

Running tours offer a 360-degree view on Northern Italy's Dolomites.

# Have Shoes, Will Travel

Trail tours give runners a new way to see the world. BY RACHEL STURTZ



DAY TWO OF CATALONIA'S Running & Trekking Costa Brava tour begins at Mas Cals, a 1,000-year-old stone farmhouse pocked with barrel-sized holes to accommodate shotguns used for protecting the homestead against pirates. After the proprietor plies runners with dry-aged sausage and a steady stream of red wine, the group heads into the woods, past a church and its grazing sheep, until the topaz Mediterranean reveals itself miles later at the wild and rugged coastline of Northwest Spain. Salvador Dalí's cockeyed beach hut and an ancient Iberian fishing village line the trail, and after another hour along the shore (and through a nude beach), kayaks await to take runners on the final leg

to reach Calella de Palafrugell by sea.

"Runners end up knowing the Costa Brava better than 98 percent of locals," says Pablo Rodríguez, owner of Running & Trekking Costa Brava and head of Run the World Adventures, a consortium of six international running tours launched last summer.

The lesson Rodríguez hopes to impart is simple: Running can be more than just racing. Run the World Adventures is the first organized group of multiday, off-road running experiences that cover 4 to 15 miles a day. Runners are able to get onto less-traveled trails that only experienced mountain bikers could pedal. They cover twice as much ground as hikers and arrive in time to enjoy a beer in the afternoon.

Fitness travel has seen a surge in popularity in the last few years, but as any

Lower Left: Paitucci/Photo; Others: Courtesy of Run the World Adventures [3]

well-traveled harrier knows, no race is necessary to explore a country by foot, and there's ritualistic warmth in pulling out a map over morning coffee. This new breed of travel aims to do the work for you, outfitting you with GPS watches, carrying your gear, feeding you and introducing you to locals.

Rodríguez has requirements to join the consortium: Tour owners must be local—enough to point out where their kids go to school. They must have an attachment to where they live and a love of their day-to-day trails. “And it has to be someplace incredibly beautiful,” he says.

On the itinerary: multiday tours around Lake Atitlán in Guatemala with Mayan Running Adventure, the top of the South Island in New Zealand with Running Wild, the volcanoes and glaciers of Iceland with Arctic Running, the base of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania with Summit Expeditions and Nomadic Experience (SENE), the Italian Dolomites, with Holimites,

and the Catalan coastline with Running & Trekking Costa Brava. Each of the guides started their company independently and mostly for the same reason: They wanted to share the beauty of their region with other runners.

“We designed our tour to take people to places they couldn't go easily by themselves,” says Malcolm Law, founder of Running Wild in New Zealand. “Quite a number of our tours are point-to-point runs you couldn't do without transportation—spectacular routes that you wouldn't have a hope in hell of seeing otherwise.”

Running Wild began almost as a hobby website for Law to share photos and routes in order to inspire trail running in New Zealand. After years of taking visiting friends on his favorite trails, he dropped his full-time job and decided to scratch a living doing what he loved. “I'd look at the wonder on my friends' faces when they'd see the beauty of what we passed through, and the moment they



1 / After a long day, runners refuel with *fideuà*, a Catalan take on *paella*.

2 / Exploring the nooks of the Catalan village of La Vall de Santa Creu.

3 / Participants enter Calella de Palafrugell by sea.

realized what they were capable of running,” he says.

The other tour guides concur, which is why they wanted to create something official to tap into that next level of travel for die-hard runners like themselves. The majority of the tours in Run the World Adventures popped up in only the past few years, and the owners are still feeling their way around the new business. Most people may have never heard of running tours like these, and more than a few might not consider a multi-day running vacation relaxing. Well, except Americans.

“Americans are so passionate and will run everywhere,” says Igor Tavella, founder of Holimites, which specializes in trekking, cycling and trail running in the Italian Dolomites. He estimates 90 percent of his tours are made up of

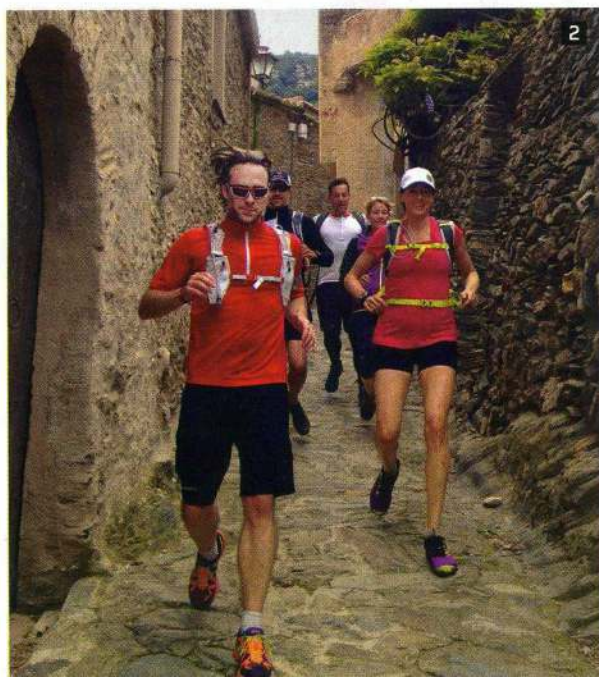
Americans, with U.K. runners a distant second.

Others may be daunted by the scope of the running. The tours can range anywhere from two to eight days and, to the uninitiated, cover an eyebrow-raising amount of mileage.

“One look at most itineraries could scare off the most die-hard runner at 13 miles a day,” Tavella says. “But people forget that off-road running usually involves a fair amount of walking uphill, and stops for pictures and food. Oftentimes, a 10-mile day never feels that way.”

He explains: If you can run a marathon or have a solid base that allows you to comfortably run 6 miles, three times a week, you'll be just fine. Those who are on the other end of the spectrum—with a desire to get in more miles or run at faster paces—are matched with a group of similar ability, or have time in the day for another run at their own pace. Tavella says his clients' biggest problem is making the mistake of buying new shoes for the trip and suffering through the ensuing blisters.

The diversity of tours within the group is unique.



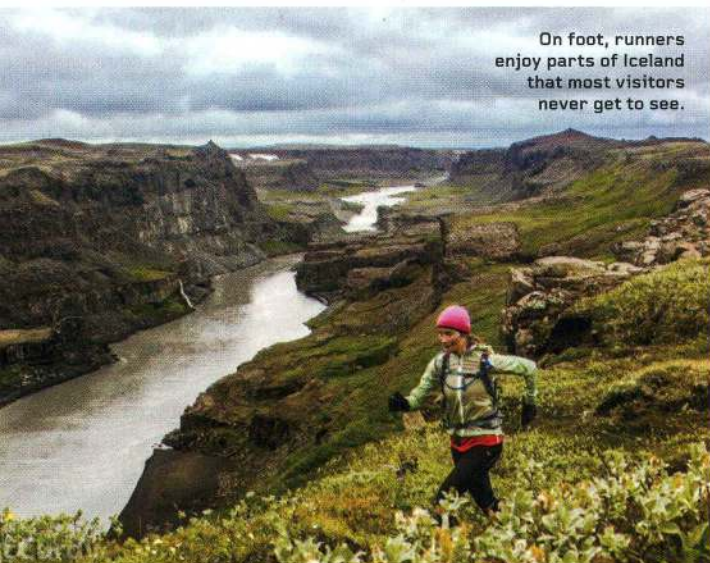
Rodríguez's tour winds along the wild coastline but pampers runners with "surprises" each day like sleeping in a medieval castle, luxuriating at a spa and refueling at a Michelin-starred restaurant. In the Dolomites, Tavela's runners stay in family-owned huts in the gorgeous UNESCO World Heritage Site and are served steaming plates of whatever Italian food the hut owner or his wife cooks that night (usually meat). During SENE's circumnavigation of Mount Kilimanjaro, runners camp in rainforests and fields, eat local Tanzanian food like *uji* for breakfast, drink fresh coffee from the family farm of founder Simon Mtuy—who held the speed record for Kilimanjaro until Kilian Jornet showed up—and rub elbows with the Maasai tribe. While you'll get to know the area better than locals, you'll also interact with the area's countrymen in a new way.

"When you're running, you're out in their field sweating," says Tim Leinbach, director of U.S. operations for SENE. "It starts a relationship

and bond you wouldn't see otherwise if you were just a tourist, mainly because many of the places we run don't usually see tourists."

Like taking any adventure, a bond also forms between the guides and runners in the group. For everyone involved, it ends up becoming one of the most memorable parts of the trip, and the friendships often last for years. In fact, a group of five women requested that Rodríguez begin a separate singles running tour because sharing the experience with other people was so profound. What Rodríguez would like everyone to take away is the freedom that comes with running—especially running downhill, his favorite.

"You're going so fast, there's no time to think or worry what happens if you trip," he says. "It touches a layer of yourself very deep inside you, and it works so fast that it feels like it's impossible to fall. The trail is the roller coaster, and you're the spectator. It's intuitive. We need more experiences like that." RT



On foot, runners enjoy parts of Iceland that most visitors never get to see.

## Find Your Next Trail Adventure

You don't need a plane ticket to experience the thrill of a weekend-long running trip. Stateside running tours are popping up in Colorado, Washington and the Appalachian Mountains. Know what you're getting into before you book.



**GO LOCAL.** Large tour operations will sometimes fly guides into the chosen exotic locale. Their tours may be a great experience, but they can't touch a local guide's insight into the region's best people, pubs and behind-the-scenes culture hidden to most tourists.



**BUY TRAVEL INSURANCE.** A broken ankle on a mountain summit could equal a \$10,000 helicopter ride to the doctor. Insurance companies like Travel Guard and Global Rescue Inc. offer packages to adventurers and explorers with this scenario in mind. An American Alpine Club membership qualifies you for global trailhead and domestic rescue insurance benefits.



**CHOOSE WISELY.** Do you want a self-supported or a fully guided trip? Would you rather fall asleep in a tent, a hut or a hotel? Can you handle an arid desert or a humid rainforest? Do you want to run most of the day or have afternoons free? Balance your dream destination with the tour offerings, which can differ greatly. Call the owner ahead of time to find out what to expect.



**BUILD MILEAGE EARLY.** It's one thing to win a 5K with a \$20 entry fee on the line. It's another to go into a multiday running vacation worth \$2,000 with inadequate base training. Pain is a quick way to detract from a great view. Know your capabilities, and be honest with your guide before you arrive.



**ASK IF FAMILIES FIT.** Some tours, like Running & Trekking Costa Brava, will set up the experience so that families can meet up with their running patriarch or matriarch throughout their adventure. If the tour can't work around your running schedule, ask if there are other family-friendly activities to keep everyone as busy—and happy—as you are. —R.S.