

Fastpacking

About the Author

Lily is a writer and a runner based in the Brecon Beacons, Wales. Her childhood was spent in Ireland and the northwest of England and her love of the outdoors grew from studying geology during a natural sciences degree. She started running in her 20s and since then the sport has taken her from pounding the pavements around Birmingham University to running around Manaslu, Nepal, the world's eighth highest mountain. She also enjoys cycle touring and has ridden Land's End to John O'Groats and the loftiest roads of the Himalaya in Ladakh. She still enjoys the buzz of a big-city marathon but is always happiest spending time with friends, beneath open skies and preferably in lumpy places.

Lily is passionate about sharing her love of adventure and the natural world with others. A proportion of author royalties from this book will be donated to nature conservation projects and activity breaks for disadvantaged children.



Inset photo credit: David Palmer
Main photo: Autumn Fastpacking –
Loch Hourn on the west coast of Scotland
(Route 8) (Photo credit: Chris Councill)

Fastpacking

Multi-day running adventures:
tips, stories and route ideas

by Lily Dyu

CICERONE

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Running has brought so many friends into my life and I'm indebted to all those I've shared the trails with (you know who you are!) Special thanks to Chris for many of the wonderful photographs within these pages and precious memories of shared fastpacking adventures. Without his enthusiasm for crazy capers, this book would not exist.

Updates to this guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/957/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time.

The non-UK route maps in this guide are derived from publicly available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency, although naturally we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

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Front cover: Sea views from Mam Meadail, Knoydart, Scotland (Route 8)
(Photo credit: Chris Councill)

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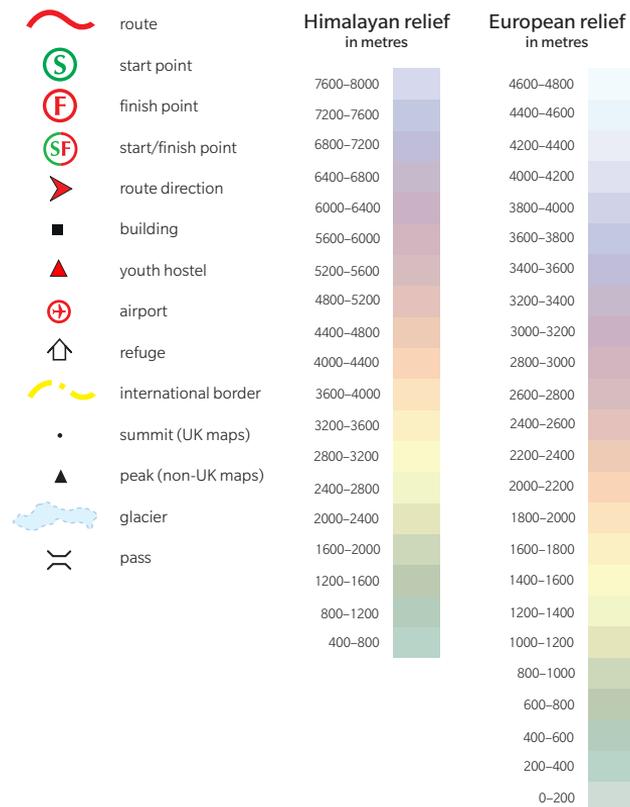
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› Mountain safety

Every mountain run has its dangers, and those described in this guidebook are no exception. All who fastpack in the mountains should recognise this and take responsibility for themselves and their companions along the way. The author and publisher have made every effort to ensure that the information contained in this guide was correct when it went to press, but, except for any liability that cannot be excluded by law, they cannot accept responsibility for any loss, injury or inconvenience sustained by any person using this book.

To call out the Mountain Rescue, ring 999 (in the UK) or the international emergency number 112: this will connect you via any available network. Once connected to the emergency operator, ask for the police.

Symbols used on route maps



Scales vary widely. Please refer to map for scale.

Relief is relevant to non-UK maps only.

Fastpacking is the art of moving fast and light on multi-day trail-running journeys
(Wengen, Switzerland, Route 11) (Photo credit: Chris Council)



Introduction

Welcome to the world of fastpacking



Fastpacking is a great way for runners to explore and discover new places – Vallone di Vallasco, Italy

Fastpacking is a fast-growing niche in the world of trail running. Put simply, fastpacking is the hybrid of running, hiking and backpacking. It's the art of moving fast and light on multi-day trail running journeys.

To purists, it means being self-sufficient in wild places, experiencing the mountains raw, but there are many styles of trip: from running with a pack between overnight stops, like guesthouses and hostels, to bothying in remote wilderness locations. Hut-to-hut running is increasingly popular in places like the Alps where networks of mountain refuges in spectacular

› *We were wilderness running. Power hiking. Kind of backpacking, but much faster. More fluid. Neat. Almost surgical. Get in. Get out. I call it fastpacking.* ◀

Jim Knight in an article in *UltraRunning* magazine following his 1988 traverse of the Wind River Range, USA. He and his running companion, Bryce Thatcher, completed the 100-mile journey in just 38 hours.

locations provide hot meals and a bed, allowing you to live well and travel light.

Over recent years there has been a boom in trail and ultra-running and stage races. This has evolved into offshoots such as Fastest Known Times, or FKTs, where runners try to set speed records on established routes, such as Damian Hall completing the UK's 630-mile South West Coast Path in less than 11 days and Kilian Jornet running and climbing over Mont Blanc, starting in Courmayeur and finishing in Chamonix nine hours later.

Multi-day running is not all about times, though. More and more people are pursuing solo running adventures as a way to experience and explore the outdoors. Elise Downing ran the coast of Britain in 301 days, camping and staying with friends, and Anna McNuff

covered the length of New Zealand in 148 days, stopping to speak at schools and inspire children to get outside. But you don't need to go far. It could be an out-and-back running trip from your doorstep or following a local long-distance path at a leisurely pace. Fastpacking is for everyone.

Underpinning the activity is the principle of 'fast and light' – taking only what you need to stay safe and happy and nothing more. This allows you to travel further and faster in a day compared to hiking, by running whenever the terrain allows it. You could see it as adventure racing without the race. It's about exploring and enjoying your surroundings at your own pace. It's the excitement and fun of ultras and stage races but without the entry fee and cut-off times. There are no medals, t-shirts

or personal bests. The reward is the journey itself and the thrill of moving fast and light in the wild. Quite simply, if you love running, fastpacking is a wonderful way to travel and discover new places.

Humans were born to run. Our ancient ancestors were hunter-gatherers, spending days on foot, roaming through the landscape. On a psychological level many of the people who shared their stories for this book spoke of the heightened sense of awareness they experienced in ultra and multi-day running. Such peak experiences and 'flow' may be a huge part of the appeal for those who seek solitude in the natural world through fastpacking.

Perhaps the phenomenal growth of fastpacking is a backlash against our increasingly screen-based, sedentary lives and the constant pressure to record and post every run or ride online. It's a fantastic way to disconnect from our digital lives and reconnect with nature and ourselves. Spending days immersed in the landscape and natural world through fastpacking is, for many runners, a much richer and deeper experience than a trail or ultra race. There is a special satisfaction in making a running journey powered by your own two feet and seeing your surroundings change as you go. And by carrying no more than you need, fastpacking provides a beautiful sense of simplicity and freedom.

You don't need to be an ultra athlete or an extreme adventurer to go fastpacking. It's a lot easier than you'd imagine. And for those who hate

planning, there are many companies who will take all of that off your hands, including moving your bags and booking your accommodation, allowing you to just run with a day pack.

This book provides practical tips and advice on organising your own multi-day running trips, including: styles of fastpacking, from supported to unsupported; how to choose a route; where to stay; what to what to take; and eating on multi-day runs.

A question that often comes up when picking a route is, 'How runnable is it?' While a person's ability to run up big climbs and tackle technical terrain is largely a matter of experience, this book also gives overviews and travel tales from 12 tried-and-tested fastpacking routes, including: a wild camping micro-adventure on Dartmoor; running some of the UK's national trails; and a bothy-run in the Highlands. Overseas, there's hut-hopping in the Alps and Dolomites, plus a stage race in Nepal on a tea-house trekking route, along with other fastpacking opportunities in the country.

In addition there are a dozen stories from the world of multi-day running enthusiasts and ultra-distance athletes. In the UK these tales range from bothying in the Black Mountains with Anna McNuff to running from Land's End to John O'Groats with Aly Wren. Iain Harper tackles the Pennine Way in one push, competing in the legendary Spine Race, while Jasmin Paris and her husband, Konrad Rawlik, take a more leisurely approach along the same trails to celebrate her birthday. Further

A great way to travel. Ridge running in the Black Mountains of Wales





Fastpacking can take you to remote and inaccessible places – Barrisdale Bay, Scotland (Route 8)

afield, Olly Stephenson takes on the iconic John Muir Trail in the States; Jez Bragg goes hut-to-hut running around Monte Rosa, in Italy and Switzerland; and Anna Frost takes us on a sky-high running journey in Bhutan, the Land of the Thunder Dragon.

By sharing our fastpacking experiences and what we love about multi-day running, we hope that our stories will spark ideas and inspire you to try fastpacking too.

How fit do I need to be?

Fastpacking is for all trail runners. It's not a race and it's up to you how far you go each day. Slowing down is the secret to multi-day running. Compared to a typical run, you can expect to be much slower, mixing running – probably at the pace of a slow training run – with plenty of power-walking. Few people have the fitness to average more than

about three miles an hour on hilly or mountainous routes over several days. That's not fast; it's the pace of an average walk.

› A word about walking

Fastpacking is just like ultra-running in that you will do a lot more walking than you would on a typical long run. This is due to the extra weight on your back and the fact that you're doing it for several days. When fastpacking, most people will usually walk the hills, and run the flats and downhill, unless the terrain is very technical. A leisurely pace also gives you more time to enjoy the views!

How do I train for fastpacking?

If you are already a trail runner, then training for fastpacking has the same principles as preparing for stage races. You need to get your legs and body used to sustained effort over multiple days and to be able to recover quickly. Back-to-back runs – for example, a long run on a Saturday and another on a Sunday – are a key component. The length of these runs would depend on the distances you are aiming to cover in your trip. Although not necessary, you could also squeeze in a brisk run on the Friday so you enter the back-to-back weekend fatigued, to get used to running on tired legs.

To get used to running with a pack you should try a couple of long runs beforehand with a pack slightly lighter than the one you'll be carrying on your trip, perhaps about 5kg.

If you are planning to follow a mountainous or hilly route, you should include hills in your training, to give you leg strength for climbing. Any time spent hiking in the mountains is also great training, because rough trails and big climbs mean you will often be power-walking. Cycling and indoor bike training, such as spinning, are also excellent for building leg strength for hilly terrain.

Strength training of the upper body will prepare your back and shoulder muscles for the effort of running with a pack, while exercises to build core strength will benefit your running posture and speed.

The different styles of fastpacking

Broadly speaking, there are four types of fastpacking – unsupported, where you carry your own food and shelter; running between existing accommodation, such as huts, guesthouses and hostels; self-supported trips, where you might cache food and equipment along the way; and finally, fully supported trips.

Unsupported fastpacking

This is considered by many to be the purest form of the sport because you carry everything you need to be self-sufficient. Your pack will contain a shelter in the form of tent, tarp or bivvy, plus food and sleeping gear. This style is particularly popular in the US where more reliable, dry weather in national parks, such as Yosemite, makes it possible to use a lightweight tent or tarp and carry less clothing, compared to, say, a European or British trip. In the UK, two-day mountain marathon events follow this approach, with runners carrying food and equipment for an overnight camp. Examples of unsupported trips would be two days of running and wild camping in Dartmoor National Park, or taking on the entire Cape Wrath Trail.

Running between existing accommodation

The second variant is running with a small pack between overnight stops, such as mountain huts, guesthouses and hostels. In continental Europe, hut-to-hut running is growing in popularity since there are excellent trail networks coupled with perfectly spaced huts,

providing runners with a warm place to sleep and get a hot meal. A lighter pack allows you to enjoy your running more comfortably and to travel further, and by staying in huts you can enjoy the local food and culture, and meet like-minded travellers in the evenings.

Self-supported trips

On these trips, you cache supplies and equipment along the way. An example would be a three-day trip that two runners made across Wales, from Borth on the coast, to Hay-on-Wye on the English border. They doubled up their camping gear by borrowing an extra tent and pair of sleeping bags, and on their drive to the start of the run they dropped off their equipment, along with food for breakfasts and snacks, at

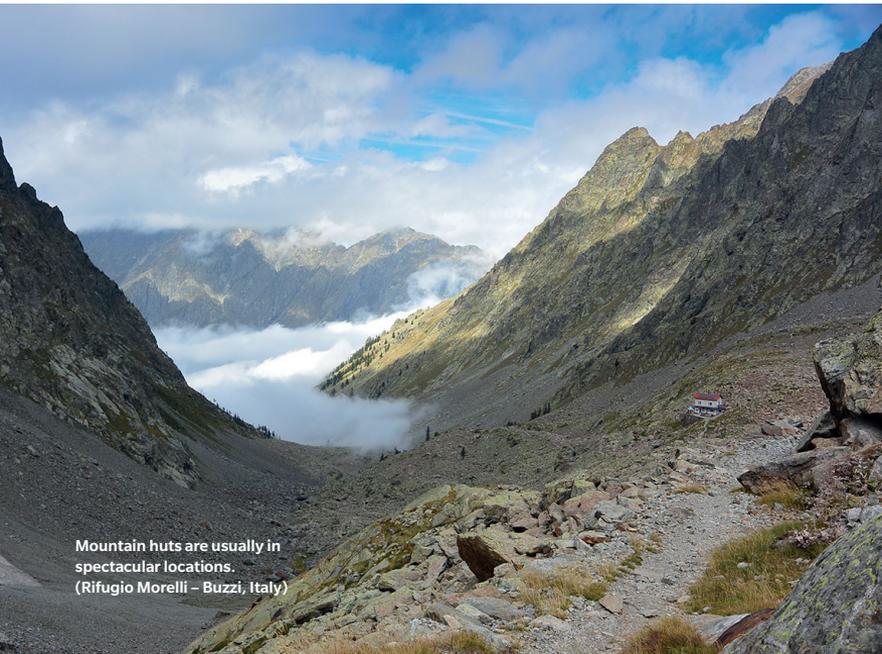
two pre-planned campsites en route. They then ran back, sleeping at the campsites and eating in pubs in the evenings. They had to recover their car from the start and collect the camping gear on their drive home, but it was a fun, self-styled adventure.

Supported fastpacking

These are trips where a crew will tend to runners at checkpoints along the route, offering backup in case of an emergency. They are generally the fastest and lightest fastpacking style and also fun and social trips. Every year since 2003, for example, a group of runners from Edinburgh and Aberdeen Hash House Harriers take on an Easter Challenge – a four-day run along a long-distance path or



Wild camping means you can stop wherever you find your perfect spot (Photo credit: Chris Council)



Mountain huts are usually in spectacular locations. (Rifugio Morelli – Buzzi, Italy)

a bespoke route – with a driver and minibus. The end point of each day is the next day's starting point. By night, instead of camping, the friends return to a hotel for food, drink and a comfortable bed.

Baggage transfer

Although marketed largely to walkers, it is easy to use baggage transfer services (available on many long-distance routes in the UK) for multi-day runs. For a small cost, your gear will be moved between your overnight stops, allowing you to run with just a day pack carrying essentials. Some companies even deliver bags to campsites. Often hotels can organise this

for you too, using taxis, and there are now companies that offer self-guided trail-running holidays where all of this is taken care of.

Where to stay

On a multi-day route there may be guesthouses, hostels, bunkhouses and hotels to stay at, but when fastpacking there are additional options that allow you to explore wilder, remote or mountainous areas. These are covered below.

Wild camping

For the purist, fastpacking is about being totally self-sufficient through wild camping and carrying all your own gear and food. This has the advantage



Ready to go at Kirk Yetholm
(Photo credit: Jasmin Paris and Konrad Rawlik collection)

A PENNINE PASSAGE

A birthday run along the backbone of England with Jasmin Paris and Konrad Rawlik

Keld appeared to be abandoned for winter. This was the intersection of the Coast-to-Coast and Pennine Way, where the guidebook had painted a picture of a bustling village – but this was a ghost town. They were starting to feel cold, walking beneath moonlight through dark, silent lanes. Turning a corner, they saw a house with lights on. Konrad knocked on the door and explained to the owner that they needed somewhere to stay. She invited the pair in and made calls to friends, further and further away before a guesthouse was eventually found.

It was November 2015 and Jasmin Paris and her husband, Konrad Rawlik, were at the end of their fourth day of running the Pennine Way. Both are well known for their running achievements: Jasmin has been national fell running champion; she's the fastest woman over the Bob Graham and Paddy Buckley rounds and holds the overall record for the Charlie Ramsay – all achieved in an astonishing six months in 2016. Konrad has won the Fellsman race and also placed third in the Dragon's Back. The couple have twice raced the multi-day Transalpine together.

For both, this was simply to be a week's holiday to celebrate Jasmin's birthday, following the route that starts at Kirk Yetholm, close to their home in Scotland, and finishes at Edale near her parents' place in Derbyshire. 'When she first suggested it,' laughs Konrad, 'I said that taking the TransPennine Express to her parents for her birthday was a great idea!'

That evening they ran two extra miles from Keld to their eventual bed for the night. 'It was a really nice family-run B&B,' recalls Jasmin. 'They weren't expecting anyone and their boiler was being repaired, so they put the kettle on and gave us bowls of water to wash our muddy legs. We'd expected to eat in the pub so we asked if we could have our cooked breakfast for tea instead. We had a fry-up in the evening and cereal and toast the next morning!'

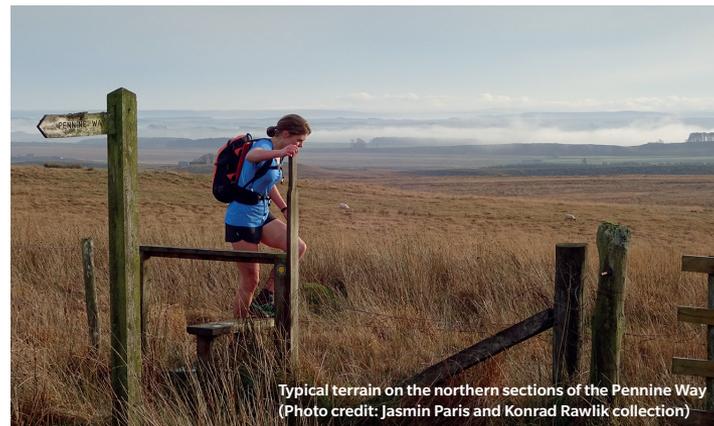
Their journey so far had been a joy, taking them over the Cheviot hills floating on a sea of cloud, where they had met a herd of wild goats – a highlight for Konrad as a fan of those much-maligned creatures, and for Jasmin a trigger for an unexpected craving for goat's cheese.

'We loved the first day,' says Konrad. 'The Cheviots were the wildest section, with the most fell running. On the second day Hadrian's Wall was really special – running alongside it towards an amazing sunset. Everything was orange and pink. There was a lovely autumn light. It was spectacular.'

On Cross Fell, the highest point of the route, they were chased along a ridge by wind, rain and hail before dropping to Dufton. This was followed by a perfect day above the rift of High Cup Nick and passing High Force.

'Each day had its own special moment,' says Konrad, 'like getting to the Tan Hill Inn, having a hot chocolate and then running in the dark down to Keld. The sky was clear and all the stars were out. It was beautiful.'

Knowing few people would be walking the route at that time of year, they had decided against pre-booking accommodation. 'Planning a 270-odd-mile run in Britain during November is no easy task,' Konrad jokes, 'so I decided to largely avoid any planning!'



Typical terrain on the northern sections of the Pennine Way
(Photo credit: Jasmin Paris and Konrad Rawlik collection)

Finding rooms wasn't to be easy, though. On their second night they ran an extra three miles, from Greenhead to Gilsland, for somewhere to stay, and the following night they trudged through Dufton until they stumbled across a farmhouse B&B on the outskirts of the village. Here, however, the local pub wasn't serving meals and Jasmin's pleas to buy some bread and cheese didn't yield any success. Thankfully, their B&B host came to the rescue, with the drive to collect her daughter from badminton being diverted to the nearest fish and chip shop.

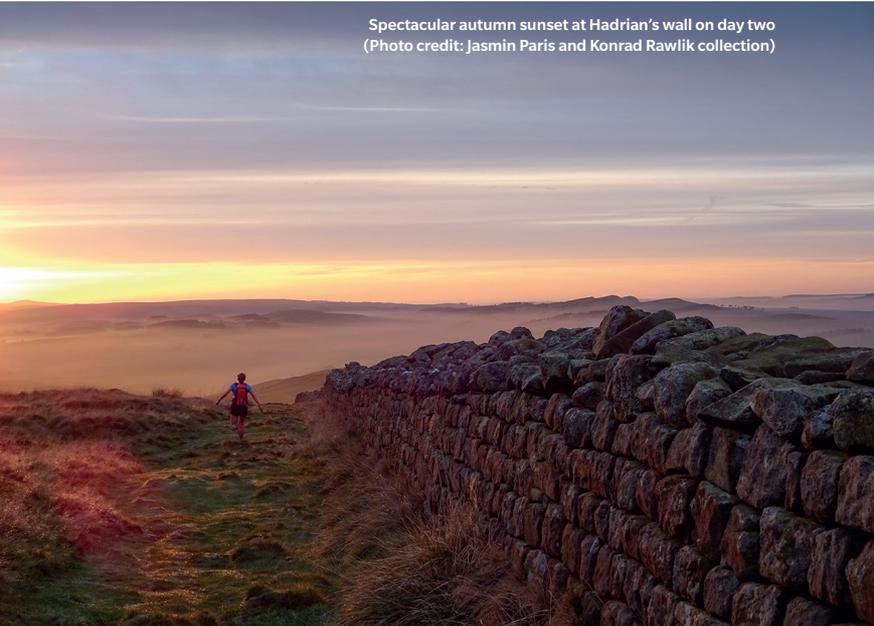
Jasmin and Konrad weren't carrying much food apart from some flapjack, along with essentials, in their 15-litre packs. Instead of taking extra shoes they'd opted for the mountain marathon trick of plastic bags on their feet to keep their socks dry in the evening. Each had only one set of running gear.

'Go light,' is Jasmin's advice to anyone contemplating fastpacking. 'You really don't need much. It was enjoyable because we had such light packs. If you carry too much, it's not much fun because you have to walk. All our evening gear was hill clothes you could put on in an emergency.'

Day five was Jasmin's birthday, so to avoid the hassle of previous days they phoned ahead to book a room for the night. Sunshine and iconic terrain, familiar from the Fellsman and Three Peaks races, led them to Horton-in-Ribblesdale, their agreed second tea-stop of the day. Regular tea breaks were a crucial ingredient of the holiday.



High Force in Teesdale on day four, one of many sights along the way (Photo credit: Jasmin Paris and Konrad Rawlik collection)



Spectacular autumn sunset at Hadrian's wall on day two (Photo credit: Jasmin Paris and Konrad Rawlik collection)

'We both love a cuppa,' says Jasmin, 'but Konrad lives for cake. The more tea-stops we could have, the better! Even when we raced the Transalpine, that was our ethos. Just having fun together. We were running hard, but every day we'd finished by mid-day so we still went for ice cream sundaes and went swimming. Other competitors were more serious – some would only have gels – but we'd try the local food in the aid stations. So although we weren't exactly sightseeing, it was still a very enjoyable week away.'

Disappointingly, the café in Horton-in-Ribblesdale was shut, so bowls of soup from the pub fuelled them over Pen-y-Ghent. From here they crossed limestone pavement in the gathering dusk before descending past the cove to the twinkling lights of Malham, where a three-course dinner and bottle of wine awaited them.

'It was an award-winning B&B,' recalls Jasmin. 'The morning after my birthday, we ate so much breakfast it was bouncing around in our stomachs. Luckily it was a downhill section, so we could just roll along!'

Achilles pain then saw Jasmin experimenting with barefoot running through farmland to the foot of Haworth Moor before reverting to shoes for the climb, post-tea-stop, over Stoodley Pike and then the descent to Mankinholes. Here, they were staying at the youth hostel where a sign warned about the pub: 'Don't go if you want good service!'

– but in fact they enjoyed a surprisingly tasty dinner there. The hostel itself wasn't offering meals, but the warden sold them tins of Tesco Value custard and rice pudding for breakfast. The following day would be their last, with 43 miles to cover.

By mid-morning the next day the two runners, in shorts and brightly coloured waterproofs, were sitting on plastic chairs by a catering van, next to the M62. Sheltering from drizzle and the roar of traffic, they drank tea and ate flapjack whilst being stared at by the lorry drivers on neighbouring tables who had opted for double bacon sandwiches. After a morning of crossing moorland in rain and howling wind, the couple were glad to warm up. This was home turf for Jasmin and she knew it didn't offer many options for refreshments; however, as her parents were meeting them later with a picnic, happily the day's cake supply was guaranteed.

After an autumn of mostly benign weather, the Pennine Way seemed intent on a proper blast of winter. Complacency in familiar terrain led to a wrong turn and a boggy climb to the summit of Black Hill. Following a family lunch, they resisted the temptation to steal Jasmin's parents' bikes and instead headed into the rain and biting wind to climb Bleaklow. After easy navigation for most of the trip, it was on the hills of Jasmin's youth that they made another error, missing Jacob's Ladder on the way to Edale Cross, resulting in a long afternoon being pelted by rain before finally arriving at the Old Nag's Head in Edale – 6 days, 8 hours and 19 minutes after leaving Kirk Yetholm.

Afterwards, they both agreed that multi-day runs give a sense of achievement you don't get from other running. 'You get such satisfaction moving from one end of the country to another without using public transport,' says Konrad, 'just getting there on your own, seeing the landscape changing as you go.'

'We love the simplicity,' says Jasmin. 'It reduces you to the essentials of what you need. All you do is run, find somewhere to sleep, eat and then run again. You can just enjoy *being* – in nature, in the surroundings and just with each other. And it's great to feel tired at the end of the day. You're hungry. Food tastes good. Bed is good. The hills are good. And you just go out and enjoy it all again the next day.'

'And the wonderful thing is how many trails and routes there are out there to explore,' she adds. 'There are too many to actually do! We've got a lifetime ahead of us, lots of years. Maybe when we retire, we can do one a month!'

That evening, dripping in a corner of the pub, next to a glowing fire and having phoned the 'Dad-taxi', they had 30 minutes to wait. Plenty of time to celebrate their birthday run down the spine of England – which they did in style, with hot chocolate and, of course, slices of cake.

Further information

- Jasmin's blog: jasminfellrunner.blogspot.co.uk
- *The Pennine Way* by Paddy Dillon (Cicerone Press)



Day one, ascending Mt Whitney through the sunrise, with spectacular colours and views in every direction (Photo credit: Olly Stephenson)

SOLO IN THE SIERRAS

Fastpacking the John Muir Trail with Olly Stephenson

After another hot day, the evening air was cool and dry as Olly Stephenson hiked the Upper Basin of Kings Canyon National Park, California. He was at 3350m, 44km from the nearest trailhead, and hadn't seen another person all day. A crimson sunset streaked the horizon, daubing the surrounding peaks orange-pink. Overhead, stars began to twinkle in the inky-blue. He'd covered 50km through wonderful scenery and was ready to stop for the night.

In that moment, he felt deeply connected to the landscape and blessed to be there. The exertions of the previous day and doubt-filled night seemed a lifetime ago. Then, he had been demoralised after a demanding 65km that included climbing Mount Whitney at 4421m and Forester Pass at 4009m, carrying a full pack. If there'd been a trailhead at the first night's camp he'd have been tempted to abandon his trip, but the next morning, after a good night's sleep, he made a conscious decision to reduce his daily distances and simply enjoy the journey.



United Kingdom

ROUTE 1 *Brecon Beacons*

A classic circuit of the highest peaks, escarpments and ridges of South Wales

Start/Finish	Pont ar Daf car park on the A470 near Libanus, Powys
Distance	47km (29 miles)
Total ascent	2050m (6730ft)
Duration	2 days, with an overnight stop in Talybont
Terrain	Good mountain paths (often paved); ridge, moorland and canal paths without especially technical terrain. Route passes through sections of boggy ground. Apart from steep climbs and descents around main summits, a very runnable route.
High point	Pen y Fan, 886m (2907ft)
Navigation	Straightforward in good weather; in poor conditions good navigational skills are needed
Where to stay	Guesthouses, bunkhouse, inns and hostel in Talybont-on-Usk

The Brecon Beacons National Park contains some of the most spectacular and distinctive upland scenery in southern Britain. Much of the area is formed of Old Red Sandstone, resulting in rolling peaks, escarpments and long ridges, making it fantastic trail-running terrain. It is also home to Pen y Fan, the highest mountain in southern Britain at 886m.

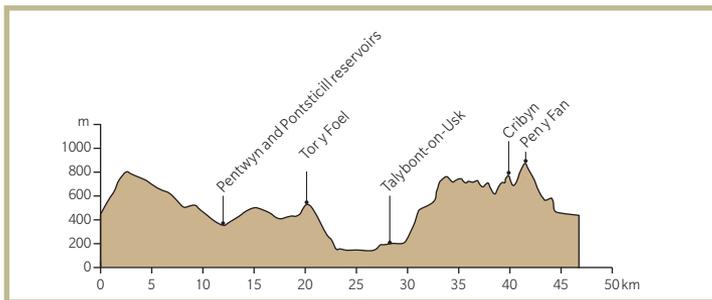
This two-day circuit visits the highest peaks of the central Brecon Beacons, as well as the varied surroundings, from secluded reservoirs and forest to gentle pasture and quiet canal. The charming village of Talybont-on-Usk offers plenty of accommodation and pubs for an overnight stop.

The route

A straightforward climb on the main path to Pen y Fan brings you to the long escarpment above **Gwaun Taf**. The route then drops between the

Pontsticill and **Pentwyn** reservoirs before heading over moorland and above the forested slopes overlooking **Talybont Reservoir**. It's a stiff





climb over **Tor y Foel** and then a lovely descent through successive pastures takes you onto the canal path to **Talybont village**. On the second day the route climbs back into the mountains and past the giant cairn of **Carn Pica** to join a wonderful escarpment path to the summits of **Fan y Big**, **Cribbyn**, **Pen y Fan** and **Corn Du** before returning to the start through a quiet hidden valley.

Highlights

- Pen y Fan and Corn Du, the two highest peaks in South Wales, plus their neighbour, Cribbyn
- Superb running on escarpments, ridges and open moorland
- Quiet reservoirs and forests, hidden in the mountains
- The beautiful and peaceful Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal – the most popular visitor attraction in the national park



Just a couple more summits to go – Corn Du and Pen y Fan

- Fantastic views of the whole area, from the Carmarthen Fans in the west to the Black Mountains in the east.

› Did you know?

It's perhaps not as well known as the other classic 'rounds', like the Bob Graham, but the Brecon Beacons Traverse is a long-distance fell-running challenge across the national park. It's a linear route of 118km taking in 31 summits over 610m, with 5000m of ascent. The goal is to complete the route within 24 hours and the fastest known crossing was by Mark Hartell in 1993 in 14 hours 42 minutes.

Top tips

- Carry sufficient water for each day as there is nowhere to fill up en route
- Watch out for deep bogs on the ridges and upland sections
- Pick shoes with good grip on wet rock because of the steep paved paths between summits
- Running poles are helpful but not essential
- Pen y Fan is very popular with walkers, especially at the weekends, so an early start is recommended to ensure a parking space.

Where to find out more

For more on this route, see: <https://www.cicerone.co.uk/957>



A delicious descent on the slopes of Tor y Foel with superb views of Sugar Loaf mountain

As he checked me in, the youth hostel receptionist gave me a quizzical look. This was unsurprising since I looked like I'd been in a fight in a farmyard and lost. I had bloodied knees, was caked in peaty mud and was giving off a delicate scent of bog.

'Good day on the hills?' he laughed.

'Yes, a couple of minor mishaps, but a fab day,' I grinned.

The weekend had started well – two days of fine weather forecast and an early start so I was climbing Pen y Fan before the car park was full. I reached the col in mist, and leaving the walkers behind I turned away from the distinctive top of South Wales' highest mountain and onto the long ridge of Graig Gwaun Taf, where I could finally break into a run. The haze cleared to reveal shards of blue sky, with the sun illuminating the yellow

gorse on red sandstone. I could see the glinting reservoir – my next destination at the foot of the ridge – and tomorrow's mountains to my left. I was soon happily running in the sunshine on a seemingly dry, peaty footpath, taking in views of the Carmarthen Fans.

Suddenly, a split second later, I was chest-deep in a cold, smelly bog. Lost in my thoughts, I hadn't seen the pool of lighter-coloured 'ground' with suspicious green moss quivering on the top. I knew of the notorious bogs in the Peak District and Dartmoor, but not here in the Brecon Beacons. Could bog suck me in like quicksand? Alone, a long way from home, this seemed an embarrassingly stupid way to meet my maker. I then realised I could, of course, doggy paddle, so I splashed and pulled myself out. Mid Wales

is home to the famous bog snorkelling championships, so perhaps my wild swim shouldn't have come as such a surprise.

I spotted a stile into the edge of some forest and crossed into the enclosure and onto drier ground. Luckily it was now warm and sunny. *I'll dry off*, I thought, *but I'll probably frighten any children out with their parents.* Covered in stinking mud, I continued on my way, carefully watching the ground and cursing myself for a silly mistake so soon into my trip.

The trail dropped down to the Pontsticill reservoir and then climbed open moorland on the slopes of Bryniau Gleision. It was here, running and admiring the views, that I tripped on the stony track and landed on my front, winding myself. I was a bit sore but had suffered no major damage as far as I could tell, but now I had scraped knees as well as a coating of dried-out bog. Not a good look.

The rest of that day's run was a joy and thankfully uneventful, passing the Talybont reservoir and forest, climbing Tor y Foel, then dropping onto a deliciously shady canal path to Talybont. I arrived in time for well-deserved tea and cake before heading to the hostel, never more in need of a shower. Over dinner, I chatted

to a woman who was working her way through all the youth hostels in England and Wales and had just 'bagged' the Georgian Wilderhope Manor and a castle in Monmouthshire.

The next morning, with my t-shirt still streaked brown despite vigorous handwashing, I ran along the escarpments of the central Beacons. Above me, the cheery skylarks sang as I enjoyed views over much of the national park, its peaks rolling across the landscape like a green, petrified wave. Passing walkers, I took in the summits – Fan y Big, Cribyn, busy Pen y Fan and its table-top neighbour, Corn Du – before dropping down into a hidden valley and returning to Storey Arms.

Travelling back from the Man Versus Horse Marathon the following weekend, I mentioned to a friend that I'd run the race cautiously because my side was still sore from my fall in the Beacons. 'Does it hurt to sneeze or cough?' he asked. It turned out that I'd cracked a rib when I'd landed on my water bottle.

Trail running for me is mostly about enjoying beautiful surroundings, but that weekend I was painfully reminded to always stop to look at the views whenever the terrain also demands your attention!

A tale from the trail

Brecon Beacons