

BRIGHT SIDE OF THE ROAD

WORDS BY NINA FITTON – PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS PARKES



POUNING THE PAVEMENTS AND STOPPING AT TRAFFIC LIGHTS IN LONDON – THAT’S NOT WHY I RUN. THAT WAS MERELY TRAINING, COMPLETED IN THE HOPE OF MAKING THE END GOAL SLIGHTLY LESS PAINFUL: A GOAL THAT WOULD TAKE ME OUT OF LONDON AND OUT OF ENGLAND. I was headed to Sierra Leone to run my first marathon.

During training, I racked up the hours in a hot yoga studio in an attempt to acclimatise to the expected 35°C heat and 80% humidity. I spent money on high-tech heat-reflecting apparel and fancy insoles, and researched race nutrition for hours. But in the end, my careful preparations turned out not to be the things that fuelled me along the red dirt tracks and through the jungles of Western Africa.

The whole experience had been organised by Street Child, a UK charity focused on helping the world’s most vulnerable children access education. We’d be spending a week in Sierra Leone in order to really get to know the place and visit some of the charity’s incredible projects, travelling to remote villages that had been ravaged by Ebola. We visited sweltering classrooms full of singing children, chatted to mothers working hard so they could send their children to school, heard the stories of widows and orphans of Ebola and learned of the great work of Street Child’s social workers. Peering through a dust-coated car window, the jungle landscape was totally unexpected and

beautiful; no village was passed through without a smile and wave from every single local.

So when marathon day dawned (at a painful 4am), 200 international runners lined up on the makeshift start line alongside 800 Sierra Leoneans – many of whom had travelled hours to take part in the race, likely the country’s largest tourist attraction.

Meandering along dusty tracks in the town of Makeni following the 6am start gun, every house we passed was the picture of African domesticity: women cooking for their children over open fires would shout out morning greetings, small dogs and goats pottered about in the gutters, barefooted children shrieked and waved to us while brushing their teeth.

Obviously this was no commercial marathon – there weren’t crowds of spectators standing five-deep alongside the road – but through the villages, children lined the streets, hands outstretched for a high-five, little voices cheering you along. The effect was electric and goosebump-inducing – we were running through the very villages that our fundraising was benefiting, past the schools that we were helping to build and alongside the very children that we were sending to school.

But now the tables were turned, and it was their cheers and smiles helping me.

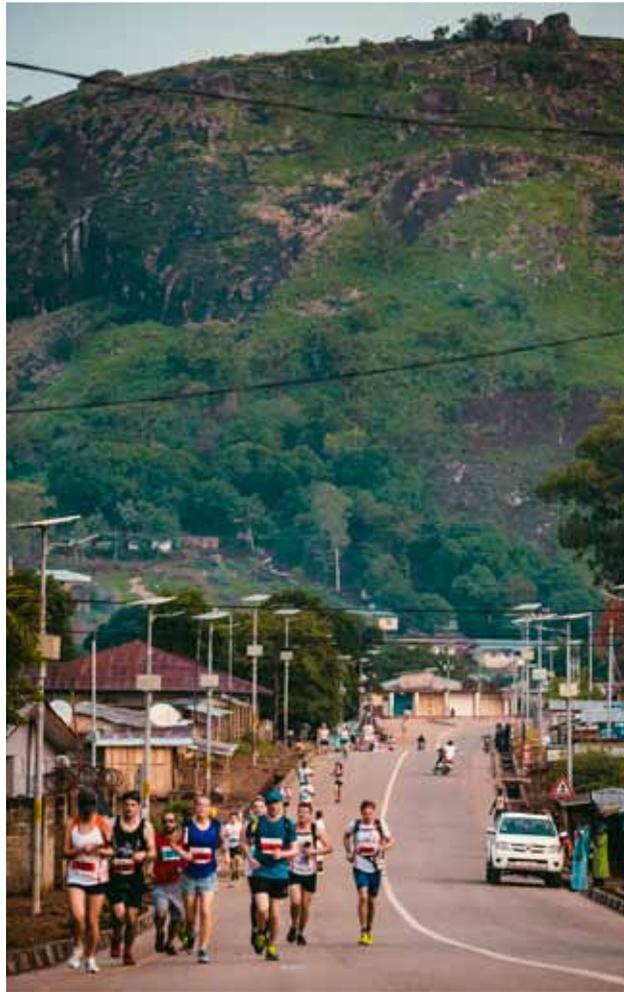
A small, selfish part of me ran that race to conquer the distance and the heat, to experience the route and those views – but only a small part. The real fuel was the smiles. Until you’ve visited a country like Sierra Leone, you’ve never experienced smiles like them. You need give nothing material – a simple wink or wave will be rewarded with the biggest grin, a grin that’s positively radiant. Each village we ran through, a dozen faces lit up, so happy to see us, all hands shooting up to wave, little legs kicking into action to run alongside us.

Twenty-six point two miles is a long way – nigh-on unconquerable if you don’t have sufficient motivation and drive. Street Child’s Sierra Leone Marathon has the answer: no one could possibly visit such a country and meet the people, and not be moved and motivated to keep their legs ticking over till the finish line.

It’s a marathon that’s not a race – runners aren’t competing, they’re uniting. Working together, along with Street Child, to create new possibilities for Sierra Leone and its children. And when you get your medal at the finish line, it’s not for you – it’s for them.



THE REAL FUEL WAS THE SMILES



WE WERE RUNNING THROUGH THE VERY VILLAGES THAT OUR FUNDRAISING WAS BENEFITING



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STREET CHILD is a UK charity, focused on creating educational opportunities for the world's most vulnerable children in West Africa and Nepal. The 2017 marathon will take place in Sierra Leone on 28 May 2017.
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