



(1) In Jamaica, finishing strong often includes a dip in the sea. (2) The author celebrates her finish at the Reggae Marathon last December. (3) The tropical backdrop was just what she needed to revive her passion for running.

3

➔ JUST GET THROUGH MILE ONE.

This is what I tell myself whenever I head off on a run and feel tempted to turn right back around. The Jedi mind trick of it all is that after the first mile, I've found my groove and will just keep going. But as winter settled into New England last year, I noticed my little mantra was becoming an everyday necessity.

That's when opportunity knocked, in the form of an invite to Jamaica's Reggae Marathon, Half Marathon & 10K. It came from a publicist friend who was working with the island's tourist board and knew that I often write about running. "Come for the run, stay for the fun," read the tagline. How could I worry about Mile One when surrounded by sun, sand, and surf?

Plus, this was my chance to experience a "runcation" (a vacay built around a race). The travel trend, which lets you simultaneously check a



I Tried a Runcation

How a 10K in Jamaica got me out of a rut—and into a happier state of mind

By NICOLE BLADES

destination off your bucket list and fulfill a personal goal by crossing the finish line, has been growing steadily in recent years. And women in particular are embracing this double-duty getaway. The turnout at Destination Races—a series of half marathons held in wine regions in the U.S. and Canada—is "70 to 75 percent female," reports Matt Dockstader, the president of the organization. More than half the runners headed to the Reggae Marathon were women, too.

GIRL POWER GETAWAY

A runcation is a way to take your girls' weekend to the next level, explains Sarah Bowen Shea, cofounder of the popular online community Another Mother Runner. "If I want to meet up with my sorority sisters or the moms from my birthing class who now live in different parts of the country, it can be a challenge," she says. But when you organize your meet-up around a race, it becomes more doable.

It's also a perfect activity for friends who share a

passion for running, says Gina Imperato, who helps put on the Montclair Bread Co.'s 5K Doughnut Run and Baker's Dozen 13.1 in New Jersey (and takes an annual runcation with her high school buddies). "Women get their strength from leveraging their community," she says. "Sure, we can race alone, but why, when it's so much more fun in a group?"

And it's not just the long weekend you get to spend with your homegirls—you also experience weeks or months of bonding while

training. “You can use apps like Strava, Dailymile, or even Facebook to encourage each other remotely,” says Shea. It’s about having a shared goal, one that could strengthen the connection you already have.

Or, in my case, creating a brand-new connection. During the winding, nearly two-hour van ride from Sangster International Airport to the Cliff Hotel in Negril, I started chatting with a fellow journalist from Toronto. We kept the confab going through the entire trip, bonding over everything from our favorite Sean Paul song to dealing with the rigors of running outdoors year-round. I even told her about my Mile One mantra and the rut I feared I was slipping into, and her knowing nods felt instantly reassuring.

FINISH STRONG

When race day arrived, I actually sprang out of bed, raring to go, despite my 3:30 a.m. wake-up call and the oppressive humidity that hit my face like a brick in the predawn darkness. And not once did I mutter anything about getting through the first mile as I gathered with the more than 2,300 other runners behind the starting line or when we all took off down the flat road. I was focused on running my own race.

As I passed the 10K course’s midway point, I started to tune in to my surroundings and told myself to take it easy. There were Bob Marley songs blaring from giant speakers and onlookers

cheering from the sidelines. Members of running teams, wearing matching shirts, tried to keep one another’s spirits high. We were all feeling the steaminess of the weather, but also the camaraderie.

When I looked around at the thinned-out crowd of runners nearby, it was heartening to see such a range of people pounding the pavement (and sweating profusely) alongside me. Women, men, young high school track stars, older folks just

keeping their own pace—everyone set on getting to the finish line.

All three of the races ended at the oatmeal-colored sands of Seven Mile Beach. When I finally made it, I kicked off my running shoes, peeled off my socks, and plopped down by the shore, soaking up every detail of the blissful moment. When I caught my breath, I found my new running-writer friend, and we hung out, dancing to the music from the main stage and toasting our finish

with coconut water sipped straight from its freshly chopped source.

The trip boosted not only my running spirit but also my mood. I felt lighter and at ease, ready to step back into my life at home refreshed. The sun, the sea, the runcation experience in a vibrant country—it all helped me run my way out of a rut and discover a new way of seeing the world, one race at a time. My next destination: a half marathon in Nova Scotia this fall. ■

5 MORE RACES TO CHECK OUT

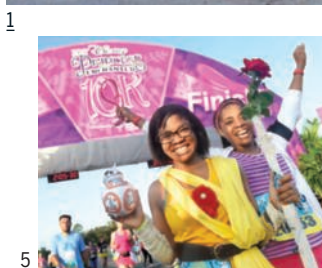
With events held all around the country, you may not need to travel far to enjoy a runcation. Here are five fun races (some with multiple locations!) coming up in the months ahead.

1. Fit Foodie Festival & 5K

It’s all about “calories burned, calories earned” at this event (copresented by *Cooking Light* and *Health*), which brings together food, fitness, and a 5K in five cities—Austin, Texas; Fairfax, Virginia; Denver; Clearwater, Florida; and San Diego—from May through October. (fitfoodierun.com)

2. The Kiawah Island Golf Resort Marathon and Half Marathon

This South Carolina resort hosts a gorgeous race along the barrier island. There’s a bike ride to check out the course, yoga, and a yummy buffet post-race. (December 9, 2017; kiawahmarathon.com)



3. Fueled by Fine Wine

The name says it all! This half marathon’s course passes through the vineyards of Oregon’s Dundee Hills wine region. After finishing the hilly run, you can relax with vino. (July 9, 2017; fueledbyfinewine.com)

4. Rock 'n' Roll Marathon Series

Thanks to live bands along the courses, this race series (which offers full and half marathons, 10Ks, and 5Ks) feels like a block party. Pick a city (there are nearly 30 to choose from!) and get ready to rock. (runrocknroll.com)

5. Disney Princess Half Marathon Weekend

Royalty will cheer you on as you run a 13.1-mile course, 10K, or 5K through the most magical place on earth. (February 22–25, 2018, at Walt Disney World Resort, Florida; rundsdisney.com)