DOWN UNDER ON THE SIX FOOT TRACK

by Scott Livingston

Deb Livingston navigates steep and rocky terrain

In Australia, track means trail. The Six Foot Track dates back to the 1880s and was designed as a shortcut bridle path through the Blue Mountains. The track is no longer used for horse travel and isn't six feet wide, at least not the whole way. It is frequented by bushwalkers (hikers) who typically take three days to make the journey and once a year, the Australia trail-running community descends upon this beautiful part of New South Wales, to celebrate the end of their summer.

My wife, Debbie, and I traveled all the way to Australia and ran 45 kilometers to prove that there is a thriving trail-running scene down under. Truth is, we didn't go all that way just to run the Six Foot Track Marathon, but running the point-to-point course from Katoomba to Jenolan Caves was a very satisfying experience.

More than 800 runners registered for the 25th edition of the race and 755 finished within the seven-hour cutoff time.

The Six Foot is a legendary race and has a heritage equal to any of the big ultras in the United States. First run in 1984 by seven people, it has grown to be Australia's fifth largest marathon-distance race, though it is a couple miles longer than an official marathon, thus qualifying it for ultramarathon status. Barry Keem was the men's winner in 3:23:13, a course record. Vanessa Haverd was the women's winner and 19th overall, in 4:00:30.

We had torrential rain, thunderstorms and high wind the night before the race, making the track muddier than anticipated. The pre-race storm also made for a pre-race adventure. We were staying at the Jenolan Caves House right at the finish line, so on race day we had to drive to the start at 5:30 a.m. A coach (bus) was blocking the narrow road between Jenolan Caves and Katoomba, so we had to take a 45-minute detour. The trip took two hours and it was white-knuckle driving the whole way, with the thickest fog I had ever seen, heavy rain, and gnarly switchbacks. Keep in mind - we were also driving on the left hand side of the road. If I had been wearing my heart rate monitor, it would have been warning me to slow down!

We took a shuttle to the actual start line near the Explorer's Tree, the national symbol that marks the start of the track. We thought that we would be in the first wave of runners, based on our times from similar races, but we were actually placed in the third wave. This was a unique position to be in, but we happily accepted it because the race rewards seniority, and we had none.

Starting 20 minutes after the first wave, we blasted off the start line and straight down a mountain with more than 1,000 wooden and stone steps cut into the hillside. It was wild. The race started out in fog and clouds, but by early afternoon, the sun had peeked out and was baking the late finishers. The course was challenging. My GPS measured 6,130 feet of elevation gain and 6,976 of elevation loss. The hills, whether going up or down, were all long.

The Six Foot Track has two especially long climbs in the middle of the race that had us going up for over an hour at a time. The course started with single-track, turned to a mix of double-track, dirt roads and fields, and then re-

Pre-race sight-seeing run in lush Australian Botanic Gardens

turned to single-track for the finish. There were several stream crossings and ample opportunities to get your feet wet.

The whole course, other than a road crossing and the last 100 feet before the finish line, was on dirt. More than 20 aid stations lined the route and they were well-stocked. The volunteers were mostly members of the Australian Rural Fire Service and their families. The rangers were full of encouragement, yelling "Good on you, mate!" as we ran by.

Despite the soreness, our Australian adventure was a lot of fun. The Blue Mountains are a wonderful place to hike and run. We spent four days in Katoomba and three days at Jenolan Caves prior to the race. Was it worth all the travel? That's debatable. It was a business conference that brought us to Sydney and the Six Foot Track Marathon added a nice bonus to the trip, but in today's carbon-conscious environment, 12,000 miles is a long way to go for anything. ■