



# Running in the clouds

**Adventure** | A 'beautiful and brutal' 116km race in the Alps is the latest addition to the growing roster of ultra-marathons. *Patrick McGee* dons headtorch and GPS tracker to test the limits of his endurance

Standing in snow, on shaky rocks high in the Alps, I realise I have not seen a course marker in more than 15 minutes. I should probably turn back, but I don't know where I left the course and I am fatigued and struggling to think straight after racing, nonstop, for 80km. Then, I slip.

My body tumbles towards the edge of the cliff and I topple over. Six or seven feet down, I crash on to a ledge, grasp for something to hold on to but fail to halt the momentum, stumbling, then dropping another seven feet. I catch myself there, just. Now in ripped shorts, missing a trekking pole, with a bloodied arm and hurt ankle, I look down to see the next fall is 10 or 12ft. Beyond that there are no more ledges, just a steep drop.

I am shaken up, alone, close to tears, still on uneven ground and wondering what to do next.

**Twenty-five hours earlier, at 10am on** September 2, I had started running the inaugural Ultra Tour Monte Rosa, a 116km race around western Europe's second-highest mountain. The route starts in Cervinia, an Italian ski resort, then climbs and falls over five high mountain passes, winding through the villages of Gressoney, Alagna and Macugnaga before crossing into Switzerland, passing Saas Fee and eventually arriving in Grächen. The elevation gain is 8,300m — equivalent to climbing from base camp to the summit of Mount Everest twice. The terrain is almost always rugged, uneven footpaths, either ascending or descending — there are precious few places to just jog.

The UTMR is the latest in the growing international roster of "ultra-marathons" (events poorly defined as any race longer than a marathon). Single-stage ultras typically range from 50km to more than 161km (100 miles), while multi-stage events take place over days or even weeks. Almost invariably they are run on rough trails rather than roads; many involve significant climbs. And the sport is booming. Globally, there were 3,738 ultra events last year,



up from 728 a decade earlier, according to the German Ultramarathon Foundation, or DUV, the world's largest association of ultra-marathon runners. The number of runners taking part leapt from fewer than 40,000 in 2000 to 172,540 in 2010, and 413,042 in 2015, according to DUV.

Who are these people? In 2012 a North American study of 100-mile racers found that 80 per cent were male, 70 per cent were married, 81 per cent had a degree and the median age was 45.

"It's about being out in the wild, a multi-sensory experience," says Jeri Chua, a former fashion editor who now directs races and distributes running nutrition products and who was volunteering at the UTMR. She is one of the growing number of female participants — up from 6,503 in 2000 to more than 50,000 last year, DUV data shows.

Many have been inspired by the intriguing idea, popularised by Christopher McDougall's book *Born to Run*, that the longer a race is, the higher the chances are that a woman will win it. One theory is that women exploit their higher body fat percentages as energy reserves in endurance events. A 2014 study based on four decades of races offered an alternative explanation — only the very fittest women participate in ultras exceeding 200km, whereas hordes of unprepared men are willing to give them a shot, making the gender data look more even.

Still, Pam Reed outright won the 217km Badwater Ultramarathon in California's Death Valley, in 2002, in just under 28 hours. The next year she did it again, reaching the finish almost half an hour before Dean Karnazes, the self-styled 'Ultramarathon Man' who would later gain fame for running 50 marathons, in 50 days, in all 50 US states.

For me, the rise of women participation is more than a statistic. It was a woman who talked me into this race and another woman who designed the course. My fiancé Eleni, who runs 100km races with an all-women's team called Hot on Their Heels, had signed me up to the Vibram Hong Kong 100 Ultra Trail this year. I finished it, albeit in near-collapse, 18 hours later.

But UTMR was something else. At the third checkpoint, about 35km in at the Col d'Olen, I received a text that Eleni had dropped out after struggling with the heat and altitude. I was, at the time, enjoying the best cup of tea I've ever drunk, but only minutes earlier my inner monologue was probing whether the race director could be prosecuted for crimes against humanity. The ascents were relentless. On several occasions I was forced to stop and lie down beside the path, adopting a foetal position for a few moments of reprieve.

The sadist in question is the demure, 5ft 4in Lizzy Hawker, who was born in suburban London but has become one of the world's most successful long-distance mountain runners. She holds the world record for running the 320km from Everest Base Camp to Kathmandu, a route she covered in 63 hours. And in 2011 she won the Commonwealth Mountain and Ultradistance Running Championships, completing more than 246km in the 24-hour time limit, beating all the male competitors and setting another world record.

Hawker, 40, entered her first mountain race in 2005 while she was finishing up a PhD in physical oceanography (she had bought her first pair of trail running shoes just 10 days earlier). Unsure if she would even finish, and without any support team, she went on to beat every



From top: runners close to the Monte Moro pass between Italy and Switzerland; passing chalets in the Champoluc valley; a water stop near Macugnaga; a 'tattoo transfer' map of one section of the course — Fabio Menzoni, Giacomo Meneghelli

[i / DETAILS](#)

Next year's Ultra Tour Monte Rosa will take place on September 6-9; entry to the ultra costs €195; see [ultraforumonterosa.com](http://ultraforumonterosa.com)

other woman. The race was the 166km Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc, now Europe's best known ultra. Hikers typically take eight days to walk the course; Hawker has done it in just over 25 hours.

She first went to Monte Rosa on holiday with her parents at age six. "The mountains always felt like home to me, so when I went back to the UK I always felt something was missing," she says. "It was the start of a long love affair." The paths around the massif became her favourite training ground for the Mont Blanc race, which she went on to win another four times. Now she has turned race organiser, transforming her training route into the UTMR.

**After 11 and a half hours I had made it** to the 47km checkpoint, a less-than-impressive pace but still on track to finish within the 32-hour time limit. Ahead of me were the two biggest climbs of the race. Both would take place in the pitch black, guided by a head torch and aided by peppermint candy to open my nasal passages as I gasped for oxygen almost 3,000m up. It turned out I preferred the night time: the darkness masked where the summit was and I could imagine, for hour after hour, that it must be just minutes away. At 5.50am I made it to the

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71km checkpoint in Macugnaga, welcomed by a massive cheer from dozens of runners preparing to hit the trails again. They were running the same course, but broken into up to three sections to be tackled on consecutive days. Hawker had organised the stage-race to coincide with the ultra to attract more participants and introduce more women to the sport. The plan worked. Only a fifth of the 115 ultra runners were women, but the 145-person stage race was evenly split.

My friend Claire was among them, beaming after a good's night sleep. I watched her take off while I ate two slices of delicious pizza, refilled my bottles with electrolyte drinks and swallowed a salt tab to combat muscle spasms. The next checkpoint was just 8km away, but the climb was 1,550m — about five Eiffel Towers. The zigzag ascent was so daunting that the second and third-placed runners had, hours before, opted to drop out rather than continue. It took me almost three-and-a-half hours, yet I actually moved up seven spots in the rankings.

**UTMR's tagline is "Bold, Beautiful, Brutal."** The difficulty is key to its allure. With many conventional marathons it is now arguably more difficult to get to the start line than the finish — last year 172,888 people applied for 58,262 places in the London marathon, but 99 per cent of runners finished. Such a high success rate leaves some wanting a tougher challenge.

"There's definitely a tendency to go always longer, harder, add more altitude gain," says Jürgen Schoch, a statistician at DUV and an ultra runner himself. "I think it's a competition on the runners' side, but also on the race director's side, to say 'I have the longest race in my country, or the highest altitude gain!'"

Not everyone agrees ultras are inherently harder. Some shorter-distance runners look down on ultra-marathoners as glorified distance-hikers, given the common strategy among amateurs to hike the climbs and only run the flats and descents. Schoch simply points out ultras demand a different skill set, focused on endurance and experience rather than speed.

They also require more kit, attracting the likes of The North Face and Salomon to sponsor races the world over. UTMR required me to carry two head torches, spare batteries for my phone, water-proofs, thermals, first aid kit and an emergency blanket. Special insurance was required in case a helicopter rescue was needed. And I rented a GPS tracker so my family could have live updates.

That GPS tracker came in handy when, shortly after reaching the top of the final big climb — the pass at Monte Moro, 2,853m up, crowned by a golden statue of the Virgin Mary — I tumbled over the cliff. It took me more than an hour to find my way down over rocks and scree to a lake (later identified as the Mattmark reservoir). A Swiss couple who had been cycling on the wide path beside the lake saw me hobbling and took pity, the man offering me his bike to ride to the nearest road, about 1km away, while he jogged alongside. At the road I found a bus stop, but just as I was struggling to decipher the timetable, a man pulled up in a car and asked if I was Patrick. I was startled until he introduced himself as the race doctor, explaining he had noticed my GPS was well off course and set out to find me.

The drive to the finish held more relief than disappointment. We passed Claire, who was happy to call it a day and jump in the car. Eleni was already waiting with all our bags at the finish line. It might not have been a triumph, but we had tested our limits, and found them.

*Patrick McGee is the FT's Frankfurt correspondent*

**POSTCARD FROM . . . KIELDER FOREST**

When we go for a walk in the forest, we don't think of it as a tree factory," the artist Anya Gallaccio, who works a lot with trees, told me this year. "We think we're in wilderness, but we're not."

It was a thought that haunted me as I trekked through the dense woodland of Kielder Forest in Northumberland to a rocky outcrop known as Cat Cairn. It is the site of a Skyspace, one of more than 80 created worldwide by the American artist James Turrell. This one is partially subterranean, a circular room, clad in local stone and entered through a tunnel, from which one is invited to contemplate the ever-changing sky through a central oculus.

It stands surrounded by a sylvan landscape — mostly Sitka spruce but also Scots pine and Douglas fir — through whose canopy dappled sunlight falls on a hummocky forest floor, traversed by sparkling streams. It is a glorious scene: English landscape at its loveliest. Yet it is as much a construct as the Skyspace.

Kielder is the largest forest in England, stretching across 600 sq km just north of Hadrian's Wall. It was established in 1926 as a national timber reserve, not least to supply pit props to the mining industry. Over the century the forest grew (it is now the largest area of man-made woodland in



northern Europe), and in 1975 construction began on Kielder Water, a reservoir more than 9km long, sufficiently ragged in form to seem as though it was created by glaciers and erosion rather than bulldozers. Its *raison d'être* was also industrial: to supply the steel and chemical industries in Teesside, but with their decline, so it became redundant.

Since then its purpose has been to bring tourists to the area. Some come for water sports, and hiking and mountain biking around the water's edge, others for the growing body of contemporary art installations — 23 at the last count. I loved Nick Coombe and Shona Kitchen's discombobulating maze, Minotaur, built of local black whinstone and lumps of recycled glass that glitter in sunlight. And Tania

**The next proposal in the project to 'rewild' Kielder is to bring in 10 or so Eurasian lynx, a powerful wild cat that died out in Britain 1,500 years ago**

Kovats' giant 3D renderings of the Ordnance Survey viewpoint symbol, strategically positioned to focus on different aspects of the water. Ryder Architecture's Janus Chairs (pictured, left) are giant seats that swivel to allow you to take in the view; Chris Drury's Wave Chamber is a drystone "beehive" containing a camera obscura that projects the lake's surface on to its floor and echoes to the sound of the waves.

A dozen of the installations are linked by a trail around the reservoir's periphery. In all it is 42km long, so the obvious way to explore it is by bike (electric ones are available for those in need of a helping hand). To appreciate the trees and the wildlife, though, it's better to walk. Amid the verdure as we strode to the Skyspace, we saw several of the roe deer that thrive here, but not the ospreys or red squirrels that have been successfully introduced. (Though there were skinned grey ones on the butcher's stall in nearby Hexham's market, alongside a note bearing the warning: "May contain nuts".)

The next proposal in the project to "rewild" Kielder, and which was put to the people of Kielder village last month, is to bring in 10 or so Eurasian lynx, a powerful wild cat, weighing as much as 30kg. They died out in Britain about 1,500 years ago, probably hunted to extinction for their pelts.

Not surprisingly the farming community is set against it and at first,

my instinct was to side with them — livestock farming is a hard enough hereabouts without a new predator to contend with. But the more I learnt, the more I saw merit in the idea thanks to an ecological process known as a trophic cascade. It's explained in a widely viewed short film on YouTube, *How Wolves Change Rivers*, based on a Ted talk by environmentalist George Monbiot, about the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park in 1995. The arrival of wolves altered deer behaviour, causing them to avoid parts of the park where they could be easily hunted. This enabled the vegetation to regenerate, encouraging the return of other species. In just six years, some trees quintupled in height, drawing migratory birds, as well as bald eagles and hawks, which fed on resultant populations of rodents and rabbits. The trees' revived root systems in turn stabilised river banks, which became more fixed in their course, encouraging the return of fish, beavers and otters.

The Lynx UK Trust, the charity behind the initiative, hopes that something similar, albeit on a smaller scale, may be effected here. For a place that started life as a plantation, parts of Kielder Forest already have the air of a wilderness. Thanks to a few lynx and the eternal mutability of nature, it may, by its centenary, seem wilder still.

**Claire Wrathall**