



  
**ULTRA PAIN,  
 ULTRA GAIN**

Not satisfied with a mere 26 miles, many runners – amateur and professional alike – are turning to ultramarathons to test their mental and physical strength even further, writes **Matt Timms**



**T**here is arguably no climate worse suited to the human race than that of the Sahara Desert. However, aside from occupying 10 percent of the African continent's landmass and ranking as the world's largest and most unforgiving hot desert, the Sahara is also home to the start and finish line of the Marathon de Sables. With the distinction of being 'the toughest footrace on earth', according to the Discovery Channel, thousands flock to the event every year, all for the privilege of putting themselves through untold measures of physical and mental exertion.

The popularity of the Marathon de Sables is – believe it or not – representative of greater participation in the so-called ultramarathon space; defined as any race longer than a traditional 26.219-mile marathon. And although the event at first glance appears fitting only for the uppermost bracket of elite runners, thousands of individuals across the globe – amateur and professional alike – are partaking in ultramarathons much like it.

"Ultra running to me is more than just racing against thousands of people – much like your big city marathons. Instead, most of the time the battle is against the elements, terrain and, the biggest factor, the mind," says Nick Furlow, an experienced ultra runner

and founder of Wrun.co.uk. "This journey and the fact that the competitive element of time is almost completely lost in the ultra running forum and geared more towards which races you have completed is why I think it is a big draw to people and is ever increasing in popularity," he added.

Surprisingly, some consider ultramarathons to be easier than standard marathons, given that they take place on more varied terrain and that the challenge, rather than finishing in as fast a time as possible, is to merely complete the course. Whereas regular marathons demand that participants put themselves through 26-plus miles of unforgiving tarmac, a softer, more irregular ultramarathon track places less stress on your joints. What's more, whereas walking in a marathon triggers encouragements from the watching crowd to 'keep going', walking in an ultramarathon is something that everyone competing must come to terms with. Without going into any great depth, ultramarathons are an entirely different kind of beast.

Another of the key differences between ultramarathons and shorter distance events is the social aspect, and many competitors maintain that they've formed lifelong friendships with fellow runners over the course of a

race. It's an event that few get through without shedding a tear or two, and one that pushes your mental and physical strength to the limit – so what better way to take it on than with a companion at your side.

"The social aspect of ultra running seems to be a friendlier one because the competitive element isn't really there, and you know fellow runners are out there for the sheer love of the sport. Having ticked off distances up to ultra, I find that the bigger the distance the bigger the social interaction before, during and after the event," says Furlow. "Because of the lack of huge prize pots within the ultra running circuit you also know that the pros are there for the challenge as well, and not necessarily the big cheque at the end."

The strong social aspect of an ultramarathon has attracted an increasing number of group participants, not least those in corporate teams choosing to represent their office on the racetrack. Increased interest from businesses has even prompted many events to put together corporate-specific packages, all in an effort to reel in bigger crowds and up the ante.

Here we take a look at some of the best events on the ultramarathon calendar, ranging from the icy peaks of Mont Blanc to the thick foliage of the Peruvian jungle. »

### MARATHON DES SABLES

The Marathon des Sables (MdS) is the go-to ultramarathon for those looking to make a name for themselves on the circuit. Demand for places is incredibly high and the waiting list can stretch well beyond a year. Founded in 1986 by Patrick Bauer, the race has run every year for 28 years, and its renown has been on the rise over that time. The MdS even has its own foundation, Solidarite, through which participants have contributed to those living in local communities and improved their quality of life. According to the race website: "You will experience something unique, something you will never forget. You will make lifelong friends. You will push your mind and body to the limit. You will find things out about yourself. And in all likelihood you'll get kissed (twice!) by a Frenchman." However, despite its reputation as the 'toughest footrace on earth', the competition is considered by some as undeserving of that title, with many maintaining that it is far from the toughest on the circuit. Nonetheless, the bragging rights that come with conquering the world's largest desert through temperatures of over 50 degrees centigrade are more than enough to bring thousands to the site year after year.



### ULTRA-TRAIL DU MONT-BLANC

2,300 participants gather in August each year to complete a 168km course, throughout which they will climb 9,600m and pass through France, Italy and Switzerland. Since the inaugural race in 2003 it has been called the 'race of all the superlatives', with the competition open only to those with the requisite number of qualification points. Following the Tour du Mont Blanc hiking path, the route usually takes walkers seven to nine days to complete. Regarded by many as the single most challenging ultramarathon in Europe, the Tour du Mont Blanc is today made up of five ultramarathons, with the Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc (UTMB) being the biggest of them all. The other four are either smaller in scale or encompass more technical challenges, not least the Courmayeur-Champex-Chamonix, or 'the little one', which takes runners on a 101km track and a 6,100m climb.



### MONTANE SPINE RACE

Britain's toughest endurance race sees participants take on a non-stop 268-mile track at the height of winter and over the course of only seven days. First attempted in 2012, the race was completed by only three of 11 individuals. Beginning in Edale, Derbyshire, the route takes runners through the Peak District, the Yorkshire Dales and Northumberland National Park, eventually finishing up at the Scottish Borders. The current record of 110h 45m was set in 2014 by Pavel Paloncy as part of what is widely regarded as one of the most impressive feats of endurance yet witnessed in the UK. Race finisher Mark Caldwell describes the event: "The Spine Race is easy, apart from it's dark most of the time; your feet, then body, will fall apart; the compulsory baggage doesn't get any lighter; sleep is a luxury; you experience extremes of weather and cold; and finally of course it's 268 miles long. Many will try to break the Spine but most will become race statistics."



### JUNGLE ULTRA

The iconic Jungle Ultra takes place over five stages and covers 230km of winding jungle trails, lofty mountain paths and little-known village tracks. Competitors must descend 10,500 feet from Peru's Cloud Forest to the Amazon Jungle, with a time limit of six days to complete the course in its entirety. The event asks that participants carry everything they need for the duration of the race, including a hammock, sleeping bag, food and water. The Jungle Ultra is only one of a long list of ultramarathons set in the jungle, however, according to the race site, "no other Jungle Ultra marathon comes close to the Jungle Ultra." Humidity levels can reach close to 100 percent and the unforgiving terrain gives participants little to no respite throughout. The race is one of four ultramarathons put on by organisers Beyond the Ultimate, with the others - Nepal's Mountain Ultra, Namibia's Desert Ultra and Sweden's Ice Ultra - representing similarly impressive challenges. The race site warns that "whether you are in it to win or finish, these footraces will test you in ways you never thought possible - expect the unexpected."

### GRAND TO GRAND ULTRA

The first and only self-supported footrace to grace America, the Grand to Grand Ultra (G2G) begins at the North Rim of the Grand Canyon and takes competitors 167 miles onwards and 9,342ft upwards to the top of the Pink Cliffs of Utah's Grand Staircase. Participants tackle the course over six stages, each taking them through red rock canyons and some of the more remote regions of continental America. "The Grand to Grand Ultra is the culmination of our vision to create a world class stage event in North America," says the race site. "We searched high and low for the most iconic course possible on a continent that offers a plethora of unsurpassed beauty. It was the unique opportunity to organize an event that would stretch from the Grand Canyon, one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World, to the relatively unknown but equally geologically iconic Grand Staircase, that settled the location." Run by a range of ultramarathon and event management talent, the team's ambition is to create a world-class event, and, at the same time, contribute to those in the local community while preserving the local environment.

Photos courtesy of Grand to Grand Ultra



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