

TRAVEL

8 / FRANCE

# Running up that hill



The latest ultra-fitness craze involves jogging up mountains most sane people would only consider skiing down. **Sean Newsom** hits the Alpine trail

**Y**ou know how it is when you're out for a run and you hit the wall? What if that wall were an Alp? That's what I'm about to find out. I'm on the first day of Icicle Mountaineering's trail-running camp in Chamonix, France, and by way of a warm-up, we're going to be running up Le Signal. As Alps go, it's not enormous – a flying buttress on the side of the Mont Blanc massif – but right now I'm down at 1,000 metres. Le Signal tops out at 2,204 metres. For someone who habitually runs up gentle inclines in northeast London, that's a lot of slope.

Everyone's running up Alps these days (or a Rocky Mountain, a Lakeland fell or a South Down – see panel, right). Trail running, often of the extreme variety, is booming. If you don't believe me, check out the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc (UTMB). A 166km race around the Alps' tallest peak, it climbs through a mind-boggling 9,500 metres and is the centrepiece of a series of five races at the end of August, which this year attracted 14,000 applicants.

I want to see if this new world of endurance is within reach of ordinary joggers; people who, like me, pound 5km-10km of city pavement to clear their head at the end of the day. Trouble is, I'm searching for a sense of wellbeing on the streets that made me feel bad in the first place. Is running in beautiful, challenging locations the way forward?

As I labour up the side of Le Signal, the answer seems to be a resounding no. That's not Icicle's fault. You couldn't wish for a more patient coach than my instructor, Kingsley Jones, veteran of two UTMBs. Throughout the climb, he keeps the pace steady, throws in breaks when they're needed and offers all kinds of pertinent advice. He strips my

uphill running style back to that of a rheumatic octogenarian ninja: I'm taking small, shuffling steps and trying not to bounce or skid, all in the name of conserving energy. He's got me using my two running poles, too, boosting myself forwards with a double-handed push.

But he can't pack any more oxygen into my lungs. You know how it feels

when you get in from a run and you're sitting in the hallway at home, chest heaving, with the world shrunk down to the next breath? Well, that's what it's like all the way up Le Signal: two hours of gasping, sucking struggle as I cram every last alveolus with air, and still want more. Above 2,000 metres, I can't actually run at all, unless the path is flat.

SUNDAY TIMES DIGITAL  
Watch the world's foremost extreme trail runner charge down the Matterhorn  
[thesundaytimes.co.uk/travel](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/travel)

Back in Chamonix, 18km of ascent later, Jones seems oddly serene about my progress, even though my legs are quivering uncontrollably and we've returned two hours later than expected. Then he tells me that day two will be harder: 1,400 metres of climbing, 21km of distance. "It's a beautiful route," he says. No it isn't. At least, not when you're so tired and sore, you feel like you're coming down with flu.

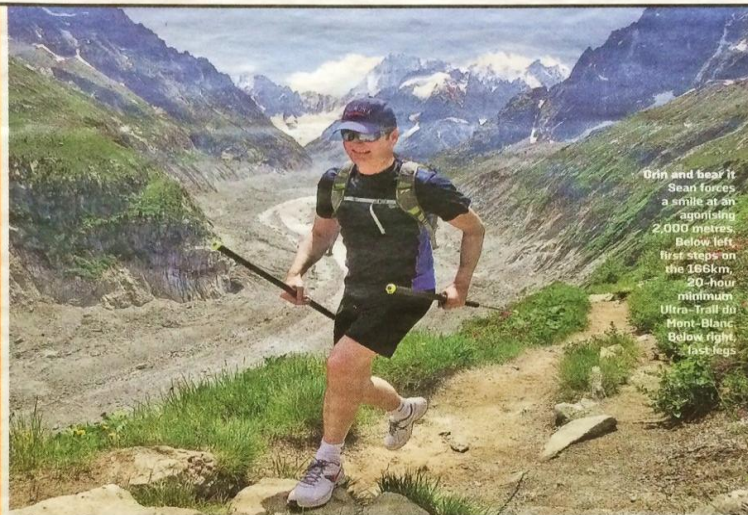
**The instructor has stripped my running style back to that of a rheumatic octogenarian ninja**

Icicle's course contains five days of running, each of roughly 15km-20km, and as I go to bed on day two, I worry I won't be able to walk tomorrow, let alone run. Then the strangest thing happens. I wake up feeling fantastic. Yes, two of my toenails have turned blue, and my right knee hurts in so many places, I can't get a bag of ice over all of them in one go. But I also feel lighter and more alert than I have for years.

Jones drives me through the Mont Blanc Tunnel into Italy, and we climb the 2,584-metre Testa della Tronche. I'm still Captain Slow – dripping with sweat, gasping for breath, smelling of armpit – but my progress is more constant. My mind is sharply focused, too. All that matters is the challenge of the climb. "What's happened?" I ask Jones.

"You've started to acclimatise," he says. "It was obvious as soon as I saw you this morning." And I realise this is probably not the first time, in 10 years of Alpine guiding, that he's seen such a transformation.

Then, as we drop down from the peak, he shows me how proper ultra-trail racers get downhill. We start with a jog, which becomes a canter and finally a headlong rush



Grin and bear it  
Sean forces a smile at an agonising 2,000 metres. Below left, first steps on the 166km, 20-hour minimum Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc. Below right, fast legs



Facial tooniness, Frank O'Brien

of a kind I haven't experienced since I was a kid – eyes wide, arms flailing, my mind a nanosecond ahead of my feet as I look for a safe landing. It's three parts exhilaration, two parts terror, and it's absolutely addictive. When we get back to the car, the last thing I want to do is stop.

## THE BRIEF

Sean Newsom was a guest of rendezvousenfrance.com, Chamonix Tourism ([chamonix.com](http://chamonix.com)) and Hôtel Faucigny. Icicle Mountaineering's next trail-running camps start on July 26, August 16 and August 30.

They run for a week and cost £499pp, or £699pp including B&B accommodation (01539 442217, [icicle-mountaineering.ltd.uk](http://icicle-mountaineering.ltd.uk)). Doubles at Hôtel Faucigny start at £95 (00 33 4 50 53 01 17, [hotelfaucigny-chamonix.com](http://hotelfaucigny-chamonix.com)). Fly to Geneva with British Airways, easyJet, Flybe or Swiss.

THE SUNDAY TIMES

12.07.2015 / 9

## Want to race? Five extreme trail runs to choose from

**ULTRA-TRAIL DU MONT-BLANC**  
One of the world's most popular ultra-marathons, around the Mont Blanc massif. The route varies slightly each year, but is usually 166km, with 9,500 metres of ascent. The winner takes roughly 20 hours. [ultra-trailmb.com](http://ultra-trailmb.com)

### TOR DES GEANTS

A monstrous 330km race in the Italian Alps, with 24,000 metres of ascent (nearly three times the height of Everest). There are 700 competitors; the winning time in 2014 was just under 72 hours. [tor-des-geants.it](http://tor-des-geants.it)

### THE HARDROCK HUNDRED MILE ENDURANCE RUN

Average elevation of 3,400 metres makes this one of the toughest runs in America, involving 10,000 metres of ascent in the spectacular San Juan Mountains, Colorado. The winning time last year was 22hr 41min. [hardrock100.com](http://hardrock100.com)

### LAKELAND 100

The 350 competitors run a 100-mile course in the Lake District, with 8,300 metres of ascent. The fastest time in 2014 was 21hr 14min. [lakeland100.com](http://lakeland100.com)

### SOUTH DOWNS WAY 100

This year, 266 runners took on a 100-mile course from Winchester to Eastbourne. There are no mountains, but it does include 3,780 metres of ascent. The 2015 winning time was 18hr 50min. [centurionrunning.com](http://centurionrunning.com)