

A boozy 30th birthday binge prompted Dean Karnazes to take up running. Now he sprints across continents

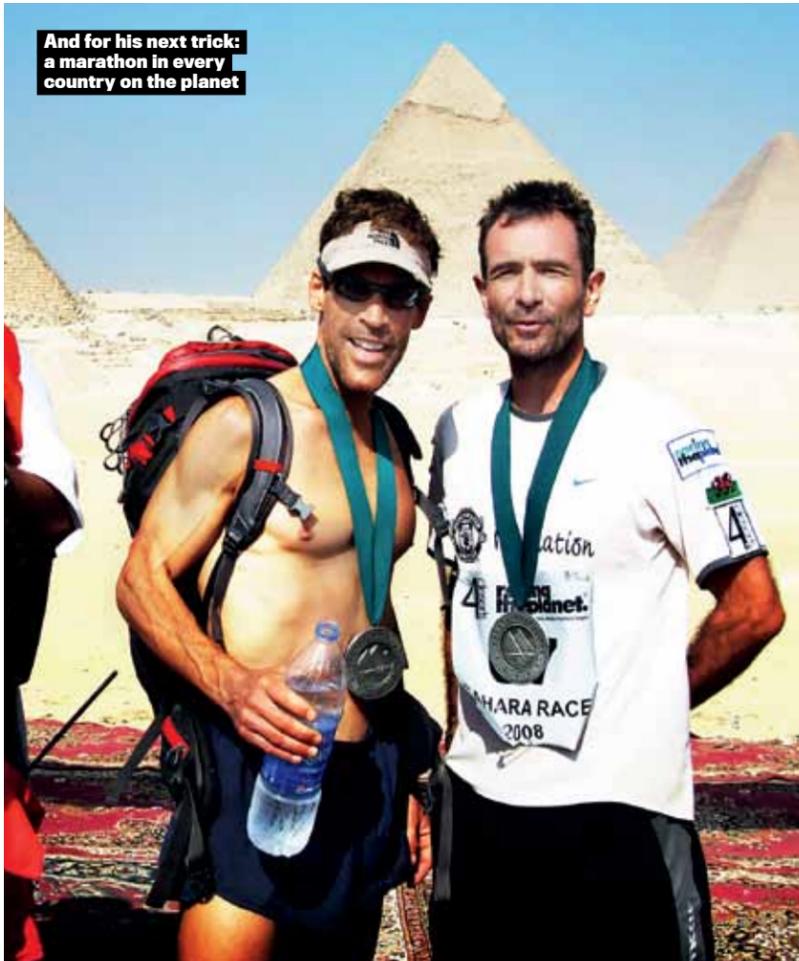


Is this the **WORLD'S FITTEST MAN?**

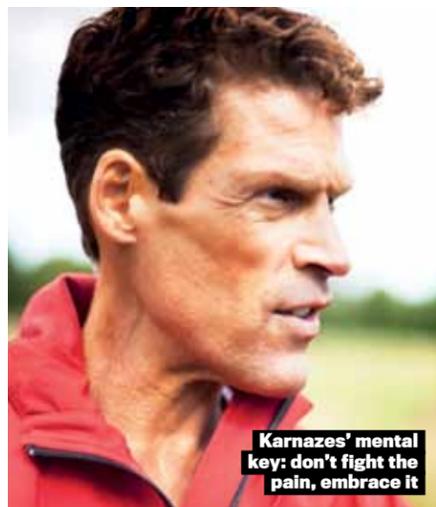
He chases cable cars up mountains, scoffs takeaway pizzas halfway through a race, and enjoys running marathons at 4am in the morning.

Oh, and he has just scampered 3,000 miles across America inside 75 days. Welcome to the weirdly inspiring world of Dean Karnazes, probably the fittest man on Earth

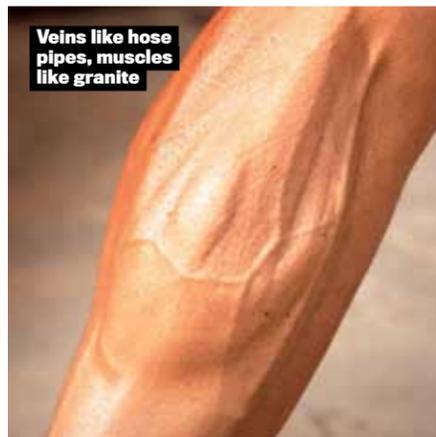
Words Mark Bailey **Pictures** Jason Critchell & ultramarathonman.com



And for his next trick: a marathon in every country on the planet



Karnazes' mental key: don't fight the pain, embrace it



Veins like hose pipes, muscles like granite

It took Dean Karnazes 75 days to run the 2,955 miles from Disneyland, California, to New York City. Between 25th February and 10th May this year, the American endurance athlete ran 40-50 miles per day, burnt 476,000 calories and channelled 2.5 billion pounds of force through his joints. But it was only on day 76, when he flew home to San Francisco, that the enormity of his coast-to-coast odyssey struck him.

"For that whole six-hour flight back across the route I'd just run, I was looking out of the plane window, thinking, 'Holy shit,'" laughs Karnazes, 48, when we meet in London's Hyde Park. "I thought, 'Oh, there's New Mexico, I know that arch right there. Still snow on the Rockies, huh? I needed my jacket there.' To know a huge country so intimately felt incredible."

Karnazes has redefined the limits of human endurance. In 2002, he battled -40°C temperatures to run a marathon to the South Pole – in his trainers. In 2004, he won the Badwater Ultramarathon, a 135-mile slog through the sun-baked Death Valley in 123° heat that caused his running shoes to melt. A year later, he simply ran non-stop for 80 hours and 44 minutes, covering 350 miles. In 2006, he completed 50 marathons in 50 days in 50 US states. And in 2008, he tackled the 4 Deserts, a quartet of seven-day, 155-mile runs – conquering the salt lakes and lava flows of the Atacama, the sand dunes of the Gobi and the Sahara, and the wilds of Antarctica.

"The cold is the worst," he says. "At Badwater, I could feel my eyeballs getting parched and the epithelia (skin) of my mouth sloughing off, but there's no escaping the cold. In the Antarctic, I had to wear a neoprene muffler just to stop my trachea from freezing."

Karnazes is an ultra-runner: someone who runs above and beyond the traditional 26.2-mile marathon. Compact and muscular at 5ft 8in and weighing 11 stone, he seems too brawny for an endurance athlete,

a result of cross-training with surfing, rock-climbing and cycling (he also competes in multi-sport adventure races). The veins on his calves are redolent of hose pipes; his thighs are so muscular they practically require their own topographical map.

What drives him? "The adventure," he replies. "When I finished my run across America, I felt disappointment. What's next? I live for the journey, not the finish line. Running makes me feel alive – even more so when it's hard. There is magic in misery. As Nietzsche said: 'That which does not kill us makes us stronger.'"

"Nothing was intense in my life. We mistake comfort for happiness, but comfort makes us miserable"

Other ultra-runners beat him in races, but winning isn't his goal. "I respect trailblazers," he continues. "People who have carved a niche – like Tony Hawk, who took skateboarding from obscurity into something big, or Laird Hamilton, who shunned competition to become a big-wave surfer. It's about chasing your dreams."

Karnazes has struck the world spellbound with his achievements. "Super-human," screamed the Boston Globe. "The indefatigable man," cried Esquire. But such hyperbole ignores the most inspiring aspect of his achievements. Scientific analysis suggests he's not that extraordinary; he does get tired – agonisingly, excruciatingly exhausted. And until his 30th birthday, he hadn't run for 15 years.

"I grew up in California, running, mountain-biking and wind-surfing," he explains. "I was never a gym guy. It was always the big

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The South Pole run was the most testing of all: "I had to wear a muffler just to stop my trachea from freezing"

When the going gets tough, the ultra-runner has a simple mantra - just keep putting one foot in front of the other



outdoors for me. I feel more energised in nature; I love that freedom to bust out of these walls and be out in the world."

Karnazes ran competitively for his high school until, aged 15, he clashed with his new coach and simply stopped running. By his 30th birthday he was married, with a successful corporate job, a mortgage and a shiny Lexus. "Nothing was intense in my life," he says. "Today we mistake comfort for happiness, but comfort makes us miserable. I needed a challenge to awaken my senses."

That birthday morning, he read an article about Reinhold Messner, the first man to scale Everest without supplementary oxygen.

"Messner said, 'I didn't go up there to die, I went up there to live'. It felt so primal: to survive, to feel alive."

After a tequila-soaked birthday celebration with friends, Karnazes staggered home, stripped to his underwear, slipped on his gardening shoes and started running. Fueled by drunken determination, he ran, walked and crawled for 30 miles. Seven hours later he called his wife Julie to save him and promptly passed out in the car. "I couldn't walk for weeks," he says. "But I felt alive."

Scrape away the dazzle of Karnazes' achievements and you discover a raw human story of dedication. "Anyone can do what I do with hard work and sacrifice. I started running two miles after work, then five miles, then 10, a bit more each time. Then I read about a 100-mile race and it shook my world. I thought, 'Hell, I've got to try this.'"

Far from superhuman, Karnazes' first 50-mile qualifier left him writhing in agony with muscle spasms, projectile vomiting onto the windshield of his car. Then, on his inaugural 100-mile attempt at the 1994 Western States Endurance Run, he suffered nyctalopia (temporary night blindness caused by low blood pressure) and passed out in the dirt. But he finished - in just over 21 hours. On his first run at Badwater, he collapsed and woke up in hospital.

"I don't fear failure or pain," he says. "You learn from both, so I push myself to the limits. I can hallucinate pretty badly. At mile 317 of my 350 mile run, I started seeing myself running from above. I thought: isn't this what happens when you die? That spooked me. I've 'seen' everything from old miners to dinosaurs."

Karnazes has successfully moulded his training around everyday life. He has running meetings with his business clients; he sleeps for just four hours a night; and his family often trail him in a campervan. Julie feeds him burritos while his kids cool him down with a plant-mister. It's all beautifully berserk.

"His wife feeds him burritos and his kids cool him down with a plant-mister. It's all beautifully berserk"

Karnazes has become supremely fit. He has a resting heart rate of 38bpm and just 3.5% body fat. He explains: "The scientists who have studied me found I have good biomechanics as I don't pronate or supinate, which helps with injury prevention, and I have a natural midfoot strike which reduces the impact on my joints. I also have strong knees because I cross-train. My one unique strength is my ability to quickly flush out lactic acid (the by-product of exercise that causes pain), which is partly from training and partly genetic. But generally, I'm pretty normal."

Karnazes used to fuel his epic runs on junk food, like cheesecake or chocolate eclairs. He'd order a Hawaiian pizza to be delivered to a street corner, roll it up and devour it on the move. "I was like a steam

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No wonder he looks happy - he's just seen a pink dinosaur



Day off? Must be time for a multi-sport adventure race



Dean says cross training is key to his all-round endurance

DEAN KARNAZES' STAMINA SECRETS

Discover how to run further, fuel your training, avoid injury and recover faster with these tips from Dean Karnazes.

PUMP UP THE VOLUME "Hard work, no excuses," that's Karnazes' training mantra. He runs 80-120 miles per week, but the key lesson is consistency. "Go out hard on three to five days," he says, "with a light jog on rest days. And try to ramp up your distance by 10% weekly."

AT THE DOUBLE "Double up with two half-hour runs for extra benefits," Karnazes suggests. "It boosts cardiovascular fitness, encourages your body to recover faster and is less damaging on your joints than longer runs."

HIT THE HILLS "Introduce some sprint drills to build your lung capacity," says Karnazes, who likes to chase cable cars up the steep streets of San Francisco.

MIX IT UP "Cross-training builds muscle to support your joints and maintain your biomechanics," advises Karnazes, who cycles, rock-climbs or windsurfs two to three times a week. He also performs pull-ups, push-ups, sit-ups, dips and single-leg squats in 20-minute blasts, three to four times a day. "Add some bodyweight exercises to keep your whole body strong," he says.

GET TECHNICAL Karnazes has a natural midfoot strike and uses a rapid turnover of small strides. "It is very in vogue, with minimalist footwear and barefoot running, but biomechanically it is the best way to run," he says. Karnazes maintains a steady heart rate of 117bpm on endurance runs to minimise lactic acid build-up.

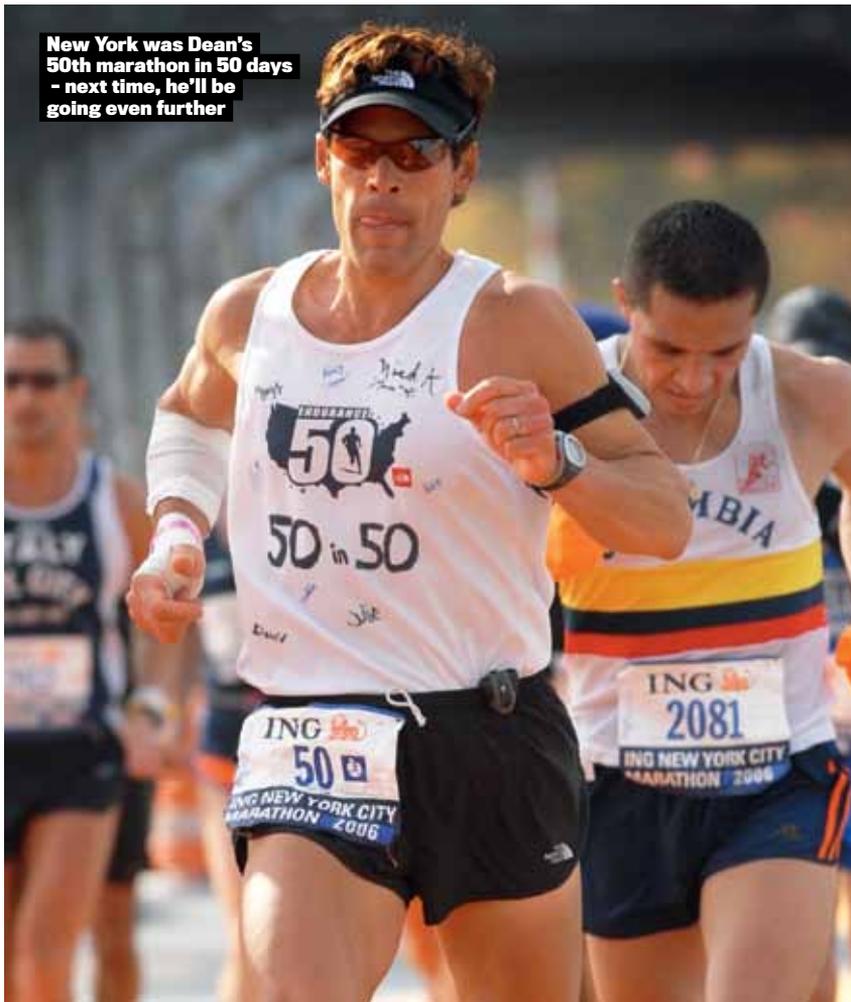
EAT FOR ENDURANCE Karnazes' diet consists of 40% carbs (brown rice, granola, vegetables), 30% fats (mainly

monounsaturated fats from olive oil, avocados and nuts) and 30% protein (wild salmon, chicken). "It gives you sustained energy, lower body fat and lean muscle," he says. He eats no hydrogenated oils, trans fats or refined sugar.

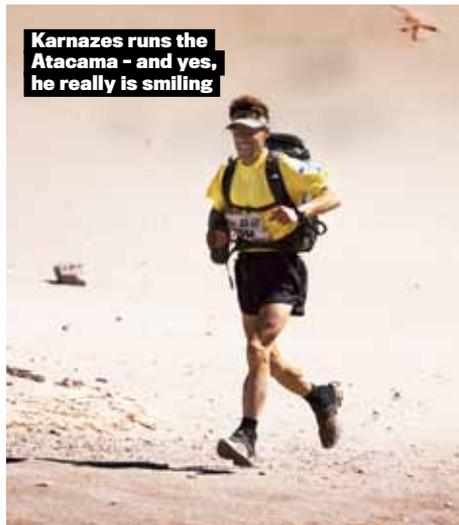
FUEL YOUR JOURNEY Karnazes stays energised with berries, almonds and cashew butter. "Hydrate with drinks containing sodium, potassium and chloride as well as water," he says. "If you see salt marks on your clothing, strategically increase your electrolyte intake."

RECOVER FAST "Take an ice bath after a big run to flush out waste products, over-hydrate with water for 24 hours and drink coconut water to replace your glucose, calories and electrolytes," advises Karnazes. "Salmon is a miracle recovery food, with the perfect mix of protein, Omega-3 fatty acids and nutrients."

New York was Dean's 50th marathon in 50 days - next time, he'll be going even further



Karnazes runs the Atacama - and yes, he really is smiling



Three cheers on completing the 4 Deserts challenge

train needing fuel," he chuckles. "But I've gone more natural. I now eat almonds, bananas or squeezable cashew-nut butter."

The true secret behind Karnazes' stamina, though, lies in his deep reservoirs of self-motivation. "I try to stay in the moment," he says. "Pain is going to hurt so don't fool yourself. But instead of fearing it, welcome it. Bring it on. Overcome the challenge and master your own mind. Hitting the wall and pushing through is exhilarating."

"I use 'baby steps' to overcome devastating lows. Just think about your next step: putting one foot in front of another. Then reach that next tree. Literally get that granular. It's about being the best you can be in that moment and repeating that. Ultimately, you have a simple decision at any moment: stop or go."

Karnazes has no plans to stop. "My adventures start with a dream and next I want to run a marathon in all 204 countries in the world in one year," he declares. "In between races I will take planes, trains, boats, rickshaws and donkeys or swim from island to island. I will finish with the New York marathon in November 2013."

The ultra-runner's adventures have inspired millions to start running and discover the outdoors, earning him a place in *Time* magazine's list of the Top 100 Most Influential People in the World and an invitation to the White House. "I'd never expect anyone to do what I do," he smiles. "But I'd say to anyone reading this: why not sign up for your first 10k, triathlon or bike race? Lock it in the diary and train hard. You don't have to run 350 miles, but I promise you one thing: you can go further than you think."



■ RUN! 26.2 Stories of Blisters and Bliss by Dean Karnazes is published by Allen & Unwin, priced £10.99

THE RUNNING MAN

Dean Karnazes has run on all seven continents. Here are ten of his most epic adventures:

- 1 Ran a 26.2-mile **marathon to the South Pole** in 9 hours and 18 minutes (2002)
- 2 Won the Badwater Ultramarathon, a 135-mile run in the sizzling 123° heat of **California's Death Valley** (2004)
- 3 Completed **The Relay**, a 199-mile race for teams of 12 from **Calistoga to Santa Cruz**, by running solo
- 4 Ran **350 miles without stopping** in 80 hours 44 mins (2005)
- 5 Finished the **100-mile Western States Endurance Run** in under 24 hours (11 times)
- 6 Conquered **50 marathons on 50 consecutive days in 50 different US states**, then spent 6 weeks running 1,300 miles from New York to St. Louis (2006)
- 7 Ran 348 miles from **Australia's Mount Kosciusko to Sydney in a week**, crossing the Great Dividing Range (2007)
- 8 Tackled the **4 Deserts**, a series of 155-mile runs through the Atacama, Gobi, Sahara and Antarctica deserts, inside 12 months (2008)
- 9 Jogged on a treadmill for **212 miles over 48 hours** (2008)
- 10 Ran 2,955 miles from the **Pacific to the Atlantic coast** of America in 75 days (2011)