

30 greatest OutThere challenges

Had enough of beach holidays and city breaks? Whether you're looking for a one-day activity or want to spend weeks on a serious test of your fitness, there's something for you in this list

Words Damian Hall



1 Race the Scotland Coast to Coast

Use your feet, pedals and paddles for 169km as you run, cycle and kayak from one side of Scotland - which is certainly not the world's flattest country - to the other. The race includes classic Scottish landscapes such as Loch Ness, the Great Glen, Ben Nevis and Glen Coe and is open to all adventure racers (the three categories are Racer, Challenger and Expert), with pairs or soloists equally welcome. The Racer option includes 38km of running/trekking (much of it off-road), 130km of cycling (including off-road) and about 5km of kayaking.

scotlandcoasttocoast.com

2 Walk the Great Himalaya Trail

Everest Base Camp Trek too soft for you? The new Great Himalaya Trail is the small matter of 1,700km and, as the name suggests, it traces the world's highest mountain range. The trail's a work in progress but is planned ultimately to stretch from the perilous mountain of Nanga Parbat in Pakistan through India, Bhutan and Nepal to Namche Barwa in Tibet, clocking up 4,500km. It currently passes eight of the world's 14 peaks over 8,000m, including Everest, and goes as high as 6,000m, with a total ascent of 150,000m. It visits some of Nepal's poorest areas, where tourism can make a real difference. This is no holiday jaunt: plan for something like 150-160 days. greathimalayatrail.com



3 Walk the South West Coast Path

The Pennine Way may be remoter and muddier, but the South West Coast Path is England's longest National Trail. The 1,014km route starts in Minehead, Somerset, and follows the wild coast around Devon and Cornwall into Dorset, finishing in Poole. To walk it in one go you'll need a couple of months, but you can tackle its tough ascents one at a time for a satisfying hike. While the coastal weather doesn't always smile on walkers, the scenery is outstanding - the path has sections designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Heritage Coast and World Heritage Site. southwestcoastpath.com



4 Race the Ironman 70.3 Pays d'Aix

The idea of a half Ironman is much less intimidating if you take part in one somewhere bright and sunny rather than grey and gloomy. The Ironman 70.3 Pays d'Aix - a qualifying race for the Ironman 70.3 world championship - takes place in the city of Aix-en-Provence, which apart from its promise of sunshine has a reputation as a training mecca for French cyclists and triathletes. Competitors swim 1.9km, cycle 90km and run 21km, with the bike ride the most challenging part and not just because of the distance. The course includes the famous mountain pass in Provence, around Mont Sainte-Victoire, immortalised by the painter Paul Cézanne. The road isn't in good condition and there are some long, torturous ascents. ironmanpaysdaix.com

5 Cycle across England

Around 13,000 people cycle coast to coast in England each year - the challenge is to complete it in a weekend. The traditional route starts at Whitehaven on the west coast and ends at Tynemouth, taking in the Lake District. Around 96% of the route is quiet country roads, cycle paths and off-road trails, so there's plenty of scope to let loose. Going west to east takes advantage of prevailing winds, as well as short uphill and long downhill. c2c-guide.co.uk

6 Run the Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc

Why? It's simply the most challenging foot race in Europe. The 166km trail loops the Mont Blanc Massif, with a total height gain of 9,500m. Competitors must carry all their requirements and while super-athletes finish in around 20 hours, most runners take 30 to 45 hours - that's if they finish at all. Shorter races and a team 300km are also available. ultra-trailmb.com

7 Climb the Inaccessible Pinnacle

There are 283 Munros - Scottish mountains higher than 3,000ft (914.4m) - and Sgurr Dearg on the Isle of Skye is by far the hardest to climb. That's because while the rest of the Munros are trekking peaks, the 986m Sgurr Dearg - tellingly known as the Inaccessible Pinnacle - requires rope, rock-climbing skills and plenty of courage. The usual ascent is along a long ridge, involving a vertical climb of 50m, including two roped 30m pitches. tinyurl.com/5w75h8l

8 Run a marathon and a half

Running a marathon is impressive - but not as impressive as running a marathon and a half, is it? ULTRARace.Peaks is a compelling addition to the ultra-race calendar on a 64km course through Derbyshire's rugged Peak District. There are nine testing inclines and plenty of speedy downhill sections amid its glorious scenery, plus the unique experience of running 350m in a tunnel. ultrarace.co.uk

Photography Shutterstock, Richard Taylor, Yannick Parienti

9 Run the Snowdonia Marathon

Almost all marathons are in cities. So fancy swapping houses for hills and multi-storey car parks for mountains? The Snowdonia Marathon was created in the early 1980s as an alternative to urban races and it loops around Wales's highest peak, making this a demanding course. Despite its reputation as the toughest 42km in Britain, this event has topped 'best marathon' polls among runners and is known for its spectacular scenery, great camaraderie among competitors and hospitable, cheerleading locals - though you certainly shouldn't expect pleasant weather, especially since it's in late October. snowdoniamarathon.com



10 Escape From Alcatraz

In its 29 years as the world's most infamous maximum-security prison, no-one ever escaped alive from the shores of Alcatraz. Now, each June, 2,000 of the world's best triathletes assemble in San Francisco to try. To be fair, security isn't what it was, but this triathlon with a brilliant novelty factor is still a gruelling affair. A 2.4km swim through frigid waters from Alcatraz Island to shore is followed by a 29km bike leg, then a 13km run through the rugged trails of Golden Gate Recreation Area. Set against the famous skyline of San Francisco, it's little wonder the event draws over 20,000 spectators. escapefromalcatraztriathlon.com

11 Walk the Pennine Way

This is the classic long-distance trail in the UK. The record for the 431km stomp along the backbone of England is a maniacal two days, 17 hours and 20 minutes, although most mortals will take 16-19 days. The trail leads from Edale in the rugged Peak District through the Yorkshire Dales, along Hadrian's Wall to the giant Cheviots and the Scottish border. Although notorious for foul weather and treacherous peat bogs, the Way has the wildest and best upland walking in England. It was too tough for arch-rambler Alfred Wainwright: 'You won't come across me anywhere along the Pennine Way,' he said. nationaltrail.co.uk/pennineway

12 Climb the Matterhorn

Few European peaks are more infamous than the Matterhorn, the mountain that lies between Italy and Switzerland and rises to 4,478m with four steep faces. It was the last great Alpine peak to be climbed, the ascent marking the end of the golden age of alpinism. It's also one of the deadliest peaks in the Alps: from 1865 to 1995, 500 climbers died on it. You'll need some experience and/or a knowledgeable guide to climb it. The summit day itself is long, with up to 4,500m of tricky scrambling, and requires commitment and concentration for eight-plus hours. mountaintracks.co.uk

13 Paddle from Devizes to London

The Devizes Westminster International Canoe Marathon, the longest nonstop canoe race in the world, goes 200km from sleepy Wiltshire up the Thames to Westminster and requires about 20 hours of hard rowing. Training is essential to complete the race: 'many "fit" people have turned up to take part,' the organisers say, 'but most collapse and fail within a few hours.' Paddling through the night, fighting exhaustion and mental fatigue, is a real test of fitness and character, and finishing in under 24 hours is seen as a good time. The intensity of training required is said to be the closest you can get to Olympic training. dwrace.org.uk



14 Cycle the Kielder 100

The UK's first mountain-bike ultramarathon is fast becoming a classic. As if the 100-mile (161km) Northumberland course wasn't enough of a challenge, 2011's race was preceded by five days of torrential rain - but 230 riders didn't let that stop them haring around northern Europe's largest man-made forest. Organisers say the race is for 'experienced cyclists capable of riding long distances on tough terrain and technically competent enough to ride difficult red-grade mountain bike trails' so get your training in gear as soon as possible. kielder100.co.uk



15 Cycle Mont Ventoux's three ascents

Lance Armstrong called Mont Ventoux 'the hardest climb in the Tour de France'. But the Tour only ascends it once - the real challenge is to cycle up all the mountain routes in a day, racking up a Herculean 4,443m of ascent and 68km. You can face winds of 100km/h or more near the summit. cycling-challenge.com/mont-ventoux

16 Walk the Grande Randonnée 20

There's a network of over 100 Grande Randonnée (French for 'great trek') footpaths all over western Europe - and Corsica's GR 20 has a reputation for being the toughest. The 180km route includes some scrambling, high winds and occasionally snow, but the pay-off is spectacular views. It takes most people about 15 days. le-gr20.com/gb

17 Do the Vitruvian Triathlon

Established in 2003, the Vitruvian triathlon is now one of the most popular races in the UK and a regular award winner. Based at the spectacular Rutland Water Nature Reserve in Leicestershire, it begins with a 1.9km swim followed by two laps of a 42.5km bike course and a half marathon. pacesetterevents.com

18 Ice climb Ben Nevis in winter

Britain's highest summit is a straightforward hike in normal conditions - but in winter, covered in ice and snow, it's a different beast. There are routes of all lengths and difficulties; make sure you have the necessary skills or go with an experienced guide. tinyurl.com/68fr7ck

19 Take the 24 Hour Challenge

The idea for this endurance challenge sounds like it was dreamed up in a school playground: how far can you run/walk in 24 hours? It takes place on a 10.5km course in Kent with varying terrain. Dudley Manning won in 2011 with 105 miles (169km). How's that for a target? challengehub.co.uk

20 Cycle the 24 Hours of Exposure race

Ever wanted to race all night? This is the UK's only 24-hour mountain bike endurance race for solo riders only (with a 12-hour race option). You bomb around an 18km loop on all-weather trails at Whithaugh Park's tailor-made arena just north of the England/Scotland border. 24 Hour and 12 Hour MTB Champions of Europe and the UK will be crowned at the event, but newcomers are welcome too - the event is open to 'competent riders' new to endurance racing and there are plenty of titles, prizes and even rookie awards up for grabs. 24hoursolo.co.uk



21 Run the 6633 Ultra

The organisers claim Canada's 6633 Ultra race, which enters the Arctic Circle, is 'the toughest, coldest and windiest extreme ultramarathon on the planet'. It's hard to disagree - it's a nonstop, self-sufficient foot race over a distance of 563km. Competitors carry their provisions or pull them on sleds, including food, cooking items, clothing, sleeping kit and safety gear. The race starts at Eagle Plain, a solitary hotel and fuel stop in the northern Yukon (aka the middle of effing nowhere) and ends at the Arctic Ocean at Tuktoyaktuk. Racers are allowed two drop-bags, plus checkpoints are spaced between 42 and 113km apart. Entry is strictly limited to 25 athletes and the next race is in 2013. 6633ultra.com

22 Cycle Land's End to John o' Groats

The distance of this classic journey is around 1,400km, which takes most cyclists about 12 days - although the record is 44hr 4min 20sec if you want a real challenge. ctc.org.uk

23 Run the Bath Half

England's most handsome city has a half marathon in March, setting you up for bigger events later in the season. It's also flat, which should mean a confidence-boosting time. bathhalf.co.uk

24 Do the London Duathlon

Daunted by open-water swimming? London has a multisport alternative. A 20km run/80km bike/10km run is the main event, but shorter races are available. thelondonduathlon.co.uk

25 Take on the Ironman Cozumel

Cozumel Island in Mexico hosts a race comprising a 3.8km sea swim, a 180km bike ride and a 42.2km city run. Make a holiday of it and relax afterwards with some ridiculously hot food as a reward. ironmancozumel.com

26 Walk the Continental Divide Trail

This 5,000km mountainous route from Canada to Mexico takes around six months. Highlights include Yellowstone National Park. cdtrail.org

27 Do the Everest Marathon

The world's highest marathon starts at 5,184m, although it goes mostly downhill on rough trails. The next race is in November 2013. everestmarathon.org.uk

28 Surf Freshwater West

With offshore swells, a heavy reef break and monster waves, this Pembrokeshire beach offers serious surfing thrills. visitpembrokeshire.com

29 Do a log race

Think you're fit enough for the Army? Join a team of six to carry an 80kg log for 2.4km and find out. challengehub.co.uk

30 Climb the world's highest artificial wall

The Diga di Luzzzone dam in Switzerland towers 165m high and is disturbingly exposed. climb-europe.com



Up for any of these? We've got the best outdoor kit at mensfitness.co.uk/links/outerwear