

# Summit

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# ALPINE ATTACK

REVEALED: TOP TEN CLASSIC ALPINE SUMMITS

# ULTRA SPIRIT

What does it take to finish the 168km-long Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc race? **Kingsley Jones** on loneliness of the ultra-distance mountain runner.

Nearly 2,500 runners set off each year, but on average only half finish the 168km-long Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc. There are the usual twisted ankles, muscle strains and tendon damage. What shocked me though, both in myself and others, was the mental battle that was visibly ever-raging. I saw strong athletes see the scale of the next mountain, sit down on a rock and cry in disbelief. I heard one older man stop in a food station near the end, saying to the marshal that he didn't want to hurt any more and had nothing more to prove. I saw more people drop out from being defeated mentally than physically.

It would be easy to write clichés about the Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc, the 'Queen of Trail Races'. There is something special about the spirit of the event. I've run countless mountain races in amazing places, where I couldn't put my finger on the unquantifiable element that was missing but is evident at the

UTMB. In the years before I ran it, I vividly recall watching the runners set off as a spectator amongst thousands in the streets of Chamonix. I was moved close to tears by the raw emotion of the crowd, the passion of the runners, and that music - no one who ever completes the UTMB will ever get the Vangelis 'Conquest of Paradise' out of their heads. There's a profound, deep-rooted respect of the mountains that host this event evident in every runner and race supporter, and I think that is what makes the UTMB special.

At about 4am, I passed through the Swiss hamlet of Praz de Fort. A lady had set up a chaumiere (coal heater) alongside the track and offered hot coffee

↑ Chamonix: home of the fearsome UTMB.

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**WITHIN MINUTES OF LEAVING CHAMONIX THE NOISE REDUCES TO BREATHING, THE SCUFF OF SHOES ON STONES, THE RUSTLE OF CLOTHING, AND THE STOMP OF FEET. NO-ONE TALKS.**

## I WAS RUNNING WITH A FRENCH GUY WHO KEPT WARNING ME ABOUT 'TREES' GROWING IN THE MIDDLE OF THE TRAIL, THAT I COULD CLEARLY SEE DIDN'T EXIST.

to those passing by. No one was paying her or asked her to stay up all night. As I left the mountain village of Champex-Lac, I passed a mother who had woken her three children up in the night, to stand next to a barn ringing a cow bell in support. The children's little hands were caught in the beam of the head torch, stretched upwards to clap the hands of the runners. The excitement and belief in their small faces was enough to motivate anyone to continue.

A UTMB runner is witness to a huge variety of support, from the simple shouts of 'allez', to those who took the time to read your name on the race number to cheer you on and, in so doing, provided strength. No one finishes the UTMB on their own. Your efforts are the culmination of your stamina and hundreds of other people's energy. It's impossible not to be moved by that, and it helps combat the loneliness of running the UTMB.

It might sound crazy to talk of loneliness considering the hundreds of runners and spectators, but each runner performs in their own little bubble. There is an amazing atmosphere at the start-line, then you run through crowd-lined streets. There is cheering, flag waving, music, cow bells ringing, cameras flashing and whistling. Within minutes though, you leave Chamonix and get onto the trails. The noise reduces to breathing, the scuff of shoes on stones, the rustle of clothing, and the stomp of feet. No-one talks. Everyone is very focused. Many people are jostling for places, and the feeling is aggressively-charged, perhaps unsurprisingly with all the pent up energy and worries.

After an hour or so, the mood changes again as the field spreads out and people settle into their rhythm. During the first night and dawn the individual focus is high, and it is strangely lonely. For most people the UTMB involves two nights and two days out running in the mountains. It is not until towards the end of the race that most runners start to interact more, chatting and taking photos of each other.

Testament to the struggles my body and mind were experiencing, during the UTMB my tastes changed like the fluctuating food cravings pregnant women sometimes cite. At one food station I wanted salty soup; chocolate at another, and sandwiches at a final stage. Obviously my body was in charge, telling me I needed electrolytes, fats, or protein. During the race there is just one piece of advice I'd give anyone: listen to your body, not your brain.

On the final few kilometres into Chamonix I was running on empty, and saw lines of chairs at the



PHOTO: KINGSLEY JONES COLLECTION

side of the trail. I thought the organisers were very good in anticipating how tired we would be, so took advantage of a chair. It turned out not to be there, as I tumbled over, but my brain registered it as me simply toppling the chair over. Don't worry I was in safe hands, running with a French guy who kept warning me about 'trees' growing in the middle of the trail, that I could clearly see didn't exist.

Another runner was convinced that we were lost, despite the fact that the French runner and I kept pointing out the markers. I was convinced I was running with madmen. They'd both witnessed my chair incident so probably thought I was the nutter. In retrospect these hallucinations are amusing, but they also exemplify how fragile a state of mind we were in, and how little common sense and 'normal' emotions and determination can be counted on when you're truly reaching the limit of what your body can give.

The night after I finished the UTMB I hurt too much to sleep well. I couldn't get undressed myself, and it hurt too much to be helped. I shivered under the duvet and blankets, not through cold but through physical and a greater mental exhaustion. I kept waking up afraid that I needed to keep running to reach the finish, petrified that my sleep had affected my chances. The next morning I had a long painful bath. Muscles were locked, skin was rubbed raw, feet ached, and everything hurt, yet nothing filled me with more pride than seeing the finisher jacket hanging by the door. I wasn't a UTMB competitor, a dreamer, or a DNF (did not finish). I was finally a finisher. 🏆

Thanks to **Kingsley Jones** for the words. Kingsley is a personal trainer, UIMLA international mountain leader and glaciologist, who splits his time between living in Chamonix Mont Blanc in the French Alps and Windermere in the English Lake District.

### FACTS AND FIGURES

In 2013, the Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc will take place in the last week of August, between August 26th and September 1st. The race is around 168 km-long, with 9,600m of positive altitude change and numerous passages at high altitude.

The principle is semi-self sufficiency: there are eleven refreshment posts with food and six offering drinks. You need seven race points from finishing previous ultra-trails in order to enter the UTMB. You can find out which races count as qualifiers on the website below. Registration for the UTMB 2014 will be open from December 19th 2013 to January 6th 2014.

The North Face is the UTMB's main sponsor, the outdoor gear brand have sponsored the race since its inception in 2003.

You can see the race profile and find out more about the UTMB on this website:

[www.ultratrailmb.com](http://www.ultratrailmb.com)