



RED SEA CROSSING

An unforgiving desert, 12km climbs and a drip-feed of hummus. Would **Tim Heming** avoid hitting the (wailing) wall at the Israman Half?



MEET TIM HEMING

Age 38
Profession Journalist
Strongest discipline Run
Weakest discipline Swim
Why I raced Always up for a novel challenge

It's a sportswriters tour of Israel and I'm meeting more entrepreneurs in a week than in the best part of four decades. If triathlon is a sport of modern innovators, it has found a welcome bedfellow in the Middle East.

A cornucopia of multisport inventions are being introduced, from odour-quelling sports socks to a self-clotting sealant for

punctures; cognitive brain training to helmets that measure your heart-rate, the list goes on. In fact, the only place you won't find Israelis looking for a more efficient solution is in the country's only long-distance triathlon. It's called Israman, it's a behemoth, and my name is on the start list for the Israman Half event.

The 113km challenge starts and finishes in the holiday resort of Eilat in southern Israel, the Las Vegas of the Red Sea, with the mountainous terrain of Jordan to the left and Egypt to the right. Yet the stunning location belies the challenge ahead: Israman's heartbeat lies north, in the pernicious hands of the Negev desert.

AN IMPENDING NADIR

I arrive in Tel Aviv from London on Tuesday evening thinking two days will be ample tapering. What follows is a whirlwind 48 hours of social engagements focused on the fledgling but blossoming Israeli triathlon community, during which the only way to increase my

carbo-loading of hummus would be through an intravenous drip of liquidised chickpeas as I sleep. The locals also take every opportunity to remind me of my impending nadir, citing 60mph sandstorms and sub-zero temperatures as featured in the 2009 edition (worth searching on YouTube), a decade on from its inception.

Come Friday morning my transition area is awash with arm warmers, gilet, gloves, hats and an emasculating fleece-lined onesie. The 200 full-distance starters take the plunge at 6:15am, with the rest of the 1,000 or so half-wits like me, save a few relay bikers and runners, following 15mins later in the half-light.

Plan A is foiled as the Red Sea fails to part, so I hastily retrieve my wetsuit and gingerly splash into

action, finding myself wrapped in a tangled mass of arms and legs as human Sat Navs malfunction all around. After stopping to discover hand gestures have the same resonance in Hebrew, I splutter out in a pitiful 40:54mins for 1.9km; the myth that nothing sinks in the Red Sea quashed for good.

The sun is on the rise but I heed sage advice and dutifully wrap up warm in an inordinately lengthy transition before cycling out of town and straight into a 12km climb, attaining a body temperature high enough to fry falafel. Switchback follows switchback as the Corratec CC road bike, borrowed from the race organisers, floats up the mountain pass in the same manner it purred across the hotel car park on a 30sec test ride the day before.

“PLAN A IS FOILED AS THE RED SEA FAILS TO PART, SO I HASTILY RETRIEVE MY WETSUIT AND GINGERLY SPLASH INTO ACTION”



Below: Tim negotiating 70km of out-and-back rolling terrain; Left: The Israman bike course leads competitors into “the pernicious hands of the Negev desert”; Above: A remarkably fresh-looking Tim about to flake over the finish line with a 1:27hr, 21.1km run split

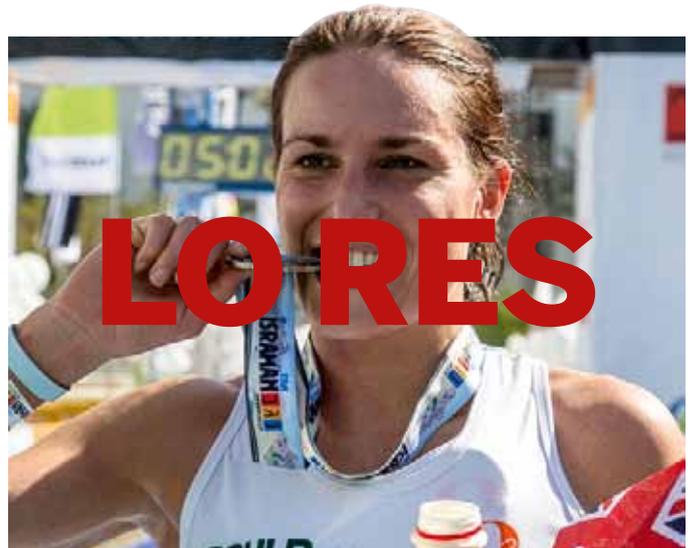


The summit reveals the location of the second transition, but it won't serve as a bike dump until 70km of out-and-back rolling terrain is first negotiated. All told it equates to over 2,000m of climb on the 90km route and offers enchanting views. I feel like Armstrong exploring a virgin lunar landscape... more Neil than Lance as TT bikes scream past.

TIME FOR SOME REAL GRIT
Back in T2 after a saddle-scything

3:48hrs, confusion reigns as my non-existent grasp of the dialect leaves me unsure where to stow my transition bag, I forget to pee, then desperately relieve myself behind a rock in the first kilometre of the descent. Is it steep? Let's just say it's disconcerting to be overtaken by a stream of your own urine.

It's time to show some real grit, most of which lodges under my big toe as trying to be smart by taking the trails instead of the



ISRAMAN Eilat, Israel, 17 January '14
3.8km swim | 180km bike | 42.2km run

Petr Verbrousek returned to successfully defend his Israman title against a small but patriotic pro field in the full-distance race. The Czech veteran took the lead from home favourite Tom Marmarelli at the start of the run leg, and although the 26-year-old stubbornly clung on he was never within striking distance of his wily nemesis, 15 years his senior. For a triathlete who has raced 138 long-distance events all over the world, Verbrousek's finishing time of 9:55hrs gives an indication as to the demands of the course.

In the women's race, Nina Pekerman was jubilant in crossing the line first. Repeating her victory of 2010, Israel's only female professional long-course triathlete dominated the field with a 15:49min margin of victory over the 2012 champion, Irena Mazin.

Edo van der Meer of the Netherlands claimed the men's Israman Half title in 4:35hrs, but the standout performance of the day came in the women's Half where the British pro, Alice Hector (above), won by over 40mins, finishing fifth overall in 5:00hrs. Hector, 31, from Windsor, has returned to triathlon after an unbeaten, seven-year spell in ultra-running, and is yet another impressive talent to add to the incredible depth in British long-course racing.

TOP 3 MEN

- 1 Petr Vabrousek, CZE 9:55:30
- 2 Tom Marmarelli, ISR 10:01:12
- 3 Nir Menachem, ISR 10:04:22

TOP 3 WOMEN

- 1 Nina Pekerman, ISR 11:17:42
- 2 Irena Mazin, ISR 11:33:30
- 3 Suzsanna Harsanyi, HUN 12:16:28

tarmac for 12km of heel-stomping, downhill fell running leaves me with gravel in my shoes and a gargantuan blister. There are a lot of people to pass so I set about my task with the enthusiasm of a crooked exam board and hobble on towards Eilat. Once on the flat, the sun beats down and the temperature edges towards the 30s.

The pace slows dramatically and as I try to chow down chia seed gels I'm cursing again – this time at the design flaws of plastic cups that retain no more than 10% of any fluid. Ultimately it all proves too much for this pasty-faced Brit who flakes over the finish line with a 1:27hr run split, collapses into a paddling pool of ice and commandeers it for the next 20mins with the vigorous

ferocity that was strangely missing for the previous 6hrs.

IF YOU CAN'T MAKE KONA...

The result? 87th out of 519 finishers. The verdict? I'm under no illusion it was an easy day on a tough course. The desert temperatures didn't plummet and we were spared the Kona-esque crosswinds. Yet the race, the organisation and the energy of the event still captivated, which led me to reflect (as I lay in a vat of my own bodily excretions): If you're forever dreaming of Hawaii but, like me, have little hope of ever being able to swim, bike, run or, er, cook well enough to reach the Big Island on merit, then sate that need by getting your ill-prepared backside over to Israel and riding the rollers on a top trip to Israman.