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10 Unusual Marathons Around the World Featured

Written by [Michelle Leach](#) | font size | [Print](#) | [E-mail](#)

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More and more people are crossing “marathon” off their bucket list; in 2010, more than 500,000 American runners went the 26.2 distance, up from 299,000 in 2000. But where do you go when you’ve done all the classic races, such as New York, Chicago and London? If you don’t opt to either shave your times or try the “ultra” distances — generally considered to be any distance greater than 30.99 miles — you may be tempted to seek out more unusual races in exotic locales to test your personal limits. Be forewarned: Some of these so-called adventure races will turn your 9-minute-mile standard into an 18-minute mile pace — and you’ll be elated just to finish.

10. Honolulu and Kaua’i Marathons

These two races in the Hawaiian islands are unique for completely different reasons. The Honolulu marathon is known more for its international flavor than its sheer beauty, which features the world-famous Diamond Head volcano and stunning ocean views. In fact, in recent years Japanese tourists have made up roughly two-thirds of the field. The appeal lies, in part, with the fact that Japanese marathons often have strict time constraints, which means many amateurs don’t qualify there. If running in otherworldly beauty is more what you’re after, then try the marathon on the “Garden Isle” of Kaua’i. Often cited as the most beautiful of the eight major islands, runners will pass under massive canopies of lush trees, and along beaches, rugged



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volcanoes and rainforests so gorgeous they've been featured in movies from South Pacific to Jurassic Park.

9. Pikes Peak Marathon

Imagine running a marathon at high altitude, thinking, "This isn't so bad for a mountain marathon," only to realize that you're still in the foothills. During the next 13 miles you will climb around 8,000 vertical feet before summiting Colorado's Pikes Peak. Say your marathon time on flat land is 4 hours. Pikes Peak veterans say you should plan on spending twice that amount of time, battling the mountain and everything it throws at you — including snow. Yes, there may be balmy conditions in August at the bottom of the mountain, but at the top you may be freezing. Pack accordingly. It sounds crazy, but so many people want to do this race that the U.S. Forest Service has limited the event to 800 runners; organizers have established a lottery to determine who gets in. On top of that, you must have completed a 26.2 race in 5 hours, 30 minutes or less to even qualify for the event that's been dubbed "America's Ultimate Challenge."

8. Gaza Marathon

This powder keg of violence, a prime example of Palestinian-Israeli conflict, may seem like the worst place on Earth to host an international marathon. The brainchild of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East, the race began as a fundraiser to help schoolchildren in Gaza. During the race, runners dodge donkey carts and catch a

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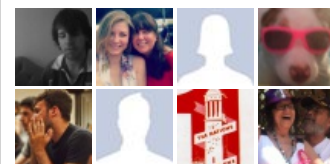
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glimpse of everything from refugee camps to the ruins of Yasser Arafat's former presidential compound. To make the race a reality, organizers had to work with members of Hamas, which runs the territory's security forces and is recognized by the United States as a terrorist group. They also had to be sensitive to ingrained issues associated with men and women running together. While the 2012 marathon was postponed due to funding issues, it is set to return in 2013.

7. Midnight Sun Marathon

As its name suggests, this race is one of the few overnight marathons and, making it even more special, it's held in one of the rare places where you can run at midnight but it looks just as sunny as it did at noon. Held in Tromso, a charming city of around 70,000 in northern Norway, the sun does not set in this part of the Arctic Circle from mid-May to mid-July. Thanks to crowd support, the city's beauty (it's surrounded by water) and just the very unique nature of running in broad daylight overnight, the June race has been going strong for nearly three decades and boasts an international field, with finishers from a recent event hailing from more than 63 countries.

6. Race to Kazbegi (Republic of Georgia)

This war-ravaged former Soviet republic at the crossroads of western Asia and Eastern Europe seems an unlikely place for an international marathon. But take a quick look at photos from prior races and you'll see how Georgia's window on the Great

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Caucasus Mountains is a great backdrop for a race, with picturesque gorges and valleys, villages lost in time and ancient fortresses and cathedrals. Unfortunately, bear in mind Georgia is such a volatile state that it's made a number of "World's Most Dangerous Countries" lists. Bordered by the Black Sea, Russia, Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan and boasting 4.7 million residents, Georgia was home to post-Communist-era civil and economic unrest, as well as bloody inter-ethnic wars as recently as 2008. Luckily, the marathon does not border any of these disputed areas. Runners can couple the race with tours of Georgia's capital, Tbilisi.

5. The Big Five Marathon

Want to see the "Big Five" — elephant, rhino, buffalo, lion and leopard — while running past these famous African animals, as opposed to running away from them? Then strap on your running shoes, fork over some cash and set aside a portion of June for the [Big Five Marathon](#) in South Africa's Entabeni Game Reserve. Considered one of the region's largest and most diverse private reserves, Entabeni also affords intrepid racers an opportunity to see a number of other species, including giraffes, hippos, crocs and antelope, in their natural habitat. As part of a vacation package, you also have time to enjoy safari drives through the park, while staying in overnight lodges right in the middle of the reserve. For all its beauty, veteran finishers have called Entabeni among the hardest standard marathons around, with many steep routes littered with loose rocks and stones. Practice vigilance to keep your footing and when running past rhinos, which the marathon's organizers note, must be done "quietly."

4. Tenzing-Hillary Everest Marathon

While you may not physically be able to summit the world's tallest mountain, nor be able to afford to do so (hooking up with an expedition to the top will set you back about \$40,000 on the low end), Everest may still be within your grasp, courtesy of the Tenzing-Hillary Everest Marathon. The race starts at the storied Everest Base Camp and ends in Namche Bazaar, the capital of the Sherpas, an ethnic group famous for their climbing guides, including the pioneering Tenzing Norgay. While you won't be running to the summit, this won't be a walk in the park. In fact, all of the fastest finishers during a recent marathon were from Nepal, with the winner finishing in around 3 hours, 40 minutes. The first non-Nepali finisher completed the distance in about 5 hours, 20 minutes. Many required more than 10 hours to finish. It's really that tough — in fact, race organizers require all participants to arrive in Nepal three weeks before the marathon to get acclimated to the high altitude. During that time, runners hike for 14 days to the starting point, and also climb more than 18,000 feet to reach a spot with the best views of Everest. All that preparation culminates in a race that would be impossible to forget, as runners take in Buddhist monasteries, suspension bridges, Sherpa villages and Alpine forests blanketed with wild orchids as they trace the steps Sir Edmund Hillary and his guide, Norgay, made during their historic trek to the top in 1953.

3. The Great Wall Marathon

Instead of merely visiting one of the world's greatest ancient wonders, you can run a comparatively puny 26.2-mile portion of this more than 13,000-mile monster series of fortifications dating back to the 7th century B.C. As you can imagine, this race is not for the faint-of-heart; organizers note the "well-prepared" should expect to complete the distance in five to six hours and,

on average, only a quarter of those running opted to debut as marathoners at the Great Wall. [Adventure Marathon](#), which sponsors the event, urges racers to consider planning the race in stages. To that end, the first five and a half miles or so takes runners up, across and down the Wall — steep ascents and descents consisting of literally thousands of steps. Another section is quite different, featuring picturesque villages and rice fields, with a significant climb that seems particularly nasty when you’ve already covered more than 13 miles. Combine more than 5,000 stomach-churning up-and-down stairs with the heat of a May in China, and you have the recipe for, quite literally, hitting the wall on the wall.

2. Antarctica Ice Marathon

This marathon is a “must” for any runner hoping to make it into the coveted “Seven Continents” club which, as the name suggests, marks those few athletes who have the time, ambition and, most importantly, money to be able to say, “I ran on every continent.” In this case, participants must fork over nearly \$14,000 for this unique experience. That fee doesn’t cover the cost to get you to Chile, which is where participants will leave by private jet to fly to the ice continent, specifically, Union Glacier, a few hundred miles away from the geographic South Pole. If the thought of running over vast expanses of ice under a sun that never sets and in below-zero temperatures with fierce winds isn’t enough for you, there is also a 62.1-mile option for ultra-marathoners. Naturally, there is also a North Pole counterpart to this race, the Polar Circle Marathon, held each April.

1. Easter Island Marathon

This remote Pacific island that natives call Rapa Nui can be completely explored by runners during the course of a marathon, as this speck of land is only 63 square miles. There are plenty of isolated islands around the world that could host marathons, but none boast the exotic allure of the mysterious Easter Island statues. Easter Island is home to 800 of those imposing statues, averaging 13 feet high and 14 tons each. Runners go out and back from the only real town on the island, Hanga Roa, and then cut right through the middle of the island and past the statues that inexplicably were carved and placed by ancient inhabitants without the use of modern technology. Prior to the race, runners get to tour Chile. As a territory of Chile, Easter Island can only be reached courtesy of the South American country and via a five and-a half hour flight. Participants also have the opportunity to walk the lava-encrusted coastline, visit ancient ruins and archaeological sites and compete in a mountain biking race on one of the most isolated places on earth.

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Michelle Leach's love of writing has taken her to Sydney, Australia, London, U.K. and other exotic locations like Grand Island, Neb., and Clio, Mich. She has developed pieces for TV and radio stations, PR departments, newspapers and magazines. A graduate of Northwestern University and Lake Forest College (also in Illinois) she enjoys running marathons and likes to say when not writing, she's running—but she tries not to mix the two activities.

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