

Extreme marathons

An **ultramarathon** is a foot race longer than the traditional marathon distance of 42.195 kilometres. The sport of running ultramarathons is called **ultra running** or **ultra distance running**. While marathons are considered challenging by most, a few races take endurance to a level far beyond the norm, testing runners in extreme environments that challenge their survival skills. Here are some of the most extreme endurance races in the world.

■ The four most extreme marathons

- **The Marathon des Sables (Morocco):** often referred to as the “toughest footrace on earth”, the Marathon des Sables is a multi-stage race through the Sahara Desert. Covering approximately 250 kilometres over six days, participants must carry all their food and equipment, navigating through scorching heat and endless dunes. Temperatures in the desert can reach up to 50°C, and dehydration is a constant threat. The isolation and vastness of the desert can play tricks on a runner’s mind, making mental toughness just as crucial as physical endurance.



- **The Badwater Ultramarathon (USA):** often described as the hottest race in the world, this 217 kilometre ultramarathon starts in Death Valley, California, where temperatures often go above 50°C. Runners battle extreme heat while climbing over 4,000 metres as the route ascends from Badwater Basin, the lowest point in North America, to the Whitney Portal at the

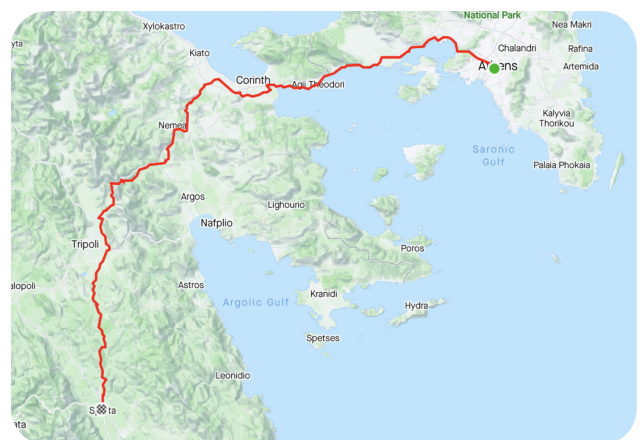


foot of Mount Whitney. Runners are allowed to have a support crew to keep them hydrated and healthy.

- **The Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc (UTMB)** is a 171-kilometre race that circles the Mont-Blanc **massif**, crossing three countries: France, Italy, and Switzerland. While the distance is formidable, what makes UTMB especially challenging is the 10,000 metres of total **elevation gain**, with runners climbing steep mountain trails in unpredictable weather conditions.



- **Spartathlon (Greece)** is a historic ultra-distance race that retraces the steps of Pheidippides, the ancient Greek messenger who ran from Athens to Sparta. Covering 246 kilometres in less than 36 hours, participants are subjected to scorching heat during the day and cold nights, with some sections of the race requiring runners to ascend mountains in the dark.



elevation gain: *dislivello positivo*
massif: *massiccio*

■ Ultramarathon organisation

The main global governing body for ultramarathons is the **International Association of Ultrarunners (IAU)**. Founded in 1984, the IAU is recognised by and operates under **World Athletics**. It oversees international ultra-distance running, including world


championships in events such as the 50 km, 100 km, 24-hour, trail, and mountain ultramarathons, as well as establishing rules, records, and rankings for the sport. While there are major organisers and race series – such as the UTMB World Series – these organisations focus on hosting events rather than governing ultrarunning at a global level.

1  **Find words or expressions in the text that match the definitions below.**

1. A race longer than the traditional marathon distance.
2. A race divided into several stages over multiple days.
3. Extremely high temperatures.
4. The total amount of uphill climbing during a race.
5. Physical and psychological ability to continue despite fatigue.
6. A group of people who help a runner during a race.
7. The ancient Greek messenger associated with a historic race.
8. The international governing body for ultramarathons.

2  **Answer the questions.**

1. What is the minimum distance that defines an ultramarathon?
2. Why are ultramarathons considered more challenging than regular marathons?
3. Which ultramarathon is known as the “toughest footrace on earth”, and where does it take place?
4. In the Badwater Ultramarathon, where does the race start and end, and what extreme conditions do runners face?
5. How many metres of elevation gain do participants climb in the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc (UTMB)?
6. What is the role of the International Association of Ultrarunners (IAU) in ultramarathon running?

3  **PAIR WORK** **Imagine you and your friend are ultramarathon runners who have just finished a race. One of you is the interviewer, and the other is the runner. After a few minutes, switch roles.**

Instructions for the interviewer:

- Ask about the race experience, challenges, and preparation.
- Example questions:
 1. Which ultramarathon did you run?
 2. How long was the race, and what terrain did you cross?
 3. What was the hardest part of the race?
 4. How did you prepare physically and mentally?
 5. Would you run it again, and why or why not?

Instructions for the runner:

- Answer in detail, describing the distance, environment (heat, mountains, desert), elevation, and mental or physical challenges.
- Talk about your feelings during the race.