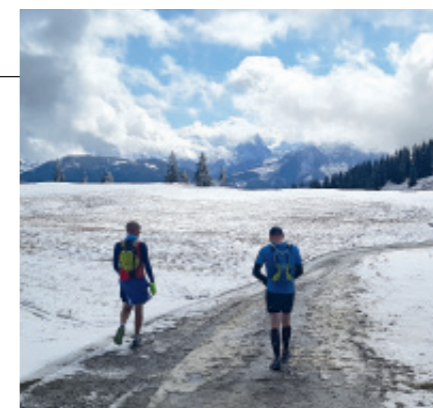


DESTINATIONS

Austria

What: Tour de Tirol (including the Kaiser Marathon)

Where: The Tour de Tirol is a weekend running festival in Austrian Tirol. The small town of Soll is the race 'HQ', in the stunningly beautiful area known as the Wilder Kaiser. In winter, Soll is a popular ski resort and in summer it turns into a paradise for hikers, runners and mountain-bikers



An easy 90-minute drive from Salzburg airport, the Wilder Kaiser is surprisingly accessible from the UK. We left home (East Sussex) at 5am and were in Soll having lunch by noon. In fact, we've taken longer to drive to the Lake district.

The Tour de Tirol takes place in early October and comprises a 10km on the Friday evening, a full mountain marathon on the Saturday (the Kaiser Marathon) and

a trail half marathon on the Sunday. The full Tour means you run all three events on the three consecutive days. Sounds easy? Perhaps for some hardcore ultra runners. But there is 3800m of ascent over the full Tour (2600m for the marathon alone).

To give it some context, that's the equivalent of climbing Snowdon four times.

Thankfully, it's possible to choose just to participate in one or two of the events as they stand alone. A far more sensible approach. The 'Outdoor Fitness' team took part in the 10km on the Friday night and

the Kaiser Marathon on the Saturday. Here's how we got on...

"Arriving in Soll on Friday lunchtime, the town seemed very quiet. There was evidence of a finish line and a registration tent, but not much else, and it became apparent that it was a small event, mostly attracting local runners. The other runners milling around looked hardcore and serious and suddenly we felt very unfit, British and unprepared. Between the four of us, we had nearly 50 marathons, two Ironman triathlons and 10 ultras under our belts, yet somehow



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compared to the lean European mountain runners we didn't feel quite so smug.

Undeterred, we headed to the start line of the 10km, ready for the rather unusual (but not unpleasant) 5.30pm start. This race was mostly on road and comprised three laps around the town. With 300m of ascent, it had a few rolling hills and had some sections on trail through the woods. We held back, not wanting to push too hard, knowing we had the marathon in less than 14 hours, but finished in 60 minutes and felt great. The clean, crisp mountain air was beautifully refreshing and the support from spectators, ringing of cow bells and hot salty soup afterwards, made it a great way to spend a Friday evening.

Early to bed, early to rise

We headed off to bed feeling pleased with our efforts, but knowing we had only just warmed up.

Saturday morning dawned, and thankfully the snow and wind that had been forecast seemed to be holding off and some blue sky was peeking through. Warming up, we bumped into a couple of other Brits, one of whom had done the race before and others

who lived locally. They all smiled at us, knowingly. What did they know that we didn't? It couldn't be that hard? Could it?

But knowing there was a) a long way to go b) a lot of climbing to do and c) we already had a 10km in our legs, we set off at a nice gentle pace and soon found ourselves towards the back of the field of 500+ runners.

The race wound through the town, then up on to the mountains. It was a rollercoaster of lung and leg-busting climbs, followed by fast descents, then up again. Every time we made some progress on the climbing, it went downhill again and it was getting really tough. The scenery, however, was utterly spectacular and by this point we were up in the snow line running through pine forests with views for miles and miles across the Austrian Alps. It was incredibly beautiful.

With 5km to go a marshal called out: 'Two minutes!' We asked him what he meant and he replied: 'Two minutes until the cut-off!' We had no idea we were so close. I've never been anywhere near a cut-off before. Had we just been running really slowly? Or were the cut-offs very tight? We sprinted through and just made it (many others didn't), only to be faced with 700m of climbing over the

final 5km. Ah, that explained it. As it turned out, that final 5km took us nearly two hours. There were even ropes on the side of path to help pull us up. Finally, after seven hours and 10 minutes (officially my slowest marathon), I dragged myself across the line, then promptly threw up.

Memories to last a lifetime

It was incredibly tough; probably the hardest single marathon we've ever done. But also the most beautiful. We were lucky with the weather; the next day there was rain and thick cloud with no visibility at all.

We hadn't anticipated how tough the cut-offs would be and the high standard of the field. We should have run a bit faster, taken less photos and spent less time at the aid stations (and possibly trained a bit more). It's a brutal race and you need to be strong, fit and experienced to contemplate it. If you are up for the challenge, however, you won't be disappointed. The Kaiser Marathon is probably the most breathtaking race I've ever done and it will provide me with memories to last a lifetime."

Sarah Russell, 'Outdoor Fitness' contributor

Running commentary from Evie

"The Tour weekend will be etched in my memory as one of the most aesthetic, challenging and uplifting running weekends I've experienced so far. The village of Soll is unspoilt and welcoming. It was great to run a relaxed 10k on Friday evening (as Sarah said, to save our legs) in light of running the marathon the next morning. Experiencing the alpine marathon as a group was special, because we were individual runners all battling our own demons at times, yet ran collectively, so could support one another and also share the experience of looking out over stunning vistas for the entire 26.2 miles (uphill, mind you). I love the fact that you can choose to do the three events, or just one, or two. While the weekend festival attracts



experienced ultra runners, I got the sense that all Tirol runners love running for what it is – simply being out in fresh air, enjoying nature at its best, and for the opportunity it presents to challenge oneself."

Evie Serventi, sports psychologist and 'Outdoor Fitness' deputy editor

SAVE THE DATE: The Tour de Tirol, including the Kaiser Marathon, will take place between 5-7 October 2018. You can choose to do the full 75km Tour de Tirol, or just one of the three race options. Its perfect for a weekend away with friends or a club, with a choice of races and distances for all. See tourdetirol.at for details.