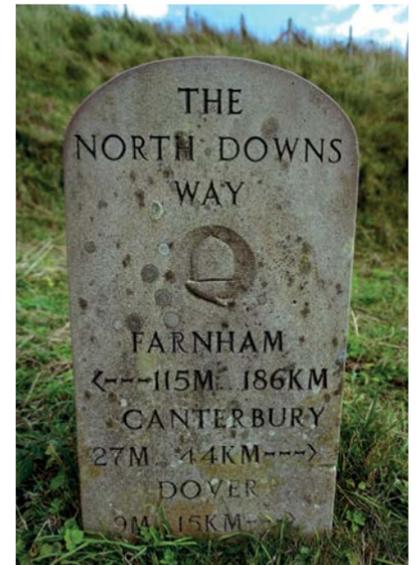


The art of fastpacking

THE NORTH DOWNS WAY NATIONAL TRAIL IS THE SAME DISTANCE AS SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST COMPETITIVE AND EXPENSIVE MULTI-STAGE RACES. THE TRAILHEAD, HOWEVER, IS ONLY A £24.50 TRAIN TICKET FROM LONDON WATERLOO EAST. ON A BUDGET AND A DEADLINE, TWO RUNNERS SET OUT LAST MONTH TO 'FASTPACK' IT IN LESS THAN 100 HOURS »





“So is this like a holiday for you guys?” The woman in the beer garden was asking a fair enough question. We had been on the North Downs Way for around 55 hours. After sleeping rough for two nights and running nearly 90 miles, we looked like the lone survivors of a sports team at the back-end of a disaster movie. If indeed this was a holiday, we didn’t have much stuff – potentially fitting both our running packs in a regular carry-on bag with room for two large beach towels and posh soap to spare. “We’re still undecided,” we told her, before downing our Spirit of Kent recovery drinks and shuffling back out to the trail.

Our 153-mile adventure along the North Downs Way began near the village of Wye, four miles from the busy hub of Ashford International Station. The style would be

‘fastpack’. This term was coined almost 20 years ago by the ultrarunner Jim Knight, explaining how he and a friend had run 100 self-supported miles in 38 hours through the remotest of American wilderness. He described their achievement as, “Kind of backpacking, but much faster. More fluid. Neat. Get in, get out. I call it fastpacking.”

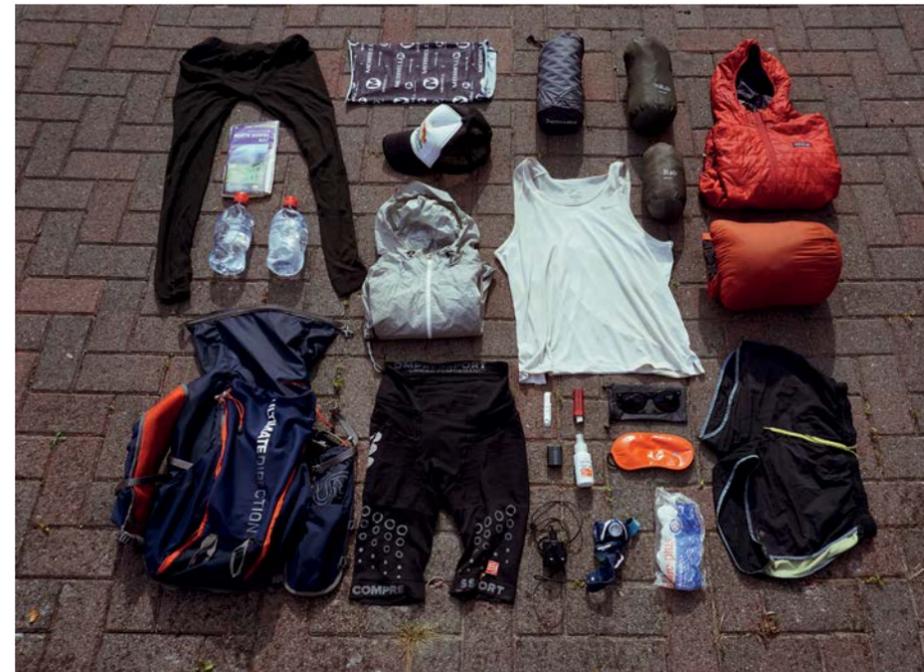
Today this spirit of boiled-down, no-frills adventuring is stronger than ever in North America. Its appeal is clear – with some thoughtful packing, a good base fitness and a mixture of hiking and slow running you can cover the kind of distances the traditional backpacker can only dream of. As we shouldered our packs and jogged the first few miles through fields of grain and orchards of Kentish apples, we thought we had the fastpacking essentials covered. By the end of day one we had

covered a respectable 28 miles. From the outset we had made the decision to wild camp along the entire North Downs Way. Making camp wherever a day’s running takes you is the fastpacker’s way. It also suited our budget. So just as the light was fading, we reached the planned point on our map and plunged into thick woodland.

HAPPY CAMPERS

Strictly speaking, it is not legal to spend the night in Britain on any private land or footpaths (except in Scotland and parts of Dartmoor). The spirit of the law though is that if you come and go quickly, keep away from houses and leave no trace of your presence then wild camping may be tolerated. It is also best to seek landowner consent where possible, and on this evening we got just that from the kindly farmer who gave us a lighter and »

Clockwise from here: a moment's respite in an orchard; the contents of Matt's bag; James takes a shower with the horses; scrumping in Kent



GO FASTPACKING!

Cotswold Overnight: The Cotswold Way offers fantastic running and is generously serviced with railway stations and accommodation in the southern section, making an afternoon fastpack, overnight stay and morning run into Bath a reality. Plan for one to two hours of fastpacking each day with a total of 12-20 miles covered.

North Downs Double: Experience the biggest climbs and best views of the North Downs Way in one challenging, 45-mile weekend from Otford station to Guildford.

Pennine Bank Holiday: Run a dramatic chunk of England's oldest and toughest National Trail, starting and finishing at railways: from Hebden Bridge to Horton-in-Ribblesdale – 48 tough miles.

All three recommendations are well-signposted National Trails. Comprehensive information for transfers, accommodation and distances available at nationaltrail.co.uk

permission to start a campfire.

Out of the rucksack came the bare essentials for a night in the woods. Everything for a successful fastpack must be judged on three main criteria: bulk, weight and functionality. The Rab Siltarp2 is a lightweight tarpaulin that can be pitched using walking poles or hung over a tree. It's not going to protect you from sideways rain on a mountain top, but works great under tree cover. Plus, at 393g, it's way lighter than a tent.

For my sleeping system, I'd picked my Prolite Thermarest sleeping mat. It's had

years of use and it takes more than a pointy twig in the undergrowth for this inflatable mattress to break a sweat. Just in case, though, I slid it inside a Rab Storm bivi bag. This would provide a waterproof and warm extra layer for my compact Marmot Hydrogen sleeping bag. Weighing just 665g, the down bag is still comfortable at 1°C, making it plenty warm enough for summer nights in southern England. And even if it was nippy, the fire was soon roaring, sending unruly midges flying.

We were on the move again shortly after sunrise. In late summer, the county

of Kent really does deserve its title as the 'Garden of England'. Approaching Canterbury, we picked wild blackberries from hedgerows to supplement our cereal bars and maybe snaffled the occasional apple from the many orchards. We were "no-cook" fastpacking. No stove, no pans, no extra food needed or water. And no washing up. Our packs were considerably lighter. By buying snacks in towns and the occasional good meal, it made the trip a little more expensive, but the adventure was richer for it. A holiday, indeed!

After leaving the cathedral city, we soon began to cross tracks with the Pilgrim's Way. Chaucer's pilgrims covered only 15 miles per day on this route. By the end of our second day, we had clocked another 38 miles as we ran the flats and downhill and power-hiked the ups. Once over the

Medway River, and leaving the Weald, the route headed west. Accents changed on the approach to the M25, as we traversed the tendrils of London suburbia.

LIGHT AND BREEZY

The lightness of our bags was what kept us moving faster than those 14th century pilgrims. James was using the 33-litre Osprey Talon, which is a backpacking and running hybrid, while I was using the dedicated Ultimate Direction Fastpack 30-litre. The favourable weather forecast meant I only needed a few layers and, with no real food to carry, I managed to pack all my sleeping kit and some camera equipment with space to spare. The Fastpack 30 fit was excellent, with minimal bounce and very little rub on the shoulders while running.

While my approach to equipment was relatively Spartan, James, perhaps the stronger runner, did pull some surprises out of his bag such as a penknife, spare running shorts and cleansing wipes. His greatest triumph came on day three. Two women mucking out stables must have smelled us coming and offered to hose us down. After his shower, James took great pleasure in pulling out a fresh microfibre towel to dry himself. Generally though, it felt good to live for a few days with only the basics.

The days passed. 31 miles on day three, 35 miles on day four. The name of the previous night's stop sounded foreign the next day to the people encountered further down the trail. From Otford to Knockolt. From Caterham to Reigate. The climb to Boxhill and a deep sleep

in a vineyard. And so finally, and still smiling, we ran the remaining 21 miles on day five to Farnham – completing the challenge in 98 hours and 27 minutes.

While posing by the finish sign, two runners approached and congratulated us. They promptly told us how they'd suffered in 2014 through the infamous heat and sand of the six-day 153-mile Marathon de Sables. "Were you training on the North Downs Way for anything in particular?" they challenged in return.

I thought back over the days outdoors, the pints of shandy and the cool evenings running through harvest-ready fields. "Oh no," I said. "That was just a holiday."

Matt Maynard is a UK Summer Mountain Leader, ultrarunner and writer. More adventures @MattMaynard