



Climb every mountain (well almost)

The old English expression of “up hill and down dale” took on a fresh meaning in September and could have been adapted to “up mountain and down the other side”. Someone always believes that a fresh challenge is needed and so the first Gore-Tex Transalpine Run was conceived and it was far more than a relaxed and pleasant jog in the park. This gruelling race covered 203 kilometres (climbing a total of 10,000 metres and descending a similar number) and four countries in seven days, a genuine challenge that only truly hardy runners, hikers and Nordic walkers would accept. Surprisingly, 95 teams of two were brave enough (or crazy enough depending on your point of view) to join the race, which attracted some 15 sponsors and the support of six towns along the route. It also attracted *WSA*

contributing editor Till Gottbrath, with his partner Nicole Dörr. As one of those willing to suffer the blood, sweat, tears (and blisters) that participating in the first such multi-day race across the Alps entailed, we felt it would be churlish to not publish his diary of the experience.

Dear Diary,

Day 1 (September 4, 2005)

**Prologue in Oberstdorf, Germany
18.5 km and climbs of 665 metres**

As the start gun went off at 12 noon, the day was set to be fairly relaxed. 18.5 km with ascents of just 665m should be a stroll in the park. 95 teams set off on the run today, a few more than will actually take part in the Transalpine Run as it included guests.



Most of the runners set off as if they only had 1,500 metres ahead of them, but Nicole and I had decided that we wouldn't let ourselves get caught up in the euphoria. Even though we could have run a lot faster today, we didn't. We have to pace ourselves if we want to get to the finish.

The route sloped gently upwards along the Trettach, then in Rubi it began to climb. We ran at a comfortable pace and after about 20 minutes we had overtaken some others who had already worn themselves out.

The last stretch was a narrow, slippery descent that would have scared the living daylights out of any flat runner, but it all went smoothly for us and after two hours we reached the finish line with a smile, just three quarters of an hour behind the winning team and twelfth in the mixed category. The best thing about it was that it had been fun, lots of fun!

Day 2 - Crossing into Austria
28.9 km and climbs of 1,496 metres

Today we started with a flat and shaded part to Spielmannsau and then climbed up to the Kempetener Hut, a genuinely nice alpine hut. After the Mädelejoch, today's highest point, we came out into a south-facing valley and full sunshine.

During the first kilometre it was still leisurely, but descent from the pass was steep, slippery and sometimes exposed. Nicole and I were grateful for having trained on similar terrain. The route passed through a wonderful ravine and I took a moment out to take photographs.

In Holzgau, we arrived in glaring sunshine, with little wind and shade and with about 300 metres still to climb. The high track to Hag was hard and seemed never-ending.

I think we came in 13th out of the mixed teams in a time of four-and-a-half hours, with the fastest team having taken just 2 hours 45 minutes. We were definitely more tired than yesterday, our legs are heavier and our muscles are stiffer, but we're OK.

Day 3 - The hardest day
36.8 km and another 2,387 altitude metres

We set off at 8am and ran for about 7 hours 45 minutes. Just from the amount of time we ran for, you can guess that it's stepped up a gear and this is no longer a gentle stroll in the mountains. Everything aches!

It was the 'Royal Stage' - high mountains, amazing landscapes, and ideal weather, sunny, but not too hot. I've never spent such a lovely day in the mountains, but neither have I ever spent such a hard day!

I'm really nervous about tomorrow, my legs are already swollen. So, fingers crossed for tomorrow!

Day 4 - Highest point of the course
Total 36.2 km and climbs of 2,143 metres

So how was today? Lying in bed in the morning, my body felt like it weighed a ton, but our muscles and legs were not as bad as we had expected them to be last night.

The route headed to Moostal along roads. At the start, the same people as usual overtook us – the same ones that we usually overtake again later and I ask myself why certain runners always start the race at such a fast pace?

After the Darmstädter hut, the trail went up again steeply on the Apothekersteig (pharmacist's climb), through scree, snow, and across the rest of the westerly part of the Kuchenferner and then onto another steep climb, some kind of "mini ferrata". From Kuchenjoch (2,730 m) we descended more than 1,000 metres towards St Anton, but then it went up again, climbing Sattelkopf. The route followed an old path, then began zigzagging, bringing us out into the glaring sun.

From there, the route descended again into the Moostal valley and after 6 hours 45 minutes we crossed the finish line, really exhausted, but not as exhausted as yesterday.

Day 5 - Mountain sprint and into Switzerland
5.5km and another 935 altitude metres

The morning brought a pleasant surprise – our legs really weren't too bad at all.

At 9 o'clock the runners met up in St Anton, where coaches were waiting. It's a real shame our non-stop path across the Alps had to be interrupted due to the floods a few weeks earlier, but, considering the whole race could have been cancelled, it's not too bad.

So this stage had to be rescheduled: only 5.5km today and with climbing of less than 1,000m, it should be a piece of cake.

The stage started from the old centre of the beautiful Swiss town Scuol at 4pm, and was staggered by 30 seconds, in reverse order of the current places.

Map of the route that the Transalpine Run followed.





The gruelling terrain of Val d' Uina.

Even whilst we were still in town the going was steep, but then we recovered a little through the fields before the path climbed steeply again. We moved ahead place by place, and were only overtaken the once (although in fairness I should probably mention that one of the 'boys' that overtook us was 72-years-old!).

After having climbed about 600m, we came to the end of the forest path and began to climb the ski pistes. My heart was racing, my calves tightened up, and my lungs were wheezing whilst Nicole ran faster and faster. However, despite the exertion, it was not too bad.

As we came towards the finish line we heard "a new best time in the mixed category". It felt so good! Our joy lasted all of 1 minute 20 seconds. While we took just over an hour to complete the leg, the winners came in at under 44 minutes.

Day 6 - Welcome to Südtirol and a touch of Italy! 38.53 km and climbs of 1,357 metres

The penultimate day! I'm absolutely sure that we're going to make it to Latsch now, as long as we don't get injured. But every day teams are pulling out...so it's best not to count any chickens.

We set off at 9am, jogging through Scuol behind a police car that led the way. But as we left town, it really got going. We ran through a forested area, then followed a wide path that ran parallel to the river Inn. We did 7.8 kilometres on the flat which didn't suit Nicole at all. "What's going on?" she shouted, "I'm here to run up mountains!"

Her wish came true as we turned into the Val d'Uina. The valley up to the Italian border is renowned for its ravine where there is a narrow climb up a sheer cliff. But even when we reached the top we still had a 900-metre climb ahead of us.

What they wore...and why

Footwear - Montrail XCR Hurricane Ridge

Till and Nicole tried out various trail running shoes from various brands before the race, but opted for Montrail Hurricane Ridge XCR shoes, because of the stability offered by this particular model. According to Till, the worse the terrain, the better the performance. He added that the material of the outer sole and its grip also outperformed anything else they have tried.

"The breathability of the XCR-membrane is also outstanding: I personally believe that the breathability is more to do with the manufacturer than the question 'with or without XCR'. This means: a non-XCR with a lot of foam and glue inside can easily be hotter and stickier than a well-made XCR-shoe. Actually, I never felt hot feet at any second during the 203 kms. Gore and Montrail have done a great job (and I'm not paid for writing this)!" said Till.

Fit and comfort: while Nicole had a couple of smaller blisters and bruises, Till had none. After more than 200 kms, you could not see any damage to his feet at all.

First layers

They used Craft Pro Cool: 94% Coolmax Extreme + 6% elastane. The Coolmax was said to have performed superbly in hot conditions, the cooling effect was really noticeable. Till particularly liked the Pro Cool Briefs with mesh as he often suffers from soreness between his legs, but with these, he says, had no problems at all. Nicole wore a Pro Cool top almost every day, even on the very hot days. She says she felt cooler with the underwear under her t-shirt than without it.

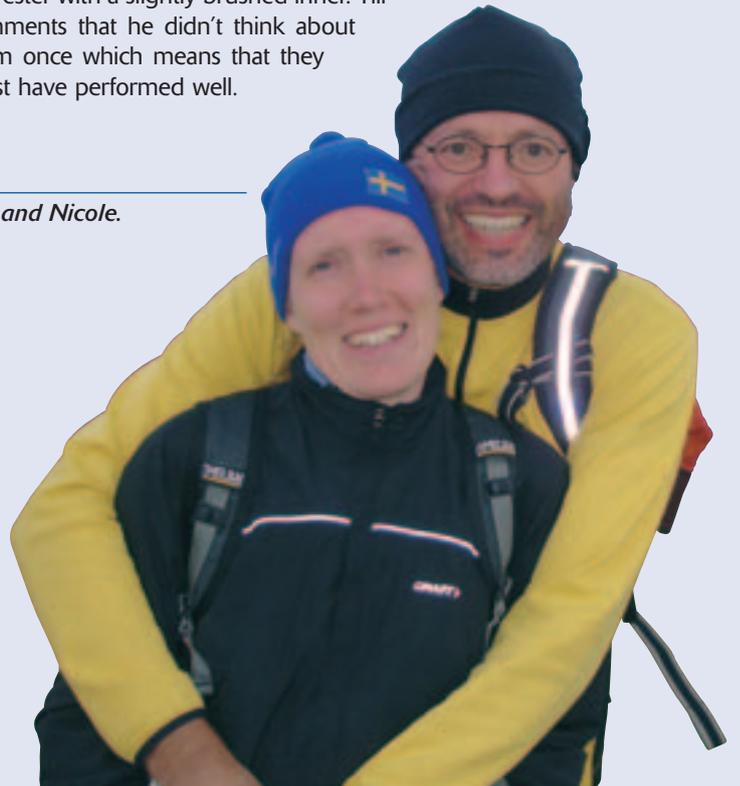
Craft Pro Dri: 100% polyester with a denier gradient construction. They had this as an alternative for colder weather, but as the weather was fine most of the time, there was no need to wear this underwear evergreen. Till commented that from his experience in practice, it is the right alternative for temperatures below 10°C.

Running Outwear

Nicole and Till both used various polyester t-shirts or long sleeved t-shirts, mainly with a denier gradient construction.

On their legs they wore Craft Trail Fitness Tights, which are 100% polyester with a slightly brushed inner. Till comments that he didn't think about them once which means that they must have performed well.

Till and Nicole.





Finishing the race took its toll.

The ravine itself is odd. The path is cut as a gallery into the vertical rock, sometimes only one metre wide, with a 100-metre drop to your right, but there are amazing views.

As the ravine opened out and we approached a grassy plain, a cold wind began to blow and we ran under a thick blanket of cloud, which was a shame because the path is said to offer an amazing panorama.

The descent was flat at times, which didn't please Nicole, and it meant we couldn't just roll down, we had to work. Then the route looped northwards again.

Shortly after the ancient Weiler Wischgader, the path curved southwards, but the going got worse. From Burgeis to Mals we had to run on a freshly-laid cycle path that felt like an ice rink. A couple more turns and we were finally there! My calves were on fire.

Day 7 - Crossing the finish line in Latsch (Südtirol) (38.18km and up another 833m altitude metres)

WE DID IT!!!

We really did it! We ran across the Alps!

But we still had to run for a day, and a day that was much harder than we thought it would be. Thirty-eight-and-a-bit kilometres climbing 830 metres sounds OK under normal circumstances, but after what we'd been through, it was a different matter.

"After what we'd been through" – the key phrase! Our bodies had given so much.

At times we descended into the Etsch valley, then a few kilometres along the banks of the Etsch, but the route mainly snaked along forest paths on the south side of the valley.

Although there was an incline, to us it seemed flat. The whole stage was too flat for us. Nicole and I have truly transformed ourselves into mountain runners – the steeper it goes up or down the better.

Our position yesterday was worse than ever – I think we were 15th. However, we still moved up, because we overtook two other teams. We also knew that we still had an hour to go so we had to make our heavy feet run a little longer.

Weather Protection

Nicole used a Craft Extreme Race Jacket, a very light, close fitting Gore-Tex PaLite Jacket without a hood but with pit-zips so as to allow good ventilation. She also wore a Gore-Tex cap on the one and only day it rained.

Till wore a Berghaus PaLite Smock, which weighed a mere 285 grams (size L) even though it had a wired hood, which really impressed him, "I think it is the lightest jacket offering such a level of weather protection".

He also added a Gore-Tex cap to keep his glasses dry.

Both of them had Berghaus PaLite pants, extremely lightweight, weighing less than 200 gms and with full length side zips for ventilation.

Rucksack / Hip Bags

For safety reasons on the high alpine stages, everybody had to carry a first aid kit, a rescue blanket, a Gore-Tex jacket plus a dry long-sleeved shirt, which meant that everybody needed rucksacks.

Nicole used a Camelback Adventure Series Rallye 18 and she liked the general fit and the accessibility of the bottles in the mesh pockets. However, she commented that she would have liked it to have had a more efficient compression system to place the load closer to the body.

Till used a Berghaus 49zer0 which according to him offered "absolutely perfect comfort". He added, "What Berghaus has done well in particular is constructing it in a way so that tightening the shoulder straps doesn't necessarily mean lifting up the entire bag. I didn't suffer from any abrasions or anything. The only thing missing would be little mesh pockets on the side or the front of the hip belt, to have easy access to energy bars or similar."

On the two 'easy' days, they only used hip bags so as to have a free back.

Nicole had a 2004 Marmot "Excursion": on this older model, the drinking bottles were placed outside the compressions straps (which has now been changed on this year's model). Apart from that she liked the tight fit, even though she has a very narrow waist.

Till used a Berghaus 29zer0, which he liked as the fit was comfortable and it offered "perfect compression". However, he noted that the bottle holders could be a little deeper so as to hold larger bottles.

Socks

They both used Craft running socks with heel, sole and toes made from PTFE-Fibres. The low friction of these fibres prevents blisters and the pair said that the socks performed brilliantly. Till used the same pair for the entire race, washing them every night.

Hydration

Nicole used two bottles during the whole race, while Till alternated between Platypus and bicycle-style bottles as the bottles allowed easier and faster refilling. According to Till, the advantage of the bladder is the accessibility of the tube anytime but, however, it means that you often carry more, because you don't want to have to refill them too often.

Other items

Till also wore a very old Jack Wolfskin Cap made from light polyamide-weave and with side mesh panels as protection against the sun while Nicole used a Buff to keep her warm when it was cold and to absorb perspiration when it was hot. 🌍

Approaching the finish line – words fail me – amazing! A huge din to the left and right of the finish banner – almost there - the finish line... we've actually done it! I was overcome with emotion. It's amazing that you can feel so happy and so exhausted all at the same time.

And it was all worth it as Till and Nicole came in 11th out of the 27 mixed teams who finished. For the record, 86 teams finished in all. 🌍