

LINES IN
THE SAND

01 Competitors make their way across a desert 50 times more arid than California's Death Valley

Blind Faith

Chile's Atacama Crossing is an ultramarathon unlike any other: a week-long trek in which competitors endure searing heat, precipitous sand dunes and razor-sharp canyons. This is the story of how blind runner Vladmi Virgilio and first-timer Aniceto Almeida found brotherhood in hell

WORDS BY TOM WARD — PHOTOGRAPHY BY THIAGO DIZ



To say that Aniceto Almeida was tired would be an understatement.

The 51-year-old antiques dealer from Belém, Brazil, had just spent 85 days cycling across three countries to Chile's Atacama Desert. Along the way, he had carried only a little food and slept in bathrooms or under a plastic tarp by the road. His journey was marked by near-misses with oncoming vehicles, and he almost froze to death when a tyre blew out as he crossed the Andes mountains. But, for Almeida, all of this was merely a warm-up. His biggest trial was yet to come.

The reason for this pilgrimage was not religion – at least, not in the strictest sense. Almeida had traversed the continent to partake in the 13th edition of the Atacama Crossing, a six-stage, 155-mile race through a desert 50 times more arid than California's Death Valley. Not only had he spent three months on the road before the race began, he had never completed an ultramarathon before. And he had almost none of the mandatory race kit – the lack of which usually results in disqualification. Something simply drew him to the desert. "I just needed to get there. I was sure something was going to happen," he'd say later.

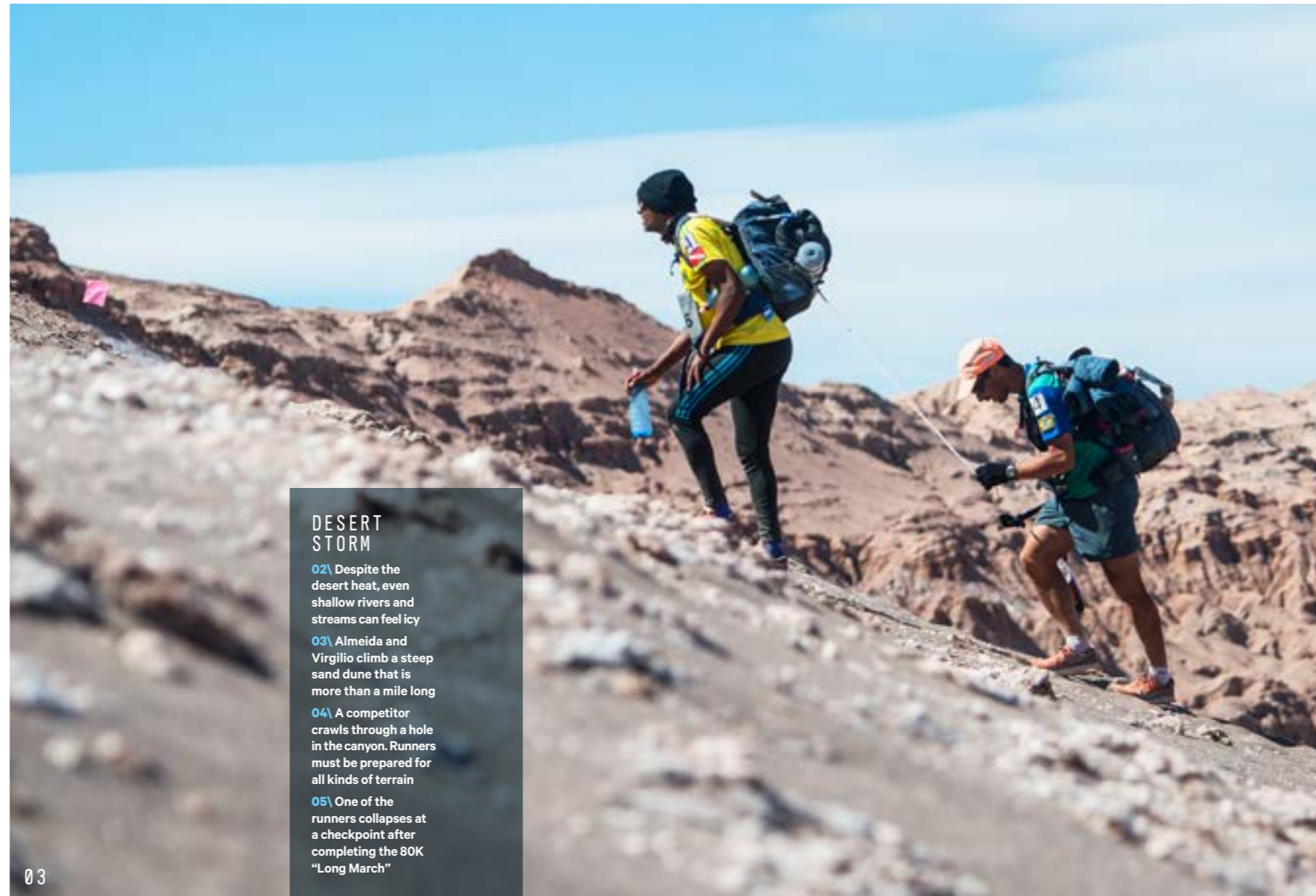
At the race camp, Almeida's arrival caused a panicked flurry of action. Moved by his story, athletes and volunteers raided their backpacks for spares of the race's 35 required items, including headlamps, whistles and food. Waterproofs were gathered, spare socks unearthed and electrolyte tablets donated.

One problem remained, however. The Atacama Crossing is a partnered race, and Almeida was alone. Then someone had an idea. There was still one racer on site who was struggling to find a partner: a 47-year-old Brazilian with two previous completions under his belt. His name

was Vladmi Virgilio. The only issue was that Virgilio is blind: Almeida would not only have to complete the race, but also guide Virgilio through the desert. The two strangers instantly agreed and, knowing nothing of each other's abilities or nature, set out together into the shimmering heat.

ROCKS AND A HARD PLACE

Of the 200 or so competitors who take part each year, only one in five run the entire distance, with the rest opting to walk part of the way. Each day, competitors cover an average of 25 miles. The fastest time recorded is a little under 24 hours (rest times between stretches are not counted); the slowest time is 70 hours. The prize,



DESERT STORM

02\ Despite the desert heat, even shallow rivers and streams can feel icy

03\ Almeida and Virgilio climb a steep sand dune that is more than a mile long

04\ A competitor crawls through a hole in the canyon. Runners must be prepared for all kinds of terrain

05\ One of the runners collapses at a checkpoint after completing the 80K "Long March"



such as it is, amounts to a pat on the back and a medal.

The crossing spans a distance equal to the width of Chile. On the first stretch, Virgilio and Almeida navigated winding trails through open desert and towering canyons, with only the occasional pink flag or strip of reflective tape to mark the route. Temperatures ranged from 35°C in the day to freezing conditions at night, when brief respite came at the fixed camps. Here, athletes gathered around the fire to coax some warmth back into their bones and ease their aching joints. Checkpoints were six miles apart. At each, the athletes received a single spray of water to the face, which would evaporate in 20 seconds.

"The desert sucks the water out of you," says photographer Thiago Diz, who has experienced parts of the race by foot and by Jeep. "Mentally, it's a killer. It's not just focusing on the horizon and running. You need to look at every single step you take." Or, in Virgilio's case, trust your guide to do so. "The slower you are, the more

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pounded you get by the sun," says Diz. "Runners set out at 7am. The fast ones get back at 12pm, but others not until 5pm."

Diz has covered the race four times, including both of Virgilio's previous completions in 2013 and 2014, and the two have become friends. It was Diz who helped to match up Almeida and Virgilio in 2017. Virgilio had arrived with the intention of racing alone, but the officials ultimately deemed it too dangerous. All hope of competing seemed lost – before Almeida came cycling out of the desert dust, like a mirage. Besides, according to the rules, competitors must start in a pair and end in a pair.

"I came to Atacama to show that even though I'm visually impaired, I can still overcome all of the obstacles the desert imposes," Virgilio says. He has been blind for 13 years, having lost his sight at the age of 34 to exudative macular degeneration, in which abnormal blood vessels form in the eye, causing rapid deterioration. He also suffers from Ménière's disease, a progressive disease of the ear that causes intense episodes of vertigo and hearing loss.

Virgilio now dedicates his life to sport. To date, he has completed marathons across Europe and crossed the Sahara and Gobi deserts, as well as setting a world record for the longest distance run without a guide in 2016 (43 miles). "When I run, it is a moment of pleasure, joy and freedom. I feel where I am by smelling and feeling the wind and the ground. I perceive my environment in a new way," he says. "I have managed to transform sadness into happiness."

INTO THE INFERNO

The Atacama Crossing is a singular and unpredictable race. In preparation for his third trip, Virgilio spared himself no pain.

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He broke his routine into three parts: strength training, with an emphasis on his knees; three- to four-hour runs; and elevation training in which he ran 100 times up and down the stairs of his 14th floor building, four times a week. Almeida, meanwhile, may have been a novice, but his epic journey to the start line proved his fitness was more than on par.

In theory, they were as prepared as they could have been to tackle the desert. The reality, however, was somewhat different. "Almeida was very inexperienced," explains Diz. "Early in the race, he thought he was too heavy, so he threw a lot of his food away."

The second stretch of the race begins with a short run, deep inside a river canyon, before leading to multiple river crossings. After that, the route descends into old mining tunnels, from which the runners emerge onto energy-sapping sand dunes. Guiding a blind man through such uneven terrain proved difficult for Almeida. A guide not only has to keep an eye on the rock in front of him, but also

has to pre-empt where his charge's feet will land. It can be mentally exhausting, even more so when fatigue and sunstroke set in. For the novice Almeida, having just completed a 3,000-mile journey of his own, the feat proved almost impossible.

"I ended up having to fight with Almeida's fatigue as well as my own," explains Virgilio. "After a certain point, exhaustion and lack of experience both in guiding a visually impaired person and in races of this nature made him stop telling me about the obstacles on the terrain. I was kicking stones and stepping on thorns that went through my shoes. I sprained my ankles numerous times."

With days' worth of toil ahead of them, Virgilio decided to tie a short rope from Almeida's backpack to his own hand, so that he could walk behind his guide and feel the movement of his body. When Almeida shifted his position to avoid an object, Virgilio would sense it and instinctively do likewise.

THE HEAT IS ON

06 After each six-mile stretch, a spray of water brings fleeting relief

07 On a descent this steep, Almeida must narrate each step in detail

08 A competitor runs down a hill after crossing an area known as the "Valley of Death"

09 After completing a final 10K sprint with Almeida, Virgilio reaches the finish line



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"A guide must pre-empt where his charge's feet will fall. In the heat, it's draining work"

THE END OF THE LINE

The third stage of the crossing is where many competitors hang up their trainers. The route descends rapidly from 535m to 150m over dried-out salt lakes complemented by fist-sized hunks of brittle, shoe-piercing shale. Nonetheless, the two men pushed on, fighting their weariness to reach the campsite.

After the fourth day's race, they reached two small lagoons. Here, competitors could wash and swim for the first time in days – a welcome respite ahead of the hardest stretch yet. The fifth stage is known as "the Long March". At this point, Almeida's decision to dispense with so much of his food proved perilous. "He had almost none left," says Diz. With their bodies running on empty, the two men faced a gruelling 47-mile slog to the final base camp: in effect, a double marathon after the four marathons already completed. Conserving water was crucial. The men reached their camp at 11pm, 14 hours after they set off.

The last effort, on day six, is a 10K sprint through the desert to reach the finish line in the town square of San Pedro de Atacama. With little left to fuel them except adrenalin and sheer will, Virgilio and Almeida struggled through the final stretch, still bound by their length of rope. As they crossed the line, they checked their time: 48 hours and 34 minutes.

The winning team that year was led by American runner Alexander Mangold, who finished almost 20 hours ahead of Virgilio and Almeida. But for them,

completing the race within a certain time was never the objective. Both men had arrived at the start line doubtful yet hopeful of their ability to take part. And both had earned their finisher medals.

Many, including photographer Diz, were inspired by the pair's fortitude. This year, Diz will be competing for the first time. He says he aims to run where he can and walk the rest. "I want to have my own go, to understand what goes through these people's minds," he muses. "Vlad is an inspiration. But the prize is personal – it's working through your demons. And that's the biggest prize there is."

Despite the setbacks, Virgilio was similarly inspired by Almeida's dedication. "The effort he made to get here made me feel stronger than ever," he says. "I knew it would be hard due to his lack of experience in ultramarathons, but we were united in our objective of simply completing the race. We just focused on that."

Though Virgilio has not yet decided on his next challenge, a return to Atacama is all but inevitable. "Life is much more than being able to see with your eyes," he says. "I've learned to see the world in a different way, a more beautiful way. This is what I search for in these races. I'm not after titles and records. The Atacama Crossing is an event that gives me back my dignity as a human being. In this race, I am a person no different to anyone else. In the desert, I feel invincible." 