

**ULTIMATE
EVENT**

A maximum of 550
competitors battle it out
in the *Tor des Géants*
every September

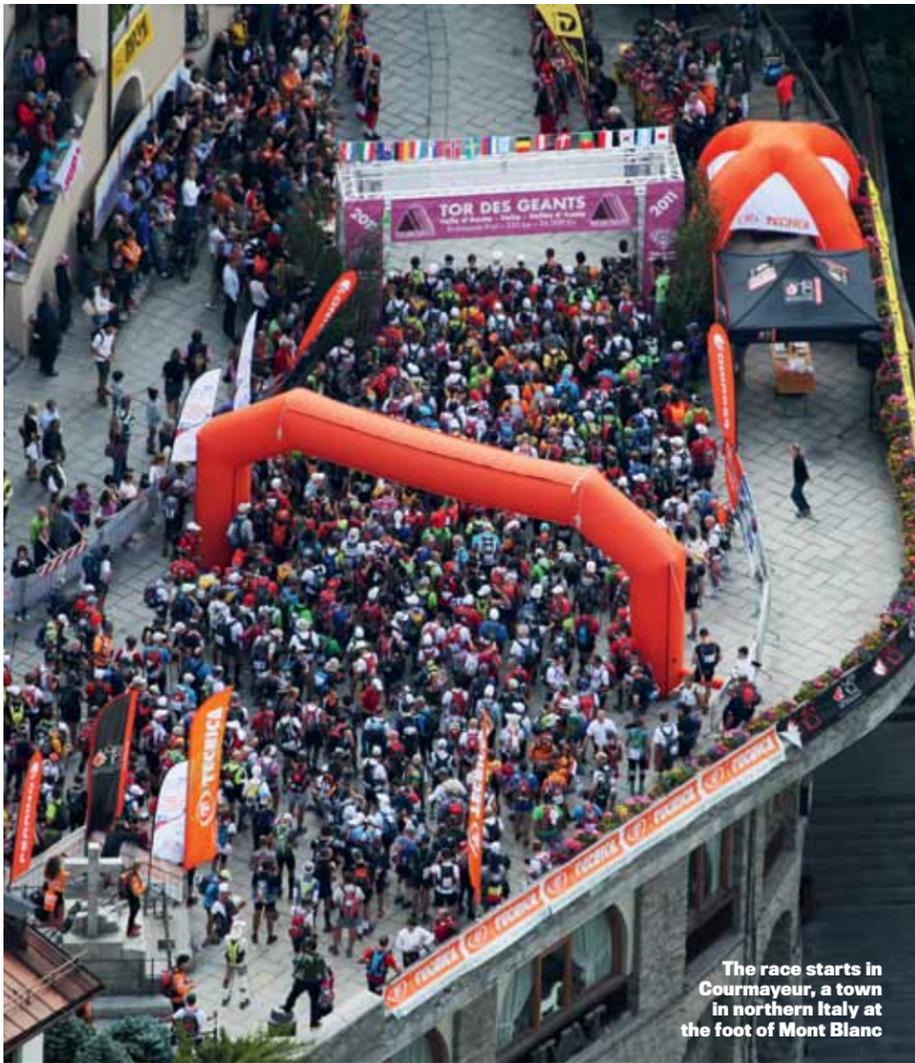
205 MILES,
6 DAYS & NIGHTS,
24,000 METRES OF ASCENT,
25 MOUNTAIN PASSES...

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





The race starts in Courmayeur, a town in northern Italy at the foot of Mont Blanc



Crossing the valley between Col Nana and Col Fontaine, this point would normally be reached on day five

Running over 50 miles in an ultra marathon is a huge feat for most people. But completing the epic 205-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.

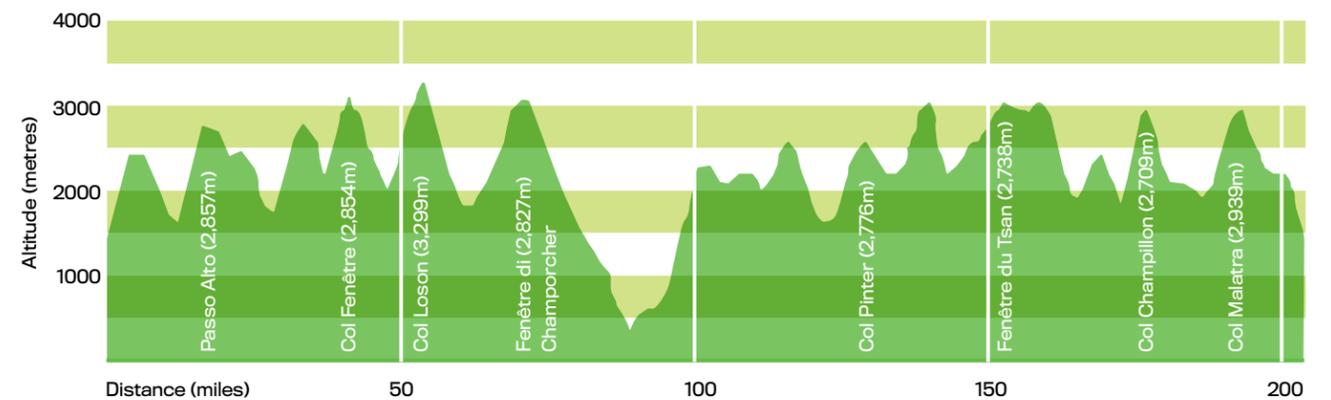
Around 500 people from as many as 22 countries enter the *Tor des Géants*, with just over half completing it. Part of the attraction and enthusiasm could be down to the apparent simplicity of the event, as the bare minimum that you need for trail running is a pair of shorts and trainers. "The race is 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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THE ROUTE

Skirting the foot of the four big peaks in the Alps (Mont Blanc, Gran Paradiso, Monte Rosa and the Matterhorn), *Tor des Géants* competitors have 150 hours to complete this 205-mile route through some of Europe's most breathtaking scenery



2011 TOR IN NUMBERS

So tough that 37 per cent of entrants didn't even finish

473
Runners on the starting line

63%
Runners finished [+9% on 2010]

34
Women finished

23
Countries represented

2860
Bananas consumed

4230
Oranges consumed

2421
Litres of water drunk

4527
Cans of cola consumed



Participants in the *Tor des Géants* cross the Aosta valley, Italy's smallest region



Competitor Doone Watson reaches Col Entrelor, at an altitude of 3,002m. At this point, there's still another 165 miles to go



Payman Janbaksh came 112th in the *Tor* last year, completing it in 127 hours and 49 minutes



Tim and Doone Watson have entered the *Tor* for the past two years

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?

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

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 53 minutes. She is entering again this year



Watson ran her first marathon in 1976 and started taking part in 'ultras' 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, “and it should be reserved for people who are looking for new challenges, and have a background of adventure racing, stage races or numerous ultras.” She ran numerous 100-milers, as well as several stage races like the Trans Rockies and Desert Rats, before finally taking on the *Tor des Géants* itself.

“To be competitive in this race you have to be incredibly mountain fit and have to be able to ‘free fall’ down technical mountain paths,” says Watson. “Training comes down to time on your feet in the mountains and a history of multi-day events or ultras. Running speed is not as big a factor as the ability to keep moving for 18-20 hours at a

time, then stopping for two hours of rest and getting up and doing it again. The ability to move downhill quickly is an immense advantage, so downhill training is essential to strengthen the quads and protect your knees. 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!

“The altitude is significant but not as big a factor as might be expected, unless you're planning on really racing. Certainly, training at over 1,000m is helpful, but I know people who have trained at sea level and ended up doing really well. The number of miles you've run is not as important as the number of hours you've run. Doing 10-12 hours a day should be comfortable and back-to-back days shouldn't feel strained. Long hiking days in the mountains are as beneficial, if not more so, than 25-mile runs on groomed runnable trails.”

MENTAL APPROACH

Payman Janbaksh, 39, from Calgary, was 112th last year (127 hours and 49 minutes)



“The mental side is a big deal in the *Tor des Géants*. It's a long race and you'll be alone for long hauls day and night - especially before sunrise when the sleep monster visits you! If you have prior experience in endurance sports like mountaineering, adventure racing or ultra-running you'd 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 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. Let your mind reach 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 unreal things! When you reach that point just keep moving forward - it will pass.”

KIT

Angela Pierotti, 34, from Calgary, was the 13th woman in 2011 (139 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 Mountaineering, the Arc'teryx Atom jacket (which is hands-down the best piece of warm clothing I've ever purchased), Windstopper gloves, Marmot lightweight hat with ear flaps, Marmot Precip rain jacket, eye drops, blisterkit, my own food/electrolytes, Advil 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, Zoot 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!”