

GET HIGH!

RUN UPHILL QUICKER THAN EVER BEFORE BY TRAINING AT ALTITUDE

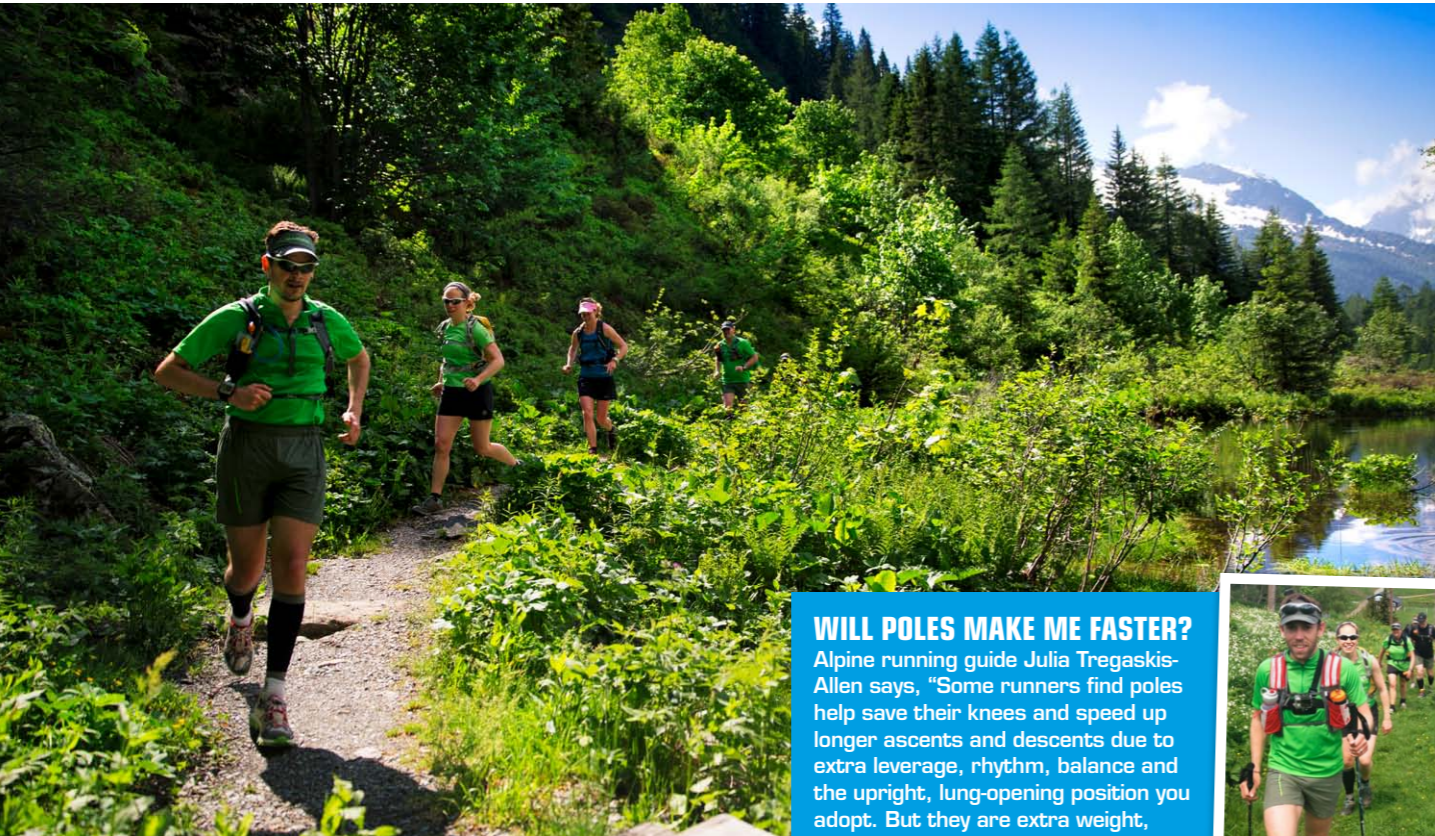
Words Claire Maxted Photos Roy Belchamber

We all want to run faster, right? Even people who only run for the bus want to get there quicker. But here's the thing, getting faster takes Mo Farah-like dedication, determination and effort. There are no quick fixes...or are there? We joined the Torq Trail Team for a training weekend in the Alps to find out how you can get a speed boost by training at altitude.

When you say the word altitude, pictures of oxygen-masked mountaineers plodding up a snowy Everest come to mind, but don't worry, no one's talking about the Death Zone here. "The Alps is a natural rollercoaster of mountains where you can happily train on beautiful, well-used and easily-navigable footpaths at altitude," says Julia Tregaskis-Allen from Tracks and Trails Activity Holidays, as I and the Trail Team jogged out of Les Houches and into the lush, forested mountainside, headed for Refuge Tré le Tête high above the small mountain town of Les Contamines.

"You can practise much longer ascents and descents, enjoy the weather and fantastic views of Mont Blanc," said Julia, waving a pole at the impressive snow-smoothed mountain rising out of the clouds to our left. All six of the team were fast-walking up the narrow, snaking trail, juggling climbs up rocky steps and tree root lunges with trying not to fall off the precipitous edge as we took in the view. We were panting with the lack of oxygen, whereas Julia was →





WILL POLES MAKE ME FASTER?

Alpine running guide Julia Tregaskis-Allen says, "Some runners find poles help save their knees and speed up longer ascents and descents due to extra leverage, rhythm, balance and the upright, lung-opening position you adopt. But they are extra weight, cost money, and can get in the way if not used properly. Check your race allows them before you invest." tracks-and-trails.com



- 1 Use the strap around the hand to push down on
- 2 Shorten for uphill and lengthen for down (if adjustable)
- 3 Get a good rhythm going – opposite arm to leg
- 4 Lean into the angle of the hill, watching out for others
- 5 Keep elbows in and push back on each pole plant
- 6 Practice speed-walking uphill with your running heart rate

used to it. "After a few days you start to feel more acclimatised," she said, making good pace without breaking a sweat. "When you return to the UK, our smaller, lower mountains feel much easier, and if you have a race about three days later you may be surprised how fast you run it."

"Damn, my next race is the Thames Ring 250, a month away!" said Trail Team member Lindley, 'fresh' from the South Downs Way 100 of which he completed a heroic 83 miles, still tired from the Grand Union Canal Race 145-miler last May. "Training at altitude will give you the edge in any lower-level UK race but especially ones here like the UTMB, CCC or Mont Blanc Marathon," said Julia as we turned our backs on Mont Blanc and ran down to the ski station. "If you can spare the week beforehand to acclimatise here and recce the course three to four days before the race it will definitely pay off. Training at altitude like this can last up to 10 days but is best up to three. And I had a girl do a personal best in a trail half marathon after one of my training camps here."

It's all convincing stuff, especially as world record marathon runner Paula Radcliffe (see p54) used to train at altitude regularly at Font Romeu, Pyrenees and Albuquerque, New Mexico, but what do the scientists say? Professor John Brewer has just returned from a two-week holiday, running high in the Grand Teton and Yellowstone US national parks and is now feeling the benefits at home, a mere 500m high in the Chilterns. "Current thinking is that altitude training works," he says. "It conditions your body to create more red blood cells because of the lower oxygen pressure. Two weeks is better, but recreational runners will start adapting in three or

four days, and the increased oxygen delivery to your muscles makes you run faster. It's most effective at 2000+m, so you can't just go to Chamonix and run along the valley floor."

We most definitely weren't running along the valley floor! "These hills are insane!" said Chris grinning, hands on thighs as the path steepened. "I've been distracting myself with the views, but apparently in a few days time I'll feel the benefits." Tim agreed, saying, "What Julia calls 'Alpine flat' is actually a long, slightly less steep uphill! It's completely different to the UK, maybe in Scotland you'd get close to it, but I live in Surrey, so this is brilliant training." Massively out of breath, I was glad I'd joined the team after their Mont Blanc Marathon recce the day before.

Chris was right about the view. The top of the col revealed a breathtaking (in both altitude and aesthetics) drop to the wide, green valley floor, rising to tree-covered slopes ending with white-topped mountains punching blue sky. The world-famous Mont Blanc lay behind us, along with the Grandes Jorasses and Aiguille Verte, and ahead, the mountainous Contamines-Montjoie nature reserve.

"It's stunning. Just beautiful," said Hannah, ➔



TORQ TRAIL TEAM

This spring we reported on the new Torq Trail Team, six keen but non-elite athletes who were to be treated like pros with nutrition from Torq and gear from Mammut, Tifosi, Compressport and LED Lenser. This was their first team training weekend and there wasn't even any squabbling! Well, after Reuben promised to stop snoring...

Find out more about the Torq Trail Team's training and races from their blogs listed here trailrunningteam.com and look for their twitter posts with the hashtag [#trailrunningteam](https://twitter.com/trailrunningteam)



LINDLEY CHAMBERS, 39
FIRE FIGHTER

Dream race: Spartathlon
Motto: Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go

Wise words: Time and the result are not everything but experiencing the journey is what will inspire us

Follow Lindley on Twitter: @firemannotsam



HANNAH KEARTLAND, 33
PROJECT MANAGER

Dream race: Manaslu Trail Race

Motto: Do something every day that scares you (pushes you from your comfort zone)

Wise words: Don't overcomplicate it – just get out and enjoy it. You are capable of a lot more than you give yourself credit for

Follow Hannah on Twitter: @hannahkeartland



MEL CORDEN-LLOYD, 42
PERSONAL TRAINER AND NURSE

Dream race: The Classic Quarter

Motto: When struggling in a race the words a good friend said to me before my first marathon, 'Dig Deep', often spring to mind

Wise words: I have enjoyed the journey of running and learning and will continue soaking in and using as much information as I can

Follow Mel on Twitter: @MelCordenlloyd



CHRIS MERCER, 28
CAREERS ADVISOR

Dream race: Barkley Marathon

Motto: If you have to ask why I run, you wouldn't understand the answer

Wise words: Trails are way more fun than road running

Follow Chris on Twitter: @cmmercer



REUBEN TABNER, 33
SPORTS PHOTOGRAPHER

Dream race: Ocean Floor Race

Motto: Only positive thoughts are allowed and I don't understand 'can't'..!

Wise words: Keeping it simple and running free in the mountains, hills, or just feeling you can dream of

Follow Reuben on Twitter: @ReubenTabner



TIM ELLIS, 40
BUYER FOR CYCLE SURGERY AND RUNNERS NEED

Dream race: I've actually already run my dream race (twice), the TNF100 Australia – the Blue Mountains are incredible!

Motto: I don't have a motto

Wise words: I wish I'd taken professional advice on shoes when I first started running because that would have prevented the shin splints and constant injuries I suffered back then

Follow Tim on Twitter: @jedrider

'THE ALPINE FLATS? WELL, THEY TOUGHEN YOUR MIND'

This particular Alpine flat seems to be downhill, but imagine it the other way round!

who started out as a hill-walker, trained up for Ironman triathlons, and has now found the perfect combination in trail running. But superlative views aside, there are some downsides to training at altitude. "Too many red blood cells can thicken your blood and restrict its access to thinner muscle capillaries," says Prof John. "This is compounded by the fact that you dehydrate quicker at altitude so make sure you keep sipping water." And, something we were well aware of on every climb, "Quality training can suffer at altitude," says John, "so many athletes adopt the widely accepted Live High-Train Low (LHTL) training method." Julia has experience of this, "I know runners here who take advantage of the Wi-Fi at Aiguille du Midi [3,842m] to sit and work during the day so they acclimatise high then sleep and train lower down." But most of us don't have that option, so if you come to the Alps for a long weekend, steady, enjoyable running and fast-walking is the key.

As we ran down for cake at a pretty wooden mountain hut, Mel revealed another Alpine benefit. "I found the technical downhills yesterday very scary!" she said. "But I've really benefited from the practise on these long descents." Then it was one last, never-ending, heart-banging climb to the refuge where the unstoppable Reuben gallantly loaned me his poles and Hannah and Lindley chatted on despite the gradients.

Finally, we made it, and as we sat, sipping beer at the hut's picnic tables, 360-degree mountain view with spectacular pink-edged sunset very much earned, we had all figured out that it's not just the altitude of the Alps that will speed you up for races. The lush forest and mountain views will inspire you, the endless uphills will prepare you for long, steep races like the Ben Nevis Race, and the long, technical downhills give you a chance to work on your descent skills so you can overtake more people. And the Alpine flats? Well, they toughen your mind. Training in the Alps, even for just one weekend, will make the hilliest UK race seem like a bump in the park. Well...almost...we would have to see if we could still run tomorrow first! 🏔️

■ Thanks! The following support the Torq Trail Team:

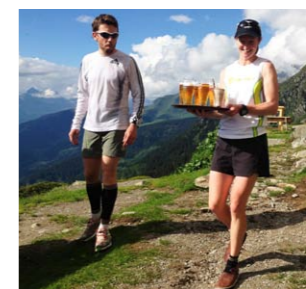
Torq >torqfitness.co.uk **Mammut** >mammut.ch

Compressport >compressport.uk.com

LED Lenser >ledlenser.co.uk


Tifosi >facebook.com/tifosioptics

Reuben aces the technical downhills
Below: We only do this for the beer...





DO IT YOURSELF!

Get faster quicker with your own high altitude Alpine adventure!

 **Getting there** Look for the cheapest to Geneva >skyscanner.net, book a transfer to Les Houches >chamexpress.com and they'll drop you at your gite.

 **Accommodation** We stayed at Michel Fagot >gite-fagot.com and booked in at Refuge Tré la Tête >tredeletete.com

 **Maps** IGN 3531 ET St Gervais Les Bains 1:25 000

 **Our (hardcore!) itinerary**
Day 1: Chamonix Marathon course recce – 26 miles, 1700m ascent.

Day 2: From Les Houches (990m), Tour du Mont Blanc trail to Col de la Forclaz, Prarion Peak (1853m), Glacier de Bionnasse, Col du Tricot (2120m), Chalet Miages for coffee and 'tarte au myrtilles' (blueberries!), Le Truc, Les Contamines (1170m) Refuge Tré le Tête (1970m). 17 miles, 3100m ascent.

Day 3: From the refuge to Tête Noire, Nant Borrant, Notre Dame de La Gorge chapel, Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc course to Les Houches, stopping in Les Contamines for croissants and passing villages Gruvaz, Le Chapel and Bionnassay. 13 miles, 1000m ascent.