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Group of triathletes in water preparing for swim



Triathlons are emerging as popular 'breaks' for those looking to swap R&R for active trips that push your body and mind to the limit

WORDS: Sam Lewis

Middle age can result in some alarming changes. While some of my friends have left their partners on a whim, others have jacked in their jobs to travel the world, and a few have forked out for Botox and a boob job. But possibly the biggest trend among my 40-something friends is triathlons. To prepare for these gruelling events they undergo intense exercise regimes, shave their legs, squeeze into spandex sports gear, and spend obscene amounts of money on carbon fibre racing bikes. To ward off middle-age spread, they discuss high-protein diets, pre-race carb-loading, the best sports drinks and the latest tips to prevent saddle sores.

Then, on their annual leave, they're swapping that luxury spa hotel in the Maldives for a holiday overseas where they can be pushed to the limit, sometimes training for up to six hours a day, cycling over 100 miles up vertiginous mountains and swimming inordinate distances in the sea. As a 40-something, former international swimmer, should I join them, or keep them at arm's length? I've heard the sport is addictive and I'm not sure I have the time — or energy — any more.

The growth of triathlon (swimming, cycling and running — one after the other) has been something of a phenomenon over the past decade, with some evidence to suggest it's the fastest growing sport in the UK. British Triathlon figures show that in 2009, 120,620 participated in an event, rising to 174,293 in 2013.

Since making its debut as an Olympic sport in Sydney in 2000, its growth in the UK was given a boost following the gold and bronze medal performances by the Brownlee brothers — Alistair and Jonathan — at the 2012 London Olympics.

Distances vary from event to event, but a standard Olympic race consists of a 1.5km (0.93 mile) swim, a 40km (25 mile) cycle, and a 10km (6.2 mile) run. And if that doesn't sound challenging enough, the UK now boasts Europe's largest number of Ironman competitors (they race a 2.4-mile (3.86km) swim, a 112-mile (180.25km) bicycle ride and finish with a 26.2-mile (42.2km) marathon).

So what makes these people want to push their body to the limit. And do I have what it takes? Gary Roethenbaugh, a triathlete and MD of MultSport Research, says I fit the

40-something profile: "Ironman is the new marathon. For many, it's a bucket list. As we get older, many of us want to tick things off and gain a sense of achievement. And the added appeal of triathlon, in general, is its variety — if you get a run injury, you cycle or swim for a while. As it's a multidiscipline, there's always something to improve."

Of course, if I were to attempt a race, the attraction of competing or training abroad is obvious: guaranteed good weather, quiet roads, open-water swimming in clear calm seas and easy access to facilities and coaches makes the early morning training (just slightly) more appealing.

Gary says a recent survey of 4,100 triathletes suggests it's a growing trend — 12% participated in a training camp in 2013, 18% went overseas to race, while 74% said they'd seriously consider doing so in the future. Europe ranks as the most popular destination, with Spain leading the field and Turkey, France, Austria and Germany runners-up, although some travel as far as the US, Canada, UAE, Australia and Mexico.

"With the strength of sterling we can expect to see more Brits travelling abroad to race or train," says Gary, although he insists price isn't the determining factor — the typical triathlete tends to be a high earner (£45k-plus). And while starter bikes cost from £600, many budget to spend £2,000 on their next bike, with some easily spending up to £10k when you factor in all the various high-tech components. In addition, most triathletes who attend camps are dedicated souls who tend to train around 10 hours a week. According to Gary, "It shows the alpha-type personality is driven in both work and play."

Paul Joseph, co-founder of UK tour operator Health and Fitness Travel, has many clients that fit this profile. "One client of mine has a particularly demanding career and works 18 hour days," he says. "As he can't fit in regular exercise he always needs to kick start his fitness regime and books seven camps a year. He flies in a private plane and he always wants to go somewhere different spending a few days before and after to relax and enjoy the destination."

Carry on camping

Sadly there's no private plane at my disposal, so where should I head? While a decade ago the choice of triathlon camps was limited — most headed to Spain's Club La Santa in Lanzarote (it boasts three open-air Olympic-size pools) — demand has resulted in new resorts worldwide and it's these types of far-flung resorts, with their combination of culture and facilities, that appeal to me.

Health and Fitness Travel has a range of triathlon camps, with new destinations this year, including the fitness resort of Thanyapura in Phuket, Thailand. Not only does it have an Olympic-size (50m) pool, there's a 25m pool equipped with a Daktronics timing system and an underwater viewing gallery for video analysis. When you realise Thanyapura also has an athletics track, fitness centre with the latest Technogym equipment, and a spin, yoga, and pilates studio, you can see its attraction for fitness addicts. Some of the food is produced at the resort's organic farm in Khao Sok National Park and ►



the chefs can tailor-make specific dishes to complement guests' health goals and taste buds. There's also a wine cellar with over 700 wines for wannabe athletes like me who don't want to take their training *too* seriously.

Led by eight-time Ironman champion Jurgen Zack, the triathlon programme includes everything from private coaching sessions to sport massages, physiotherapy, chiropractic assessment and video analysis — all for just under £1,500, including full board and flights.

Meanwhile, the Caribbean appears to be a good option for people like me who are looking for a laid-back first-time introduction to the sport. St Lucia's famed luxury all-inclusive The BodyHoliday caters for triathletes and the island hosted its first triathlon event in 2013, run by legend John Lunt, who organised the 2012 London Olympic triathlon and launched Human Race endurance events.

In November, Tri St Lucia will offer four distances — each with individual and relay entries — and former Olympian celebrity guests Daley Thompson, Steve Cram and Sharron

Davies will be present to host five days of pre-event activities and parties, with much of the proceeds going to charity.

The nearby island of Nevis is attracting triathletes too. It now holds two triathlons a year. Brit Pam Challen, 41, completed it in 2013. "It was my fourth triathlon and conditions couldn't have been better," she tells me. "The sun was shining and the atmosphere was more like a party. As I've never done a sea swim I was worried about the waves and sharks, but in reality, all I saw were turtles. On reflection, it was more dangerous when I competed in a triathlon in Northern Ireland and had to swim in Belfast dock!"

Another Caribbean alternative is the annual triathlon race on Peter Island Resort & Spa, in the British Virgin Islands. British lawyer Antony Spencer, who completed the 1km swim, five-mile bike and four-mile run, says, "The water is so lovely and clear that you can see the fish — you can even spot barracuda, which makes you swim that bit faster! The bike ride is quite a tough climb up with no cars whatsoever and a fun descent on dirt and gravel. And the run starts at beach level, then contours around a hill where the hardest part is not stopping to look at the views." And the best bit? "Once you've finished you can go to the beach and have a rum and Coke or enjoy a sports massage in the spa."

Those with families may feel the Med is a more accessible option but finding the right triathlon camp can be tricky. Waveney Thomson, 43, is a mum of two boys, aged eight and 10, and recommends two luxury Thanos hotels in Cyprus: the Almyra and Anassa. "The problem with a lot of camps in Europe is that many have basic rooms and the focus is on the training," she says. "Very often the partner and kids get left behind. At these hotels there's amazing accommodation and food, an incredible kids' club with lots of activities and a spa. There's an overriding luxury element, which means you can bring the family and not feel guilty — when you only get four weeks' holiday a year you want to be spoilt and enjoy some creature comforts."

Fit into the routine

Waveney — like many of us who have enough schedules and routine in our everyday life — appreciates the lack of a rigid regime. Guests can do as much or as little as they want. ➤

From top: Runners, Peter Island; Pam Challen (right)





If the distance sounds a tad tough, but you're bored of beach breaks and don't yet want to make any drastic like changes (like a boob job or extramarital affair), consider a holiday on Peter Island

"There's a swim, bike and run every day but you don't have to do all three of them and the regime is varied with some sessions focusing on swim and run technique with video analysis," she says. Nonetheless, the training wasn't a pushover with substantial 70km (44 mile) bike rides led by the Cypriot coach, Kypros. "In addition to a coach he was a knowledgeable guide and we got to experience a side of the country I perhaps wouldn't have on a normal holiday. He would stop in the middle of nowhere and produce cups of coffee to drink on rustic tables outside a local house in the hills."

By contrast, 53-year old David Sweeney, who lives near London, started late in life and is now a self-confessed tri addict. David wanted a holiday to prepare him for his first half Ironman and headed to Portugal to train with Tri Training Harder. "Winter training in the UK isn't easy," he says. "I wanted an injection of competence and fitness — an intensive week to learn new skills and improve all three disciplines."

There were about eight people on the camp, David explains; a mixture of nationalities, some sharing rooms with strangers of all different walks of life and abilities — but all had one common interest. "One of toughest things about Ironman is that everyone in your life gets completely sick of hearing about it," David adds. "In Portugal it was nice to live triathlon 24/7. What was remarkable is that I did something I didn't think I could do every day: I counted 32 hours of training in the six days I was there but they sneakily slid the training sessions under the radar. The coaches distract you and make

it fun. I had the hardest training session of my life and I really enjoyed it and that's what surprised me the most."

David said that while the coaches worked wonders with his swimming and his shoulder problem disappeared, the bike rides were particularly memorable, taking him into villages he'd never have explored were it not for his cycling days out. "We weren't doing tourist things at all, simply enjoying the great weather, pretty scenery, good roads and mountains."

Like a typical addict, as soon Sweeney completed his half Ironman in Majorca he wanted another hit — to prepare himself for a full Ironman. "As I'd never done a 180km [112 mile] cycle I went back to Tri Training Harder just a month and a half later. Four days later I left, having completed a 190km [118 mile] all-day cycle and I hadn't really noticed the distance because we chatted the whole time."

If, like me, the distance sounds a tad too tough, but you're looking for an active break and don't yet want to make any drastic changes to your life (like a boob job or extramarital affair), consider a holiday on Peter Island. At any time of year, staff will set up the triathlon course. A coach will even cheer you on as you tackle the one-mile swim (got that one covered), 10-mile bike ride (two laps of the island with stops to admire the view) and two-mile run (jogging is permitted). Complete the course and you'll get a certificate; set a record time and your name will be inscribed on a plaque in the resort lobby. And if you don't finish, or you're worried this will result in a rather serious (and sometimes expensive) fitness addiction, simply head to the beach bar, lie back in a hammock and enjoy an ice-cold rum and Coke. The thought was there, even if the body wasn't willing. ■

Above: Triathlon group, Tri Training Harder

Essentials

Tour Operators

Health and Fitness Travel
healthandfitnessstravel.com
Sports Tours International
sportstoursinternational.co.uk

Sports Resorts & Camps

Thanyapura Phuket Sport Hotel,
Thailand. thanyapura.com
Club La Santa, Lanzarote
clublasanta.co.uk
Thanos Hotels, Cyprus.

thanoshotels.com
Tri Training Harder.
tritrainingharder.com

Overseas Triathlons

St Lucia Triathlon (22 November 2014).
humanrace.co.uk/events/triathlon/stlucia
Nevis Triathlon (15 November 2014).
nevistriathlon.com
Peter Island.
peterislandresort.co.uk

Ultimate Events

Ironman. ironman.com
Human Race. humanrace.co.uk
Challenge Family.
challenge-family.com

ITU World Triathlon Series

wts.triathlon.org

Local clubs and information

British Triathlon
britishtriathlon.org