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Under starter's orders



As the Adventure Race season kicks off with two major events in Scotland, **Ali Paton** checks out the gruelling challenge which lies ahead

For many the start of the summer hopefully spells lazy days basking in the sunshine

and sausages sizzling on the BBQ, but for a few crazy souls, it is a sign to intensify their already punishing training regimes as the Adventure Race season kicks off in earnest.

Now tagged "the Adventure Capital of Europe", Scotland with its diversity of terrain and water courses, is a hub for the sport which is becoming ever more popular.

This weekend alone two well-established events on the adventure calendar are taking place.

Yesterday the Corrieyairack Challenge began, while today it's all about preparation and logistics for the 24 teams participating in the Hebridean Challenge.

Regardless of who you talk to, the appeal of adventure racing is the sense of achievement and element of fun that it offers which is sometimes hard to

believe given the

demanding physical nature of the sport.

Although virgins to the Hebridean Challenge, the members of the all-female team Salty Girls – otherwise known as the Scottish Adventure Ladies Team – are taking no chances with their fitness.

The recent female winners of the Bristol Rat Race, the Edinburgh-based girls are determined to make their mark on the adventure scene which is why, much to the amusement of passers by, they were practising sea rescues last Sunday at Aberdour.

"It's all about pushing ourselves," said team leader Kirsty Maguire.

And push themselves they will undoubtedly have to as the Heb Challenge is more walk on the wilds than walk in the park.

In teams of five – or fours if opting out of the kayaking – the five-day event also involves walking, running, mountain and road biking, open water swimming and a serious test of navigational skills as teams are asked to work in relay using

"human power" to negotiate the 700km course in the Outer Hebrides.

Working their way over the islands from the relatively flat, quick to cover South Uist, Benbecula and North Uist sections a degree of local knowledge is a huge advantage, according to third-time participant Kenny Riddle.

"Harris and North West Lewis are very hilly and hard going," said Riddle who has coerced his brother Roddy into giving it a go for the first time.

Being the owner of a bike shop in Inverness, Riddle is well paced to gather up the necessary equipment. "I've spent all week organising the bikes, energy drinks et for the trip", said the 39-year old.

He has also to spend most of the week working out his team's logistics and how they can maximise their potential to accrue points during the course of the event.

"Last year we were up until midnight sorting out our route for the next day, which was not great considering we were getting up again at 5am!"



Riddle's thorough preparation epitomises the determination of the type of people involved in adventure racing. However the organisers of the Heb Challenge are at pains to stress that the event is not just for super-fit athletes, but a physical and mental challenge aimed at individuals competent in a variety of disciplines.

With "mystery legs" thrown in as the week progresses to keep things interesting, team need to have their wits about them, assuming they are not lost in the mist trying to navigate some checkpoint at the top of a hill on Lewis!

With terrain ranging from rocky hills, rough grass and heather, huge white beaches and numerous lochs, nearly all the land is open to competitors travelling on foot and with few paths, route choice is almost limitless which is where logistics come in.

Working as a relay, a team may split up, sending different members off on mountain bikes where there are tracks or to the sea for an 800m open water swim or kayak section.

Some legs of the relay are mandatory, while at some stages, teams must decide what form of transport is best to get from A to B.

In the past it has not been unheard of for competitors to use scooters or rollerblades to assist their weary legs. But the only other rest these hardy athletes are like to get is if they are on vehicle duty, with each team allowed a van to transport their equipment.

After all, there is no point arriving at the village hall for a fantastic homemade meal after a hard day up the hills to find your tent is in a van back where you started.

At the end of the week a Ceilidh is being held, though it remains to be seen if anyone still has feeling in their legs.

Bikes, hills and a good old Ceilidh are what the Heb Challenge and the Corrieyairack Challenge have in common.

Now in its 13th year, the Corries, as it is affectionately known, calls on its competitors to traverse a 17-mile hill section over the historic Corrieyairack mountain pass, some 2,350 feet up, and then jump into their saddles for a 26-mile road bike section.

Like the Heb challenge, the scenery is guaranteed to be spectacular and although it's not a good idea to pitch up if the most exercise you normally get is stretching for the remote control, the Corries is aimed at walkers, joggers and elite duathletes alike.

For the first time in the event's history, the race limit of 500 competitors was reached. While unlike the Heb Challenge, the "pain" is over in one day, but the thought of cycling a marathon after running two thirds of one is a daunting prospect.

Starting at Fort Augustus after a two-mile warm up on tarmac, the route turns off and climbs the winding hills of the Corrieyairack Pass, Scotland's highest mountain road and the route once used by Bonnie Prince Charlie.

According to race organiser Paul Corrigan, who has completed the challenge four times, the long haul to the summit is eased by strategically placed water stations.

And if you believe that you will believe anything.

For more information on the Hebridean Challenge visit www.hebrideanchallenge.com The Corrie website is at www.corrieyairack.org