

# Running in Paradise

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*CJ Travel Editor*

ANTIGUA — It's as round, golden and shiny as the island sun I've left behind. Six inches in diameter it's almost as big as my head, attracting stares and comments throughout my journey home to Miami.

This is no ordinary Caribbean souvenir.

Rather, it's the mother of all race medals, my reward for finishing Antigua's Run In Paradise half-marathon.



In the pre-dawn hours of last Sunday, 143 runners toe the start line at Shell Beach, eager to begin our 13.1-mile journey. A sprinkle of rain can't dampen the enthusiasm of the field, whose members have come from 11 countries and 12 states to their mettle on the rolling hills that characterize the twin-island nation.

Soca music blares from the sound system as we bounce nervously from foot to foot; check our Garmin watches for the umpteenth time; and take quick sips of energy drinks to fortify us for the journey ahead.



“Ready, Set, Go!” says the announcer, and we dash into the disappearing dark, each one of us hoping that the hills, humidity and heat (it’s already 76 degrees) will be kind as we make our way westward from the Atlantic edge of the island to the Caribbean coast.

I have next to no chance of setting a personal record in these temps on a hilly course, so my own hopes are modest. I’m simply focused on finishing injury-free, in good humor, and to enjoy myself along the way.

Machel Montano is my soca soundtrack as I run past Jabberwock Beach in morning’s first light. Once the sun rises Calvin Harris and Ne-Yo keep me company, urging “Let’s Go!” as I run past centuries-old sugar mills, colorful country homes and the occasional grazing cow, decidedly unfazed by the human running a distance most sane people would drive.

But by mile nine, as I climb yet another coastal incline in the increasing morning heat, my initial get-up-and-go seems to have got up and left. I'm hot and cranky, wondering why on earth I'm doing this. Run In Paradise is a new race so crowd support is sparse and there are no spectators on the sidelines to cheer me, holding witty signs and furiously ringing metal cowbells. There are only the wide-eyed school children volunteering at the mile-marker water stops, handing out welcome cups of hydration.

"You can do it!" says one teenage girl to me, looking me squarely in the eye as she offers me a cup of Gatorade.

And she looks so serious and so sincere that I believe her.

As I run off, Pitbull and Chris Brown urge me to "loosen up my body" and I remember my start-line mission to enjoy myself. I shift my focus away from the heat to the breeze that cools my skin and the postcard-perfect palm-fringed sea view mere steps to my right. It's begging to be immortalized on Instagram and I wish I could stop but I'm focused: 13.1 or bust, baby!

As I crest the final incline and descend to the finish at Fort James Beach I see the crew from my running club lining the final meters, cheering me on as enthusiastically as if I was an Olympic marathoner entering the stadium. I pick up the pace and run as fast as my legs will carry me toward the finish line and the turquoise Caribbean glistening just beyond.

My foot hits the final timing mat at 2:25:55, a time that's more than 12 minutes slower than my best. Normally I'd be disappointed, kicking myself for not being faster. But as a volunteer hangs the massive medal around my neck I'm smiling from ear to ear. All I feel is grateful for the ability to run and for the opportunity to join hundreds of others who've had the chance to see Antigua in a way no one has before this morning.

And as I plunge into the blissfully cool Caribbean and float with my "race bling" around my neck I feel every bit as accomplished and happy as the winner, Mike Korir, who conquered the course in 1:14:06. I can't say for certain whether the medal has magical powers. But who knows?



Like I said: This is no ordinary souvenir.

The second annual Run In Paradise will be held in Antigua on May 29, 2016