

THE 12 BEST UK TRAIL RACES YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF

The most well-known events sell out fast, so here are our top hidden gems that you simply must run in 2016

Words Kelly Lucas

Anyone can put together a top 12 of the best trail races – the popular ones are well known, attract crowds in their hundreds and maybe even sell out in hours – but what about the ones you haven't heard of? When we asked Trail Running readers on social media what you thought made the best trail race, several of you came out as real gluttons for punishment, citing challenging mud and dirt as absolutely essential. On Facebook, Richard Sturman was a big fan of, "Light rain, mud and lots of hills." On Twitter, Gary Drum was similarly enthusiastic: "muddy, cold, wet." Most people, however, went for the sunny option – Lucja Leonard prefers a "Fun, challenging and beautiful," race and Stacy Pemberton went for: "dirty, sunny, fun." Some of you were happy just to stay injury-free – such as Jason Henderson, for whom a great trail race is one "bereft of blisters." Even in a great race, Colin van den Bergh expected, "pain" before the "finish" with "smiles." Some of you look forward more to the end of a race; James Rooney simply said: "Cake at the finish line." Valerie Nicholls looks for, "A mixture of terrain and hills, and a chocolate brownie at the end." We like their thinking. However, for us, Ali Robertson summed it up most perfectly... "Absolutely no tarmac!"

So here are 12 races which do exactly that; they're all races we think you won't have heard of before. If we've missed your fave, email in and let us know.

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OFF-ROAD RACES**



PEAK DISTRICT SPRING TRAIL SERIES

**HARTINGTON, FEBRUARY, APRIL
& MAY, 5-17km, 100 ENTRIES,
£8.50-£13.50**



After this year's successful 2015 Trail Run Series, the Spring Trail

Series is a new event for 2016. The routes are all designed in conjunction with National Park rangers to ensure runners take in the most spectacular, and often unexplored, areas of the Peak District, and will include varied terrain.

Race highlight "A fantastic event and they let my dogs run with me. We all loved the course; it had everything. Also, I loved the laid-back atmosphere and staggered starts."

Amy Baron-Hall, from the Hope Valley

Quirky fact All long course routes will have a 'Beat the Bonk' aid station chock full of energy-packed goodies to keep you going.

www.trailrunningpeaks.co.uk

ROUND THE ROCK, CHANNEL ISLANDS

JERSEY, AUGUST, 77km, 1000m ASCENT, 200 ENTRIES, £45

The original Channel Islands ultra marathon: this scenic race circumnavigates virtually the whole of Jersey on a variety of terrains, including some notorious stair climbs and descents. As you would expect from an island race, there are fantastic views and the weather is usually lovely, (no guarantees though!). You can tackle the race as part of a 2-person or 5-person relay.

Race highlight: "A great race on a stunning route with good organisation. I'm blown away by the scenery each time I return. Can't wait for next year."
Scott Harris, Dorset
Quirky fact: For several years the course record, (set by Dan Doherty), was 6hr15min and £2000 prize money was offered to anyone who could break the 6-hour mark. This year, Steve Way and Paul Martelletti smashed the record, taking home the £2000 prize. www.roundtherock.co.uk



HOPE NORTHERN SKELETON RUN

KESWICK, LAKE DISTRICT, OCTOBER (TBC), 5 MILES, 418m ASCENT, 250 ENTRIES, £15

A fantastically spooky night run through Whinlatter Forest in Keswick with a few hills thrown in to keep you warm. Halloween fancy dress is very much encouraged and the marshals really get into the spirit with spot prizes for the best dressed and toffee apples for all finishers.

Race highlight "Despite being terrified and never wanting to run in the dark again, it really was a good event - great organisation and marshals, loved all of the costumes and I'm very proud of my medal!" **Anna Hargrave from Sunderland**

Quirky fact Just in case you are thinking of taking it easy or starting to lag, there is a 'grim sweeper' to gently encourage you along the course. www.theskeletonrun.co.uk

DELICIOUS DRAKES TRAIL

BUCKLAND ABBEY, DEVON, OCTOBER (TBC), 27km, 163m ASCENT, 350 ENTRIES, £30

We love that this event is less a race and more a culinary tour of Dartmoor. Runners sample local beers, wines and plenty of food - there are at least 16 stops on the 27km race (16km option also). Fancy dress is actively encouraged.

Race highlight "It was fab from start to finish! Loved the volunteers, the route, the support and the fancy dress was hilarious!" **Kirsty Evans from Exeter**

Quirky fact Each year, 'Spirit of the Trail' awards are given out to runners whose deeds best embody the spirit of the trail. This year, it went to Kevin Duncan whose camaraderie and sense of humour helped keep spirits up when sign tampering led the field astray at the 4-mile mark. www.deliciousdrakestrail.co.uk



JAMES KIRBY

ARE WE WRONG?

Do you organise or know of a truly stupendous race that no one else has heard of? There are only 12 here so we can't have found them all. Email your most brilliant yet most obscure trail races to tr@bauermedia.co.uk

JUDGEMENT DAY, HAMPSHIRE

BORDON, FEBRUARY, 12km, 500m ASCENT, 1000 ENTRIES, £45

Used by the MOD as a tank training facility, this venue is like one big sandpit. You'll be running in ankle-deep sand, waist-deep mud and some incredible trails, as well as obstacles from rope climbs to monkey bars, to 10ft walls and sandbag carries. There's a 6k option too.

Race highlight "The whole weekend was absolutely incredible! The venue was awesome and the course was well thought out with some seriously cool obstacles. Among the toughest of the races we've done, but also, easily one of the most enjoyable."

Jessica Hobbs, Alton Hampshire

Quirky fact The course is all on sand and, in 2015, only 60% of participants managed to complete the notoriously tough quarter-pipe obstacle, where racers must leap up a slippery wall covered in mud with a crowd of baying onlookers. Awesome. www.judgement-day.co.uk



THE DORSET INVADER MARATHON, DORSET

BLANDFORD FORUM, 16 JULY, 42km, 762m ASCENT, 400 ENTRIES, £35.50

If you are looking for an all-round fun running weekend with very reasonably priced camping options:

this is your race. A hilly marathon, (there's a half marathon loop option too), around the beautiful Dorset countryside with fantastic aid stations, such as the Lovestation (a pitstop with sweets and sweet drinks), goody bags

and Roman Buffalikes headwear for all runners. This race is named after the Roman invasion of Dorchester in 45 AD, so Roman (toga) fancy dress is encouraged.

Race highlight "The atmosphere at the race was wonderful and seeing so many runners dressed up, along with the race directors, was fantastic. At the start of the race was a man dressed for the era on a horse

- absolutely brilliant!"

Pauline Albiges from Bournemouth

Quirky fact In 2015 they had to hold up the race start because so many people had dressed up; it was selfie overload. They have never delayed a race for a photo shoot before; the Roman general on horseback who started the race couldn't control his horse! www.whitestarrunning.co.uk



CAUSEWAY COAST MARATHON, COUNTY ANTRIM

N.IRELAND, SEPTEMBER (TBC), 42km, 1300m ASCENT, 1000 ENTRIES, £50

A stunning marathon and the only race of its kind to weave through the Giants Causeway, an area of about 40,000 interlocking basalt stones on the northeast coast. The scenery is fantastic; runners even pass through a set for the Game of Thrones: Lorrybane Quarry. The route is really well marked, with plenty of aid stations and support. There are a range

of distances available with an ultra, half marathon, 10k and a challenge walk too.

Race highlight "A real cracker full of stunning, mind-blowing, world-class scenery. It was the best ever marathon in my life and I have over 350 of them!" **Peter Ferris MBE from Belfast** (Irish Marathon Record Holder) **Quirky fact** There are 162 steep steps in the Shepherd's Steps and it's a real stinger of a climb. www.26extreme.com



LOVE IT!

A Grand Slammer (hopeful series completer for Dales Trail Series right) took a wrong turn on the DT40 and ran 33km before Mountain Rescue picked him up. He got a DNF (Did Not Finish) and missed out on his medal after running 83km of the total 90km. Yet he was the first person to sign up for the 2016 Grand Slam!

THE OUNDLE MAGNIFICENT TEN

LYVEDEN NEW BIELD, NORTHANTS; SEPTEMBER, 10km, 105m ASCENT, 300 ENTRIES, £12-£14

Starting at a National Trust site featuring an eerily unfinished, intricately carved Elizabethan building, runners make their way across fields, forest paths, woodland, meadows, farmers' tracks and country lanes in 10k loop with two challenging hills to finish. The race organisation receives top marks as do the finisher T-shirts and well-stocked goody bags.

Race highlight "It was an amazing day and it gets better every year. The event was so well organised, even down to the marshals out on the course supplying wine gums. It's a great course through beautiful National Trust countryside"

Claire Pallett from Peterborough

Quirky fact In 2015, a lost dog joined the race... and finished! A few horses also tried to join in! www.digitaldouble.me/outlaw



PONTY PLOD

PONTYPOOL, WALES; OCTOBER (TBC), 18km, 462m ASCENT, 250 ENTRIES, £12-£14

Held for the first time in 2015, this race follows a gorgeous route around the Llandegfedd Reservoir. There is something for everyone, including technical single track, fast descents and even a castle. The hills are tough and steep but the field is friendly with really supportive marshals

from the Ponty Pool Runners. **Race highlight** "It contains everything to give you that energy-sapping feeling; you encounter tough hills, technical woodland descents and hard climbs up steep hills. A superbly organised event with great support and camaraderie." **Adrian Woods from Blaenavon.** **Quirky fact** This year's winner was in the MV50 category; Over 50% of the top 20 were in a veteran category, proving that age often brings greater endurance for the hills. www.pontypoolrunners.co.uk

DEVILLA FOREST 15

KINCARDINE SCOTLAND, FEBRUARY, 15km, 90m ASCENT, 800 ENTRIES, £10-12

Starting and ending at the police college at Tulliallan, the circular route, (5km option too), takes runners through

Devilla Forest, skirting three lochs. A notoriously muddy bog can create a bottleneck for all but those brave enough to charge through it.

Race highlight "A beautiful course and great value for money. Suits runners new to trail races and experienced runners wanting a challenging dash over mixed terrain."

Rhona McKinnon from Stonehaven

Quirky fact No medals but each entrant over 18 receives a bottle of sponsor, Harviestoun Brewery, beer - perfect. www.carnegie-harriers.co.uk



DALES TRAIL SERIES

YORKSHIRE, APRIL, JULY & SEPTEMBER, 20km, 716m ASCENT, 200 ENTRIES, £20

Taking in breathtaking Yorkshire scenery, the DT20k and, subsequent, DT30k and DT40k races can be completed as standalone events or as part of the 90km Grand Slam. There are: ridges, sharp hills, gnarly descents, exposed moorland and a visit to the UK's highest pub, the Tan Hill Inn. Successful completers are treated to a Dales Trail Series Beer.

Race highlight "The whole weekend was fantastic; it felt more like a run with friends than a race. Great prizes from La Sportiva and local beer thrust into our hands at the finish!" **Fionna Ross from Edinburgh**

Quirky fact The race organisers went through 6kg of Jelly Babies during the races with a suspected 2kg being eaten by the marshals! www.dalestrailseries.uk



GREAT GLEN ULTRA

FORT WILLIAM, SCOTLAND, JULY, 114KM, 2000M ASCENT, 200 ENTRIES, £75

Starting at Neptune's Staircase, the route follows a series of glens to Inverness. The 2016 race will

take an even more scenic than usual high route above Loch Ness. There are fantastic prizes, and a tumbler and small bottle of whisky for all finishers too. A 3-point

qualifier for the famous Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc race too.

Race highlight "My most vivid memories of this race are the sunrises - breathtaking and awe inspiring! With excellent event organisation and stunning scenery, this race will be a permanent fixture in my calendar for the foreseeable future, as a runner or a marshal." **Pauline Walker from Fife**

Quirky fact About a mile from the stadium finish, it crosses the Caledonian Canal via a swing bridge, which needs to open to let boats through regularly during the day. www.runyabam.com



TRAIL RUNNING TEAM'S FAVES



Claire Maxted, editor: Definitely the Icebug Xperience last Sept - 73km over 3 days, running on pink granite whalebacks of rock like I've never seen before along the Bohuslan coast, west Sweden.



Hannah James, editorial assistant: The summer Fan Dance, from Avalanche events. Brutal, tough and based on SAS training, I discovered that the Fan Dance is not for the faint-hearted but I enjoyed (nearly) every second of it.



Sarah Ryan, magazine writer: Glen Coe Skyline was seriously impressive. Scotland is a stunning place: challenging, beautiful and vastly wild. This race captured all of that. A truly elite mountain challenge.



Jen Benson, gear tester: The Classic Quarter from England's most southern point, Lizard Point, to its most western tip, Land's End. It was an amazing race and an amazing shared experience too. (Jen and Sim, below, ran together).



Sim Benson, gear tester: For me, it's Endurancelife's South Devon 10k, where the Coastal Trail Series all began. I wanted to run fast. I really love the exciting technical running that the coast path offers and the friendly after race party.



Nik Cook, writer: The Kinder Downfall Fell Race. This friendly local race has everything in its 10 miles: a brutal long climb, fast technical rock-hopping on the summit plateau and a scorching descent. On a clear day, you can see for miles.



Kelly Lucas, writer: The Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc (UTMB): as incredible, breathtaking, beautiful, exhausting and exhilarating an experience as you would hope from one of the world's most famous mountain races.



Rob Kemp, writer: The Richmond Running Festival 10k. It's a wonderful part of London to run in and there's always a friendly buzz. It's hard to believe that you're in a huge metropolis; there's even a wild, cow-strewn meadow. And the race starts at Kew Gardens.