

PACK SMALL, LIVE LARGE

The tough trails of California's Marin county offer stunning views and a rewarding network of luxury lodges.



BREATH

BY MICHAEL LANZA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROD MCLEAN & EMBRY RUCKER

TALKING

It's the ultimate
**RUNNER'S
GETAWAY**

Four days, 42 miles,
8,000 feet of climbing,
six seasoned guides,
300-count sheets, and
one really clutch hot tub



PLACE IN THE SUN

The author unwinds from a long day on a trail overlooking Muir Beach.



"YOU HAVE TO EMBRACE THE HILLS."

That puzzling line from an e-mail my running partner Janet Bowman sent me a few days ago leaps to mind as we struggle up a trail pitched at the angle of a ski jump. Perspiration streams off my head like a hard rain as I gasp for air, even though we're moving at a pace that might be generously described as a determined shuffle. In fact, just minutes into a 9.5-mile trail run across Northern California's Golden Gate National Recreation Area, I'm wondering how many anaerobic-thresholds lie ahead. I'm here for an adventurous four-day,

42-mile run through Marin County, a place with a reputation for fearsome hills and arguably the country's best trail running. More than 500 miles of footpaths spiderweb through 40 federal, state, and county parks covering some 170,000 acres. The parks contain forests of towering redwoods, a coastline where elephant seals bellow on secluded beaches, and hills harboring Tule elk and half the bird species in North America.

The complete route from Sausalito to Inverness will visit the extremes of rigor and decadence. I'll step out of a different lodge every day in my running shoes, carrying just water, a couple energy bars, and a light shell and, with the exception of a short cab ride to a trailhead on my third morning, run to the next night's accommodations while a taxi transports my luggage. I'll crank out nine to 12 miles a day, almost entirely on trail, with a calf-knotting couple thousand feet of cumulative vertical. Every

evening, I'll plow through a five-star dinner and relax in luxurious digs. Launching fearlessly into that agenda upon my arrival the previous night in Sausalito, I carbo-bloated on black gnocchi with wine-braised calamari at Poggio Trattoria, then soaked in my room's oversized tub at the Casa Madrona.

The plan appealed to me on many levels: the expectation of amazing running and scenery, a big physical challenge, and living large after every run. Yet a little voice in my head—my wife's, actually—keeps replaying the question she asked before I left home, "Aren't you gonna get your butt kicked?" You see, I'm basically an unremarkable runner cramming more hard miles into four days than I've ever attempted. So I'm hoping to get through this adventure without ending up like one of those unfortunate marathoners who stagger across the finish line with a hundred-mile stare and conspicuously drooping shorts.

GUTTER CREDIT TKTK

DAY 1

From Bay to Breakers

AFTER THE LUNG-BUSTING HUNDRED-FOOT CLIMB UP FROM Sausalito, Janet and I lengthen our strides on rolling terrain. No longer feeling like I'm sucking oxygen through a kinked straw, I fall into a familiar, pleasant rhythm and start admiring my surroundings. Open hills covered in grass and bushes undulate through endless swells, creased by ravines and valleys. A former president of the local Tamalpa Runners, Janet offered to be my area envoy after I posted a message at the club's Web site seeking partners. She points out the San Francisco skyline glinting in the warm October sunshine, the Golden Gate Bridge's towers poking above one hilltop, the Berkeley Hills, and Mt. Tamalpais ("Mt. Tam" to locals) rising 2,500 feet just three miles from the ocean. From San Francisco Bay to the Pacific, half of our panorama is unbounded blue water scored with ripples. Seven million people inhabit the Bay Area's footprint, from San Francisco to Oakland to parts south. Yet except for the chatter of birds and a whisper of breeze, there isn't a sound.

Over an hour into our run, we stop at a trail junction. Tall and runner-lean at 61, a veteran of many races (from 5-Ks to ultras) over three decades of running, Janet moves as if she's spent all those years getting her pace just right. She extends that same

ethic of efficiency to her speech, as if she's allotted only so many words per day and doesn't want to waste any. "I was running alone here one day and saw a bobcat staring at me," she says, the awe from that fleeting glimpse still echoing in her voice.

I feel a similar sense of reverence as I watch the Coastal Trail slither across crumbling bluffs that plunge 400 feet to the ocean. Ahead lies Muir Beach, where we'll down a postrun pint of Guinness in the tiny English pub at my next stop, the Pelican Inn. A 16th-century manse rebuilt with antiques from a dismantled British inn, the Pelican exudes Old World charm with its low-ceilinged rooms, dark wood beams, and a menu featuring Yorkshire pudding and bangers and mash.

Far below us, the surf sloshes loudly against the rocky shore of Pirates Cove, where stone pinnacles rise out of the sea, isolated by centuries of wave erosion. It's the kind of scenery that makes talking sound like loud radio static, so we fall silent. The moment stretches into minutes. I figure Janet is politely letting me enjoy the view, because she's run these hills for 28 years and has undoubtedly stood here many times. As if reading my mind, she confesses, "I never get sick of seeing this place."

In that moment, I begin to glimpse what it means to embrace the hills: Running these trails is a package deal. To get up here, to experience all this, you gotta start way down there. Like any ultimately rewarding relationship, a love affair with Marin's trails involves a little pain.



PUB LIFE

The woodwork of the Pelican Inn's bar (right) came from a 17th-century church. The inn's pub grub (above) and old-world beer selection are like manna at the end of a long run.



GUTTER CREDIT TKTK



DAY 2
Up Mt. Tam

AS SOON AS RUSS KIERNAN WALKS UP TO ME OUTSIDE THE Pelican Inn on my second morning, I realize that I'll get no easy day running with this 70-year-old. Standing maybe six feet tall, with a wooly cap of battleship-gray hair and sinewy limbs, he looks as taut and strong as a rope.

Russ agreed to join me for today's nine-mile trot, from Muir Beach to the Mountain Home Inn on the flanks of Mt. Tam, a route that includes 2,100 feet of uphill and 1,100 feet of descent. I contacted him because Russ is a Dipsea legend. America's oldest trail race, dating to 1905, the Dipsea follows a gorgeous and grueling 7.4-mile course from Mill Valley—beginning with a section of outdoor stairs 50 stories tall—over Marin's hills to Stinson Beach. He's run it 37 times, winning three times, and holds several Dipsea records (partly because of the race's unique handicapping system based on age and gender). He taught elementary school in San Francisco for 38 years before retiring in 1998—commuting some 20 miles roundtrip from Mill Valley on his bike for his last 15 years of teaching.

As we stretch, Russ mentions his earlier warmup, running a 4 x 1600-meter relay on a squad that broke the masters world record for men age 70 to 79. Russ's anchor mile was a 6:22.

Then this guy who's my father's age sets the pace on a long, hot climb up the wide-open Coast View Trail, high above the twisted ribbon of Highway 1 and the vast Pacific. Chatting away, Russ chugs uphill like The Tall Septuagenarian That Could. On the downs, he cuts loose, hopping nimbly over rocks, occasionally calling over his shoulder to me, "Doing okay?"

People like Kiernan and Janet Bowman illustrate how running



OLD SCHOOLED
Seventy-year-old Dipsea legend Russ Kiernan demonstrates how to tackle the Coast View Trail.

trails in Marin can get into your skin like fine grit and never wash out. The abundance of paths, mild climate (the notorious fog keeps mornings cool in summer), and breathtaking scenery explain why Marin has a running culture like Green Bay has a football culture. Most of Tamalpa's 750 members prefer pounding their shoes on dirt and using asphalt for their cars. The club is known for its ultrarunners, people who bang out 20 miles for a workout, including some joining me this week. Tamalpa sponsors brutal races like the Headlands 50-K, a stunning off-road trek that includes 7,000 feet of cumulative vertical. Marin is also home to the bizarrely popular Mt. Tam Hill Climb, in which competitors choose their route to the top—and the most-direct ways are so steep that people clamber over boulders.

I understand the appeal, having converted to the religion of dirt 10 years ago when I moved to Boise, Idaho, from New Hampshire. The miles of trails starting minutes from my door offered a stark contrast to the monotony I'd always felt on asphalt. I went from struggling through 30-minute road runs to losing myself

HIGH CEILINGS
The redwoods populating Muir Woods (left) offer a brief respite before the long climb up Mt. Tam to the Mountain Home Inn (below).



GUTTER CREDIT TKTK



TRIP PLANNER
Resources for doing this run yourself



THIS FOUR-DAY TREK goes from Sausalito to Inverness, California, 42 miles, mostly on well-maintained trails, with short stretches on pavement. It passes through Golden Gate National Recreation Area (nps.gov/goga); Mt. Tamalpais State Park (mttam.net); Muir Woods National Monument (nps.gov/muwo); and Point Reyes

National Seashore (nps.gov/pore). The trip was created for the author by Wine Country Trekking (winecountrytrekking.com).



DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH
The Pelican Inn, the Mountain Home Inn (above), and the Point Reyes Seashore Lodge (below) are accommodations worth a day's run.



Food and Lodging

Lodging runs from \$135 to \$499 per night. Dinners are \$30 to \$60 per person.

- ▶ SAUSALITO Casa Madrona (casamadrona.com); Poggio (poggiotrattoria.com)
- ▶ MUIR BEACH Pelican Inn (pelicaninn.com)
- ▶ MOUNT TAMALPAIS Mountain Home Inn (mtnhomeinn.com)
- ▶ OLEMA The Olema Inn (theolemainn.com); Point Reyes Seashore Lodge (pointreyesseashorelodge.com)



Timing

The best months for mild, frequently sunny days and no fog are October (though the hills are brown) and May (when the hills green up and flowers bloom). It's often rainy between December and March. In the summer, mornings offer ideal running temps.

DIVERSITY TRAINING

The Bolinas Ridge Trail offers a mix of terrain, from open meadows to deep redwood forests.



in a mind-clearing euphoria on one- and two-hour jaunts along creeks and over hills carpeted in sagebrush and wildflowers.

I'd been an avid hiker for years, yet trail running has provided some of my most memorable backcountry experiences. Outside a small town on New Zealand's Central South Island, a buddy and I ran a trail across open hills of grass and down a canyon maybe 20 feet wide, laughing as we leapt back and forth across a little stream every five strides. I started running trails more often than hiking partly because, with two young kids, my wife and I had less time for leisurely, all-day hikes. But I also discovered that I loved the whole aesthetic of it: covering the same distance much faster; marrying the adrenaline buzz of running to the more contemplative pleasures of natural scenery; swapping much of the superfluous gear for a minimalist ethic; and, when possible, doing it during the quiet times of early morning or evening when slanting sunlight gives the landscape a big-screen depth. I'd finish 10-mile runs amazed at how fresh and exhilarated I felt. It was so many light-years removed from the chore that street running had been for me that it felt like a different sport, on a different planet, with a different body.

When I stumbled upon the Web site of an outfitter offering inn-to-inn hiking trips across Marin, I thought, *Why not run instead of hike?* This trail-running Mecca is one of a few places in the country that has the lodging and transportation infrastructure to pull off a European-style inn-to-inn trip. While I'd never tried something so ambitious, it seemed a perfect next step on my personal trail-running odyssey. If I could make it.

An hour into our run, Russ and I cruise down into the cool shade and cathedral dimensions of Muir Woods National Monument. In one of the last refuges of coastal redwoods on the planet, we glide beneath 200-foot-tall trees that germinated around the time Native Americans settled the California coast. Ferns and plate-size mushrooms crowd the ground and sprout from fallen, rotting trunks wide enough to conceal a Mini Cooper. Tourists scuff along in slo-mo, some craning necks upward, some shooting looks at Russ as if they're wondering what was in their mocha frappuccino.

After another hot, switchbacking climb of several hundred feet—Russ still looking fresh, me trying to focus through sweat-streaked sunglasses—we jog up to the Mountain Home Inn. Perched on a ridge, the inn's outdoor patio overlooks the wooded slopes of Mt. Tam, Mill Valley, and the bay. It's a captivating view in daylight, but even more spectacular at night, as I'll find out this evening while digging into a generous portion of sage-and-almond pesto with shiitake mushrooms, butternut squash, pecans, and blue cheese, under a sky liberally salted with stars.

Sipping a draft at the bar, where daylight pours through massive windows, Russ casually mentions that he's meeting a high school cross-country team this afternoon to run a few miles with them. My plans? To have a long stretch that I hope will work some of the tightness out of my quads and calves, an even longer hot shower, read on the sofa in my two-room suite while listening to birds singing just beyond my balcony—and pray for some good mojo to feel physically recovered by morning.

DAY 3**Running Down a Fault Line**

AFTER THE BRUTAL HILLS OF THE PAST TWO DAYS, MY THIRD morning features a long, gentle descent. The Bolinas Ridge Trail makes an 11-mile straight shot along a rounded ridge bisecting rural north Marin. And my partners deliver a welcome jolt of energy. Kelly Dunleavy, a petite 23-year-old blogger and runner who competes in regional triathlons and trail races, will go seven miles out, and then double back to her car. Matching her stride is sports nutritionist Sunny Blende, 58, who does ultramarathons and ran 45 miles from one rim of the Grand Canyon to the other and back one month earlier. She plans to run 10 miles with me before turning around. They both say they're looking for an easy pace today, which I assure them fits into my travel plans.

Kelly and Sunny keep up a lively conversation—talking running, races, nutrition, training, ultras—that distracts me from

the twitching muscles in my quads. We pass through a few miles of cool, quiet woods, then emerge onto grassy meadows above the bucolic Olema Valley where a forested ridge obstructs our view of the Pacific. The valley appears peaceful enough, but looks deceive: It straddles the San Andreas Fault, where the Earth's North American and Pacific plates grind against one another, gradually sawing off the ice axe-shaped horn of land called the Point Reyes peninsula. So someday this trail we're on could have an ocean view.

About 90 minutes into our run, after Kelly has turned back, the horizon ahead retreats to reveal Tomales Bay, a blue finger of sea giving California a 20-mile-long prostate exam. Rearing up above the bay is tomorrow's objective, the green wall of Inverness Ridge—big, steep hills that, I'm thinking, exist to swallow overconfident and overfatigued runners whole. It looks daunting, and three days of hard running has daunted my ability to conjugate properly.

Surrounded by cows in a field, Sunny and I shake hands. Then I slowly jog the last mile down to Olema, a handful of lodges and restaurants at a sleepy T intersection where 19th-century loggers supported a bustling economy based on saloons and a certain age-old profession. Seeking a more restorative R&R, I sink deep into the hot tub in my spacious room at the Point Reyes Seashore Lodge, nearly falling asleep. In the evening, I hobble across the street to the Olema Inn to meet my wife's 28-year-old niece and her boyfriend, who drove over from Oakland for a couple of beers and a dinner of locally caught mussels, scallops, ahi, and oysters prepared eight ways (with champagne, horseradish and cracked pepper, spicy tomato water and seeds, and four other ways that slip from my memory as quickly as I digest them). It helps me forget—for a little while—the sloshing reservoirs of lactic acid in my quads.

**TAKING IT IN STRIDE**

Sunny Blende (center) and Kelly Dunleavy maintain an easy pace with the author.

Later, with the cool night air slipping through my room's open French doors, the cumulative effect of the run, hot tub, and feast hits me like I'm one of those actors in an Ambien commercial. But just before nose-diving into a rejuvenating coma of running dreams, my thoughts wander toward the precipice of anxiety over tomorrow's itinerary: running 12 miles across Point Reyes National Seashore, over two mountains, with 2,100 feet of up and down. And right now every synapse in my brain is calling out, "Control tower to Mike: You're cleared for a rest day."

Sheesh, what was I thinking? Tomorrow, the hardest day of the hardest adventure of my running career may bring on my hardest-ever bonk.



GUTTER CREDIT TKTK

ESCAPE WITHOUT INCIDENT

Simple tips to prepare yourself for the trails ahead

Technique

Here's how to traverse a range of trails and topography.

- ▶ Looking two steps ahead helps you anticipate changes in the terrain.
- ▶ A shorter stride keeps your weight over your feet and lessens the chance of a fall.
- ▶ The direct route isn't always the fastest or safest, especially when it runs across wet rocks or slick roots.
- ▶ Walk when footing gets treacherous. Moving too fast invites injury.

Direction

Navigate through unfamiliar places with these pointers.

- ▶ Choose trails that are well maintained, clearly marked, and signed, as many are in national and state parks.
- ▶ Carry a map and consult it at key turns and landmarks to keep track of your location.
- ▶ At junctions, hold your map to match the relative position of the trails ("Trail A is to my left, Trail B straight ahead," etc.). This will help you know which path to take.

Awareness

A little planning can minimize the risks off the beaten path.

- ▶ Know beforehand whether you'll get cell-phone coverage or see other people (to get directions or summon help).
- ▶ Carry energy bars or a sports drink on runs longer than an hour, as well as an extra layer of clothing and a compact headlamp (about three ounces)—just in case.
- ▶ Make sure your car keys are always in a secure pocket where they won't fall out.

WHAT TO WEAR

The best off-road gear for men and women

TRAIL RUNNERS must be prepared for the elements. This means versatile clothes that provide coverage yet can be peeled back when you get heated up. BY LISA JHUNG



JACKET

Pick an outer layer that protects you from a downpour long enough to run back to your car.

GoLite Ether Jacket \$80 This water-resistant shell packs down to the size of a softball. golite.com

The North Face Hydrogen Vest \$79 Made of nylon ripstop, this vest offers enough protection for milder days. thenorthface.com

SHIRT

Short-sleeve tops with deep zip-neck collars let you cover up in the shade or at high elevations, then unzip when you're warm again.

Ice Breaker Dash Zip \$75 The lightweight wool and mesh panels in this tee naturally regulate body temps. icebreaker.com

Patagonia's Runshade Top \$45 Constructed of moisture-wicking polyester, this top dries quickly and has a UPF rating of 30. patagonia.com

SHORTS

Trail shorts should be long and stretchy, or slightly split, so they protect your legs but don't restrict your mobility.

Sugoi's Verve Shorts \$45 With a five-inch inseam and mesh panels, these shorts cover up the legs and provide a little ventilation. sugoi.com

Pearl Izumi Infiniti LD Shorts \$50 These seven-inch, ripstop nylon shorts have a zippered pocket to keep your keys safe. pearlizumi.com

SOCKS

Look for dark-colored socks that hide dirt and a cut that extends over your ankle bone to keep trail debris out.

SmartWool's PhD Running Ultra Light Mini \$15 Chiefly made of heat-regulating wool, these socks offer a snug, comfortable fit. smartwool.com

Fox River Ultra Light Velocity \$9 The plant fibers and recycled poly in this sock make it both eco-friendly and sweat-wicking. pearlizumi.com

SHOES

Your trail shoe should have fairly deep traction, a toe bumper to protect against rocks, and good torsional rigidity (it should be difficult to wring it like a towel).

Brooks Cascadia 4 \$100 Ideal for generally dry trails, the Cascadia has a tread that bites hard into dirt. brooksrunning.com

New Balance 875 \$100 The all-weather traction of the 875 will help keep your footing steady on wet trails. newbalance.com



WILL RUN FOR SHELLFISH

Oysters prepared eight ways at the Olema Inn don't pack as well as the energy bars in the author's bottle belt (left). Tamalpa President Ken Grebenstein talks shop before the long 12-mile climb on day four.



DAY 4

The Final Climb

JUST GOING UP THE LODGE'S HALF-DOZEN FRONT-PORCH steps in the morning, my legs feel like dead tree stumps. It doesn't bode well for today, a harsh reality that crystallizes as my partners set the week's strongest pace—which shouldn't surprise me. Tamalpa President Ken Grebenstein, 55, is a gregarious sort who has run 80 to 100 marathons and ultras, including the 100-mile Western States Endurance Run. With him is Dave Ripp, 56, a three-hour-marathoner with a quieter demeanor and a salt-and-pepper beard who's been running Marin's trails for more than 30 years. Twenty minutes into the steep climb up Mt. Wittenburg, they're already dragging me like a broken tailpipe on an old pickup.

As I'm struggling for breaths, Ken churns out stories about running Marin—of its embracing community, of a trail system so elaborate you can explore for years and still not know all of it, and of 50-mile training workouts.

"Many of my running buddies, like me, moved here for the trails and the friends that you make," he says. "Trail running in Marin is like few places in the world. In the space of a few miles, you can go from redwood forests to sweeping vistas. People fall in love with this place. Their lives get wrapped around it."

Today's trails are breathtaking enough to recharge me, despite how knackered I feel. Digging deep for some newfound reserve of stamina, I chase Ken and Dave over the roller-coaster contours of Inverness Ridge beneath pine and fir trees and a coastal fog blowing in on a cool wind. I can't quite keep up my end of the conversation, but I'm chugging hard on their heels, locating that place where the bonk keeps a merciful distance and I fall into a

rhythm of movement and awareness of my body and surroundings that feels sustainable—for a while, anyway.

The relentless climb up Mt. Vision just about sucks the last volts from my battery. I struggle to stay with these guys—indeed, just to keep lifting my feet off the ground. But at the top, the fog abruptly dissolves, casting us into warm, resuscitating sunshine. Pausing to soak up the views—and for me to suck in some oxygen—we look down 1,200 feet to Tomales Bay shimmering in the sunshine, and across it to a chaotic scrum of brown hills, scattered buildings, and narrow roads, a vision of a past, unspoiled California.

I can see something else in this view, something that has me feeling good about where I'm standing, literally and figuratively: It's all down from here. It won't matter when my quads begin to harden like poured cement on the steep, outsole-slapping, thousand-foot drop into Inverness. I'll be able to ignore the cacophony of complaints rising from my hip flexors, lower back, Achilles, calves, and soles, because I've answered the open-ended question hanging over this adventure from its outset: Yes, I'm going to make it. I have succeeded in refining my sense of my own endurance while celebrating the pleasures of great scenery, people, food, and, of course, hot tubs. I've discovered a new way to feed my running jones and see a big chunk of wilderness at the same time by running across it for days.

Most of all, I've taken Janet Bowman's advice: I've embraced the hills. One could run for a lifetime in Marin and never get tired of it.

Only very, very tired.



Check out the new Runner's World trail-running channel for destinations, gear, and hydration-pack reviews, and all other things trail-related, at runnersworld.com/trailrunning.

CUTTER CREDIT TKTK

CREDIT BY DUMMY NAME