what to expect. Prior to that day, I used to think that only the most physically fit could participate in such an activity. I was wrong.

As a girl who enjoys being outdoors and detests the thought of running on treadmills, it only took me one run to fall in love with the trails.

The FRIM forest was a welcoming change from the hustle and bustle of the city. Instead of exhaust fumes, I inhaled the scents of clean air and fresh leaves. The blaring traffic that I usually face on the road was replaced with serene environment and ever-changing terrain. Though my pace was slower than usual as I navigated the occasional tree roots and rocks, my mind and body were rejuvenated.

The trails at FRIM had many twists and turns, so pace became irrelevant. On that day, I ran solely for the sake of pure enjoyment.

Having said that, I was surprised at how tough the workout was compared to what I was used to on the road, even at shorter distances. At the end of the 14km run, I was completely exhausted and my legs were sore. I began to understand why my running friends claimed that trail running could make me fitter and stronger as a runner.

RUNNING TIPS

While trail running skills come mainly from practice, a few pointers can help you get started on the right foot. It is important to keep your eyes on the trails at all times to prevent ankle rolls and falls.

You also need to get accustomed to carrying your own fluid and nutrition, as you have nothing else to rely on while on the trails.

As for the shoes, normal running shoes should do just fine for a run on a smooth dirt trail, but you will need shoes specially designed for the trail as the path gets rougher. Most importantly, never run alone, no matter how familiar you are with the environment you're running in.

TRAILS AROUND KUALA LUMPUR

There are numerous places around KL where you can totally immerse yourselves in nature. FRIM, near the township of Kepong, offers miles of trails set against a lush backdrop of green forest.

Bukit Kiara, in Taman Tun Dr Ismail, boasts hilly jungle trails amid residential developments. Other spots include Bukit Apek (Cheras), Gunung Nuang (Hulu Langat) and Bukit Gasing (Petaling Jaya).

These places have a range of challenges for runners of various levels. They are just a short drive away from the city, waiting to be explored.

For the road warriors out there, I encourage you to get off the pavement and get muddy for a change. The experience might alter your perception about running.

Regardless of your reasons for running and regardless of your ability, you simply need to get out and experience the beauty and tranquility that nature has to offer.

So what are you waiting for? Grab your shoes and I'll see you at the trails.



Shanaz Shamsuddin is a drilling engineer by profession who finds balance in life through running and travelling.

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