

Altitude with attitude

Talk about a 'runner's high'! Learn how to run like a mountain goat in the beautiful French Alps

I need to pay attention to where I'm running, but every now and then I can't help but shift my steely gaze to the amazing vista. We pass by billowy banks of arnica, fuchsia and Alpine herbs and pass languid cattle, through chocolate-box villages and under the canopy of aromatic pine trees. Running really doesn't get more scenic or stimulating than this.

Even when bereft of snow, Chamonix Valley – dominated by Mont Blanc – is a giant playground for sporty thrill seekers. Mountain bikers, hikers, white-knuckle paragliding, canyoning and rafting fanatics all flock to the nude mountains outside of the ski season. And there's nowhere better to take my first trail running steps; this dramatic terrain is home not only to an elevated summer marathon (www.montblancmarathon.net), but also the UTMB – the Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc (www.ultra-trail-mb.com) – a four-race spectacular that includes a 166km high-altitude route with a 46-hour time limit.

Guiding me through my inaugural foray is Julia Tregaskis-Allen, co-owner of specialist holiday company Track & Trail, mountain leader, personal trainer and gold-standard runner, and Lizzy Hawker, the UK's top female endurance runner, and former winner of the UTMB. As a runner more familiar with the urban jungle, I couldn't be in better company.

This is running but not as you know it. We split our time between our quaint bolthole –

the Yeti Lodge (www.yetilodge.com) in the hamlet of Argentière – and the steep gradients of the valley, where Hawker and Tregaskis-Allen impart know-how on everything from nutrition and acclimatisation to kit and pre-race preparation. And there's extensive technique tuition – we learn about the importance of adopting a 'light and fluffy step' over rocks, roots and boulders, how to use poles, position our bodies for maximum efficiency and, at intervals, gawp in awe at Hawker's almost effortless gait.

Over the course of a few days, our small band of trail running novices works up to a half marathon; a 13-mile power walk-cum-run at altitudes of more than 1,800m. It's challenging – running uphill is likened to running and weight-training rolled into one – but there's a supportive atmosphere, and we all look out for one another. I swell with pride as we pass a troupe of walkers who clap and shout encouragement. And we bond with the scenery too – Track & Trail prioritises environmental awareness, and Tregaskis-Allen stops us at regular intervals to highlight an unusual fungus here or a loitering chamois goat there.

Post-running, we enjoy muscle-building and stretching sessions al fresco, relax in the most scenic of hot tubs and there's massage available to soothe aching limbs. As Hawker says, the mountains are a unique sanctuary, and I have high hopes my next marathon might just be of the lofty variety.



Technique training proves useful as the group builds up to a half marathon



The stunning scenery of Chamonix Valley

GIVE IT A GO

To tie in with next year's Mont Blanc Marathon, Track & Trail is hosting an Alpine running week on June 20–27, 2010. It costs £799, including six evening meals and accommodation. For details, visit www.tracks-and-trails.com or call 020 8144 6442. Easyjet (www.easyjet.com) flies to Geneva from £23.99 one way. To read about Hawker's endeavours, see <http://lizzyhawker.blogspot.com>.