205 MILES, 
6 DAYS & NIGHTS, 
24,000 METRES OF ASCENT, 
25 MOUNTAIN PASSES...

THIS IS THE RACE 
OF GIANTS

This month many of the world’s finest ultra runners will race the Tor des Géants, the equivalent of running from London to Manchester – and climbing Ben Nevis 18 times on the way.

Words: Katy Dartford | Pictures: Marco Spataro & Enrico Romanzi
Running over 50 miles in an ultra marathon is a huge feat for most people. But completing the epic 200-mile Tor des Géants, which traverses the dizzying peaks of Italy’s highest and least populated region, the beautiful Valle D’Aosta, in less than 150 hours is a truly remarkable achievement.

It’s no surprise that the final man to cross the finishing line in last year’s Tor des Géants spoke of hallucinating about cable cars and rock falls along the way. The slightly heavy ski guide from the local town took three months to recover from the race. Despite being scared, he decided to enter again this year for more punishment.

The Tor des Géants is considered one of the most demanding endurance events in the world in terms of the steepness of its slopes, with a climb of 24,000 metres (a ‘standard’ ultra requires an elevation gain of over 2,000 metres). In addition, competitors are allowed just six days, six nights and six hours to complete it.

Crossing the two high level walks of the Aosta Valley, the Alta Via of Giants and Alta Via 2, the race winds through the legendary landscapes of the five giants of the Alps: Mont Blanc, the Rutor, Gran Paradiso, Monte Rosa and the Matterhorn. Known as the ‘Trek of the Giants,’ it’s the first long distance running event that is semi-self sufficient, with 43 refreshment points and seven refuges to sleep in along the way.

Despite this, those competing to win will sleep for barely two hours at a time in their pursuit for the best time. Last year, Anne Marie Gross won the women’s title in 91 hours and 28 minutes; Switzerland’s Jules Henry Gabioud won for the men in a course record time of 79 hours and 58 minutes. Around 500 people from as many as 22 countries enter the Tor des Géants, with just over half completing it. Part of the attraction and enthusiasm could be down to the apparent simplicity of the event, as the bare minimum that you need for trail running is a pair of shorts and trainers. “The race is very well organised and supported by a community of the warmest, most hospitable and friendly people,” says 54 year old competitor Doone Watson. “It’s a course that chews you up and spits you out, but is sure to be on many runners’ bucket lists.”

This year’s Tor des Géants is from 9-16 September. See tordesgeants.it for more information.

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**2011 TOR IN NUMBERS**

So tough that 27 per cent of entrants didn’t even finish

- 473 Runners on the starting line
- 34 Runners finished (+9% on 2010)
- 23 Women finished
- 23 Countries represented
- 2860 Bananas consumed
- 4230 Oranges consumed
- 2421 Litres of water drunk
- 4527 Cans of cola consumed
THE ATHLETES

Getting ready for a race like this takes more than a few months, and the vast majority of competitors in the event are highly experienced ultra-runners who have completed many races of over 100 miles. The Tor des Géants is not an event for beginners, so how do the runners prepare themselves for such long races?

TRAINING

Doone Watson, 54, took part in the race last year - she finished 235th, and was the 21st fastest woman with a time of 145 hours and 93 minutes. She is entering again this year.

“Getting ready for a race like this takes more than a few months. A major part of training comes down to time on your feet in the mountains and a back-to-back days shouldn’t feel strained. Multiple steep descents of an hour or more are extremely beneficial - the steepness should be sufficient to cause DOMS (delayed onset muscle soreness) the first time you do the descent. Once it doesn’t hurt to do it once, start the repeats! "Training in undesirable weather stops you getting freaked out during the race if you get two-to-three days of rain or snow. Let your mind adapt to the edge and see how you react to it, then build on it. No matter what, after four days on your feet, with pain and sleep deprivation, you start loving and hating new things and seeing some unpleasant things. When you reach that point just keep moving forward - it will pass.”

MENTAL APPROACH

Payman Janbaksh, 39, from Calgary, was 112th last year (127 hours and 48 minutes) and says Watson, “It certainly isn’t a race for the newcomer,” says Watson. “It is long and you’ll be alone for long days and night – especially before sunrise when the sleep monster visita you. If you have prior experience in endurance sports like mountainaeroring, adventure racing or ultra-running you’ll have already built a lot of mental strength, but if not, you can still mentally prepare for this race just by doing a lot of lone running, night running, running in the snow, rain, snow, heat or any harsh climate that prepares you mentally for any unexpected challenge during the race.

“Training in undesirable weather stops you getting freaked out during the race if you get two-to-three days of rain or snow. The mental side is a big deal in the Tor des Géants. It’s a long race and you’ll be alone for long days and night – especially before sunrise when the sleep monster visits you. If you have prior experience in endurance sports like mountainaeroring, adventure racing or ultra-running you’ll have already built a lot of mental strength, but if not, you can still mentally prepare for this race just by doing a lot of lone running, night running, running in the snow, rain, snow, heat or any harsh climate that prepares you mentally for any unexpected challenge during the race.

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KIT

Angela Piogetti, 34, from Calgary, was the 13th woman in 2011 (119 hours, 34 minutes)

“I hiked the 2,650-mile Pacific Crest Trail in 2007, which taught me the importance of having a lightweight pack that still has all the contents in it to allow for success in both very hot and very cold weather.

“For the Tor des Géants this year I had a Gregory ISO pack, with the mandatory gear list items: an emergency lightweight bivvy from Western Mountainaeroring, the Arc’teryx Atom jacket (which is hands-down the best piece of warm clothing I ever purchased), Windstopper gloves, Marmot lightweight hat with ear flaps, Marmot Precip rain jacket, eye drops, blister kit, my own food electrolytes, Adidas painkillers and my camera, because the scenery is what brought me back for the second year in a row for the race. I have Patagonia run shorts, Zoic compression socks or calf sleeves, Brooks Cascadia running shoes, any old race shirt, and my Leki poles. Keep your pack lighter and you get to your drop bag faster, I say!”

NUTRITION

Tim Watson, 58, has taken part with his wife Doone for the past couple of years

“Food is provided at the life bases (generally pasta and tomato sauce) and at numerous aid stations. The fare is commonly cheese, bread, dried meats, bananas, oranges, water, tea, coffee and chocolate, though sometimes there would be soup and even alcohol (beer and wine are both offered). Life bases also have breads, bars, yogurt and other breakfast stuff - sometimes hard boiled eggs were available, which are obviously a great source of protein. Many runners carry extra gels and bars with them. I also use gels and bars during short ultras, but eating gels for five days in a row isn’t a particularly good idea to me.

“The better you are hydrated during your training or racing the faster your body recovers. I drink as much as I need to, but too much water in your system is also not the best idea. My theory is to try to eat as much fresh fruit, protein and fat as I can at aid stations. I also pack bottles of Boost and Red Bull!”

“The ability to keep moving for 18-20 hours at a time is more important than speed.”

Doone Watson, 54, ran her first marathon in 1976 and started taking part in ‘Ultra’ about five years ago, after completing numerous 25-30 mile mountain runs in the late 1980s. The Tor des Géants was a culmination of many years of running and racing.

“It certainly isn’t a race for the newcomer,” says Watson. “It is long and you’ll be alone for long days and night – especially before sunrise when the sleep monster visits you. If you have prior experience in endurance sports like mountainaeroring, adventure racing or ultra-running you’ll have already built a lot of mental strength, but if not, you can still mentally prepare for this race just by doing a lot of lone running, night running, running in the snow, rain, snow, heat or any harsh climate that prepares you mentally for any unexpected challenge during the race.

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