

THE NEW TRAIL



COMMON GROUND

TRAIL RUNNING IS CHANGING. IT'S BECOMING YOUNGER, BIGGER AND MORE DYNAMIC AS GEN Z DISCOVER THE JOY OF RUNNING IN NATURE. BUT IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT TAKING UP A NEW SPORT. FOR GEN Z, TRAIL IS A NEW WAY TO BE. A LIFESTYLE. A CULTURE. HERE'S THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE BRAND ADVANTAGES OF THE NEW TRAIL.

ALL CHANGE AS GEN Z HIT THE TRAIL

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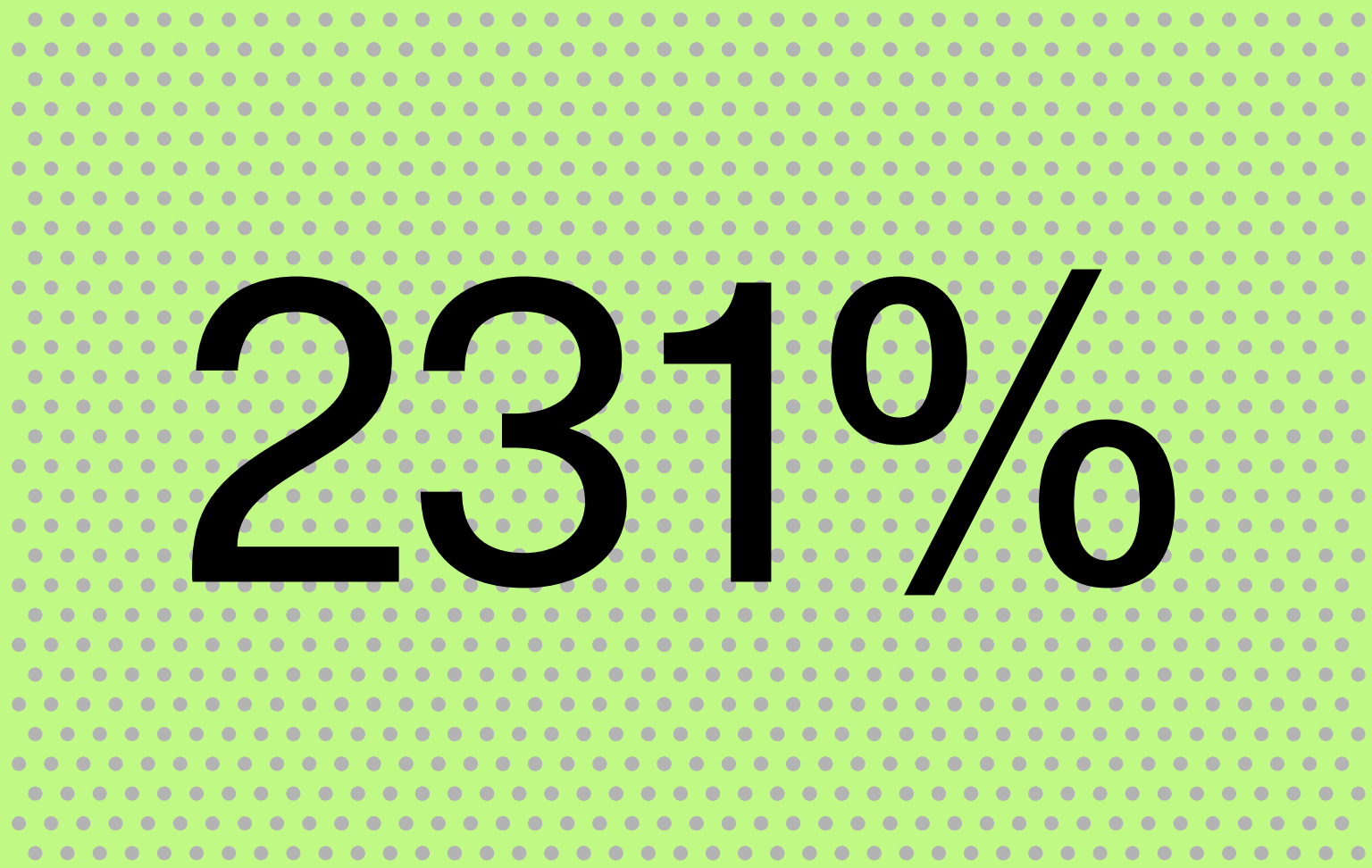
#6

Playing Out

#1. Next Gen Trail

START YOUNG

RUN LONG



231%

Growth in 10 years

SOURCE: THE STATE OF TRAIL RUNNING/RUN REPEAT, 2022

Gen Z kicked off the running boom but now they've discovered trail and are behind its staggering growth. Attracted by its freedom and deep community, by the personal challenge and the total immersion in nature – Gen Z see trail as an authentic escape that builds physical and mental resilience.

“HAVING BRANDS PROMOTING YOUNG PEOPLE IN TRAIL RUNNING WOULD BE BRILLIANT FOR US – SEEING RUNNERS FROM MORE DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS THAN TRADITIONALLY REPRESENTED MAY ENCOURAGE MORE TO TAKE PART.”

REUBEN (17)

14.8M

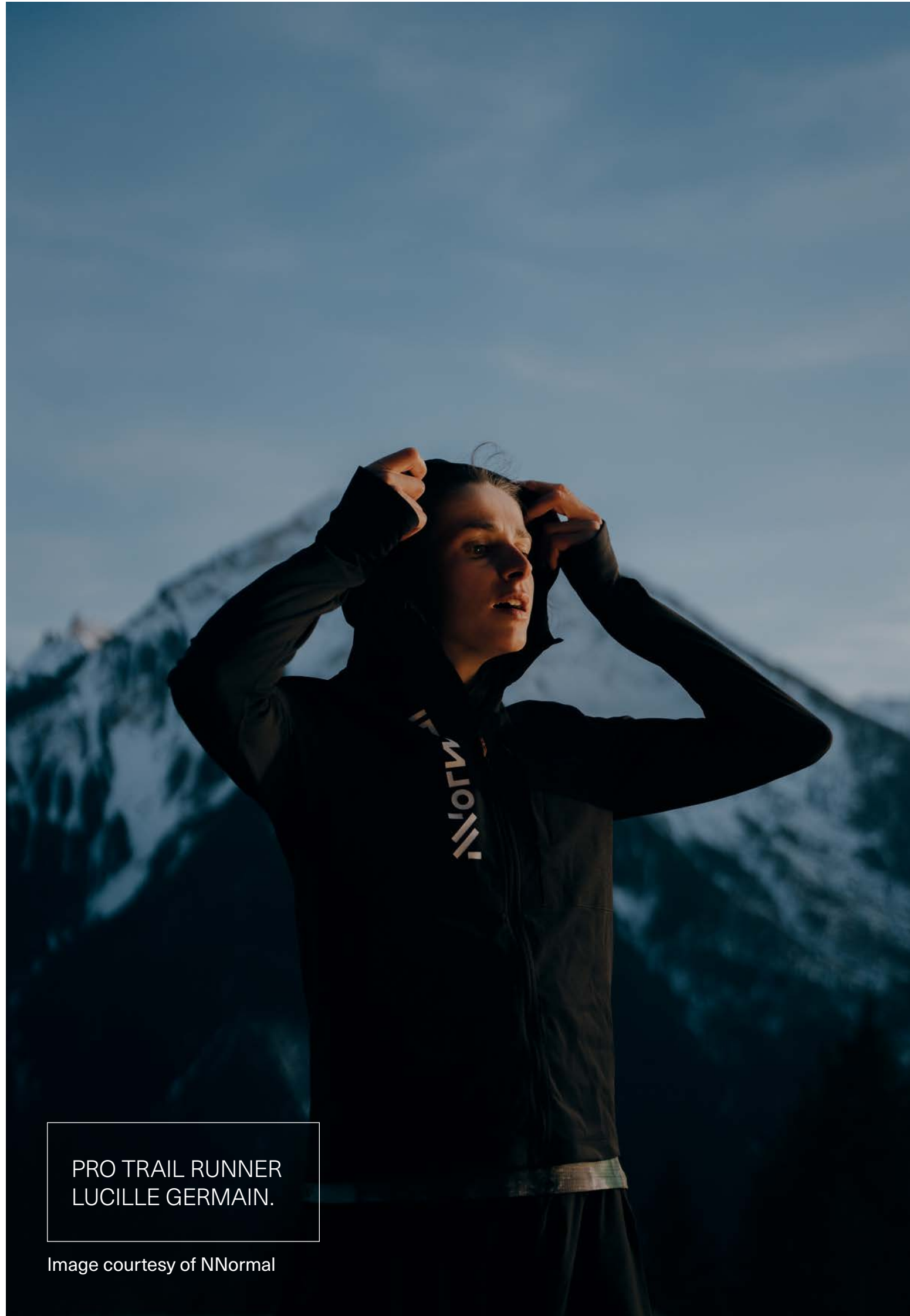
new trail runners in the US in just two years (2022–2024).

SOURCE: SFIA, 2024



MEMBER OF
NIKE ACG'S ALL
CONDITIONS RACING.
DEPT CALEB OLSON.

Image courtesy of Nike



PRO TRAIL RUNNER
LUCILLE GERMAIN.

Image courtesy of NNormal

If trail running takes years to get into, that's no problem for Gen Z. Why? Because they're taking up running at a younger age.

TRAIL IS OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH OLDER ATHLETES, THOSE MID-LIFERS WITH DECADES OF EXPERIENCE. THAT'S PARTLY BECAUSE BUILDING UP TO LONG DISTANCES CAN TAKE YEARS, AND PARTLY DUE TO COST (BOTH IN THE TIME AND THE MONEY TRAIL DEMANDS). BUT IN REALITY THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN YOUNGER TRAIL RUNNERS. THERE'S JUST A GREATER DESIRE NOW TO DIVERSIFY THE SPORT – AND MAKE YOUNGER RUNNERS MORE VISIBLE.

20%

AN ITRA SURVEY FOUND ALMOST 20% TAKING UP TRAIL BEFORE 26, AND ALMOST HALF BEFORE THEY WERE 31.

SOURCE: ITRA, 2022

“WE TEND TO BE INSPIRED BY THOSE THAT WE RELATE TO, AND THERE ARE VERY FEW GEN Z ROLE MODELS IN THE SPORT, EVEN AT THE SUB-ULTRA DISTANCE.”

DR CARL MORRIS, AUTHOR OF DIRTBAG DREAMS, A HISTORY OF MOUNTAIN, ULTRA AND TRAIL RUNNING



ULTRA RUNNER MIAO YAO IS INSPIRING A NEW GENERATION OF TRAIL RUNNERS IN CHINA AND GLOBALLY.

6.5x

Gen Z women increased trail uploads to Strava 6.5x over three years.

SOURCE: UTMB® WORLD SERIES/STRAVA, 2025



NEW BLOOD

AS THEY GET INTO TRAIL IN EVER GREATER NUMBERS, GEN Z ARE COMMITTED TO MAINTAINING ITS UNIQUE CULTURE – A SPORT THAT’S MORE JOYFUL, FUN AND, WHILE PERFORMANCE STILL MATTERS, ABSOLUTELY REFUSES TO TAKE ITSELF TOO SERIOUSLY.

NIKE ACG

NIKE ACG HAS JUST LAUNCHED THE ALL CONDITIONS RACING DEPARTMENT. EMBRACING THE GEN Z TRAIL MINDSET, ITS ELITE TRAIL RUNNERS TEST PROTOTYPES, GIVE FEEDBACK, AND PUSH GEAR TO ITS LIMITS. THE FOCUS IS ON BUILDING BETTER PERFORMANCE EQUIPMENT FOR OUTDOOR ATHLETES BUT THE FEEL IS REAL, IRREVERENT, WILD.

Image courtesy of Nike

ALL CONDITIONS Racing DepartmentSM



The **ALL CONDITIONS RACING DEPARTMENT** exists for high-speed pursuits across all known and unknown terrain. Charging in the face of heat, rain, snow and common sense, it's part science, part madness—and a full commit to unleashing the wildest runners on Planet Earth.

“

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Gen Z are up for more fun and games. The athletes are aware of their role in the game and are willing to be joked about. Running finally lost its too-serious edge; it wasn't fun but trail running now is culture, it's life and it's fun.

JURIAN ELSTGEEST, FOUNDER, 4T2

We're in a new era for trail running – and there's still space to make a move. Here's how:

01. Think long-term

Trail running is a lifetime sport. Support young runners to generate loyalty for life.

02. Create visibility

Celebrate the younger, more diverse icons – and the fact that they've always been there.

03. Don't be serious

Make it relatable. Listen to the Next Gen trail runner, and reflect their wit and humour.

MAP

THE

MEANING

WE FEEL IT

TRAIL RUNNERS DON'T COMPETE FOR THE WINS. THEIR MOTIVATION IS INTRINSIC. THEY RACE TO COMPLETE RATHER THAN COMPETE, TO TEST THEMSELVES RATHER THAN BEAT OTHERS AND, MOST IMPORTANTLY, TO CHASE A FEELING – FROM JOY TO A GREATER SENSE OF EMOTIONAL CONNECTION.

WHY? BECAUSE, OUTSIDE, CONNECTED TO THE CHANGEABILITY AND CHALLENGE OF NATURE, A RUNNER'S FOCUS STAYS ON WHERE THEY'RE AT IN THE MOMENT.

STRESS DISSOLVES. EMOTION BLOOMS.

JOYCE MUTHONI NJERU BEGAN HER TRAIL RUNNING CAREER AGED JUST 12 AND, BY 2024, WAS A WORLD MOUNTAIN RUNNING ATHLETICS WORLD CUP AND GOLDEN TRAIL SERIES WINNER.



Image courtesy of NNNormal

SENSES

AND



EMOTIONS

“WHEN IN THE MOUNTAINS, THERE’S NOTHING ELSE TO THINK ABOUT APART FROM THE TRAIL AHEAD. AN AMAZING WAY TO BE FULLY PRESENT AND IN TOUCH WITH ALL YOUR SENSES AND EMOTIONS.”

MAREK (19)



MALEN OSA FINISHING THE ZEGAMA-AIZKORRI 2025 MOUNTAIN MARATHON.

Image courtesy of Infinite Trails/ Melanie Többe

Trail running creates space. Because it demands a runner be present in the moment, deeper emotions can come into play.

For some, trail running makes them feel alive. For others, it's about joy. And for others still, trail feels spiritual. Having time and space alone with their thoughts creates the space Gen Z runners need to feel intense emotions.

“TRAIL RUNNING IS ABOUT BEING FULLY PRESENT. IT'S DROPPING INTO YOUR OWN BODY, IN MOTION, CONNECTED TO NATURE AND THEREFORE CONNECTED TO SELF AND CONNECTED TO SOURCE – A FLOW STATE.”

JESSICA VANDENBUSH, FOUNDER & EDITOR OF EAT CLEAN RUN DIRTY

77%

OF RESPONDENTS SAID THEY “JUST WANT TO FEEL SOMETHING, TO FEEL ALIVE”.

SOURCE: VML, THE AGE OF RE-ENCHANTMENT, 2023

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The next generation doesn't just want performance. They want meaning. They want to feel like the trail reflects who they are. Whether you're layering for a multi-hour effort or just getting your first taste of dirt, we give you the tools to run your way.

TOMMY HUBERT, SATISFY

TOMMY

HUBERT



Image: Gabriel de Rossi / SATISFY

A Q&A WITH SATISFY: TOMMY HUBERT

How does SATISFY celebrate trail culture?

We start by not looking at trail running just as a sport. We treat it like a culture. When we showed up in Chamonix for UTMB, for example, it wasn't just to race. It was to create a space that felt like SATISFY. Our pro athletes were on the start line, but just as important were the community runs we hosted and the Off-Road Supply experience we set up. We brought people together, not around pace or results, but around the spirit of the trail. That's how we celebrate the culture – by being inside it. Helping shape it.

How would you describe SATISFY trail runners in three words?

Experimental. Romantic. Possessed.

How does SATISFY inspire the next generation of trail runners?

We help people feel comfortable defining their own relationship with trail. Not everyone shows up ready to race 100 miles. That's why we offer different ways in. Our gear is built with purpose, for those who want to go deep, but we also create experiences that don't cost anything. Our LSD runs are free, open to all, and grounded in community. You can show up in whatever gear you have and feel part of it.

This mix matters. Because the next generation doesn't just want performance, they want meaning. They want to feel like the trail reflects who they are. Whether you're layering for a multi-hour effort or just getting your first taste of dirt, we give you the tools to run your way.

How does SATISFY bring luxury to trail?

For us, luxury starts with care. Care in the product, and in the experience. On the product side, that means designing gear that's obsessively considered. From the fabrics we develop with the world's best mills to construction details tested by our athletes, every piece is engineered to feel better, move better, and perform without distraction. Nothing is there for show. Everything serves the adventure ahead.

In experience, that care becomes hospitality. At Cocodona, Saddles, and beyond, we built aid stations that felt like home base: shaded seating, warm food, cold towels, real recovery. With partners like Snow Peak, Yeti, Aesop, and Hyperice, we've created a new standard for what care looks like. Not exclusive. Not performative. Just thoughtful, open, and needed.

“IN THE END, IT’S NOT ABOUT THE PACE, BUT THE COMMITMENT AND DRIVE TO NEVER STOP AND KEEP GOING.”

NIMRAH (19)

KEEP



GOING

We're in a new era for trail running – and there's still space to make a move. Here's how:

01. Get emotional

Tap into it to engage Gen Z. Understand the emotions they want you to help build.

02. Reflect back

Mirror their 'why' – the reasons and the intrinsic motivation that keep Gen Z moving.

03. Show don't tell

Cultivate emotional synchronicity to show you 'get' the Gen Z trail runner.


AWE BEATS ALGORITHMS



60%

DECLINE IN NATURE CONNECTEDNESS SINCE 1800.

SOURCE: MILES RICHARDSON, UNIVERSITY OF DERBY, EARTH, 2025



38%

OF GEN Z DON'T FEEL WELCOME IN THE
OUTDOOR COMMUNITY.

SOURCE: YPULSE HEALTH & FITNESS REPORT, 2023

We're losing our connection to nature. We risk an 'extinction of experience' as future generations continue to lose an awareness of and enjoyment in nature. Urbanisation has weakened the bond – and contributes to a feeling among Gen Zs that they don't belong in the outdoors.



Image courtesy of Infinite Trails/Melanie Többe

The wider outdoor industry has historically presented a limited view of the outdoors – often as a white space, somewhere that needs to be ‘conquered’ or endured. For Gen Z of the global majority in particular, this has created a feeling of being unwelcome. Now, Next Gen leaders in the category are making change, shifting perceptions of who the outdoors is actually for in the process.

OPENING UP THE OUTDOORS (OUTO) WAS SET UP IN 2021 IN RESPONSE TO AN INDUSTRY THAT HAS “DEEPLY ENTRENCHED BLINDSPOTS WHEN IT COMES TO THE EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE OF THE GLOBAL MAJORITY WITHIN THE OUTDOORS AND SOCIETY MORE GENERALLY.” VIA A 12-WEEK ACCELERATOR PROGRAMME, IT EMPOWERS NEW LEADERS ACROSS EUROPE TO BUILD AND SCALE OUTDOOR STARTUPS, ORGANISATIONS, CLUBS AND COMMUNITIES.

“THERE IS A GROWING MOVEMENT OF CHANGEMAKERS ACROSS EUROPE WHO AREN'T WAITING FOR THE INDUSTRY TO CATCH UP. THEY ARE BUILDING COMMUNITIES AND EMPOWERING PEOPLE OF THE GLOBAL MAJORITY, AND BEYOND, TO EMBRACE AND ENGAGE WITH THE OUTDOORS ON THEIR OWN TERMS.”

OPENING UP THE OUTDOORS

“ORGANISATIONS LIKE OURS
ARE THE CHANGE THAT THE
SECTOR NEEDS TO SEE, THAT
GEN Z NEED TO SEE.”

SABRINA PACE-HUMPHREYS,
CO-FOUNDER OF BLACK TRAIL RUNNERS

BLACK TO THE TRAILS IS THE
WORLD'S MOST DIVERSE
TRAIL EVENT. SOLD OUT
SINCE IT LAUNCHED IN 2023,
THIS 'CARNIVAL OF TRAIL
RUNNING' IS ORGANISED BY
THE CAMPAIGNING CHARITY
BLACK TRAIL RUNNERS.

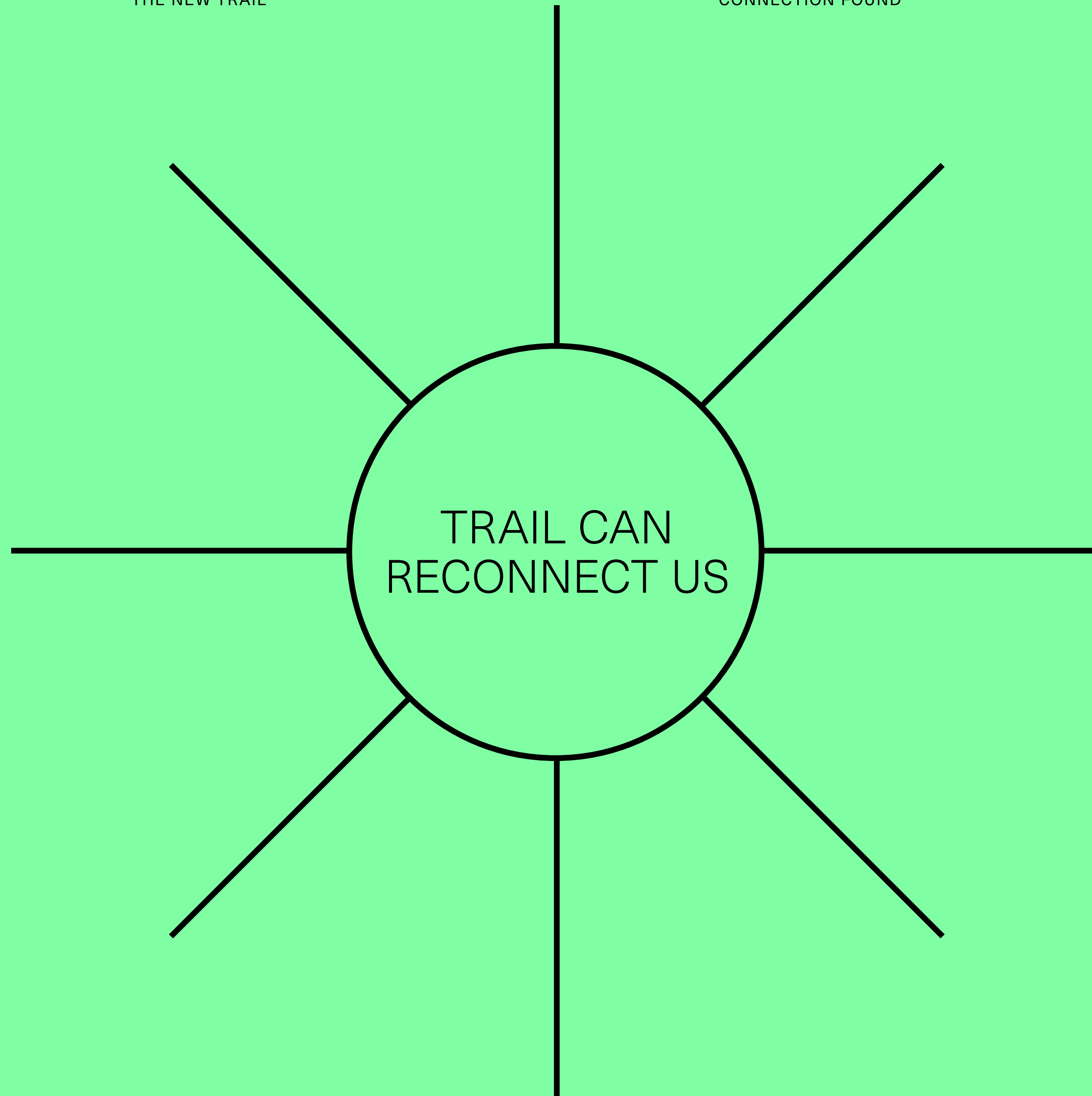


WHILE TRAIL RUNNERS FEEL MORE CONNECTED TO NATURE – TRAIL RUNNING CAN ALSO SERVE TO RECONNECT US.

INTEREST IN NATURE NATURALLY DROPS OFF FOR ALMOST EVERYONE DURING OUR TEENAGE YEARS, BEFORE IT RECOVERS AGAIN DURING ADULTHOOD.

GEN Z ARE NO DIFFERENT. DESPITE THEIR TOTAL IMMERSION IN THE DIGITAL WORLD, THE VAST MAJORITY WISH THEY HAD MORE TIME FOR OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES AND THINK OF THEMSELVES AS OUTDOORSY PEOPLE.

THEY WANT TO RECONNECT. AND THEY WANT TO EXPERIENCE A DIFFERENT KIND OF DOPAMINE HIT – THE KICK OF GETTING OUTDOORS AND DISCOVERING “MAD VIEWS” – THE KINDS OF SCENERY AND LANDSCAPES THAT MAKE GETTING OUTDOORS WORTH THE EFFORT.



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Normal inspires the younger generation by showing that there is another way to experience trail running – one that values responsibility as much as performance.

Instead of following what the industry has always done, we choose to do things differently: creating durable products, reducing waste, being transparent, sharing durability data, and constantly questioning how we can improve.

SITO LUIS SALAS, CEO, NNORMAL

SITO

SITO



Image courtesy of NNormal

SALAS

A Q&A WITH CEO OF NNORMAL: SITO LUIS SALAS

How does NNormal inspire the new generation of trail runners?

It's a mindset – doing more with less, thinking long-term, acting consciously – is what we hope to pass on. We don't just want to sell gear; we want to inspire a way of thinking, where every decision matters. If we can show the next generation that you can love the mountains and also protect them, then we're doing our job right.

How does NNormal create a sense of belonging?

Belonging, for NNormal, starts with shared purpose. We connect with the trail community not through flashy campaigns, but by living the values we believe in – honesty, responsibility, and respect for nature.

We're building a community of people who want to do things differently – who believe that being part of the trail world also means taking care of it. Through open conversations, transparent choices and collective actions, we invite others to be part of something that goes beyond the individual.

What does trail culture mean to NNormal on and off trails?

Humility, effort, and respect for nature. On the trail, it's about performance, passion, and a deep connection with nature and the mountains.

Off the trail, it's about living and consuming in a way that's consistent with our values – appreciating our surroundings and taking care of them so we can continue to enjoy the incredible environment we're lucky to have.

How can trail runners act more responsibly?

At NNormal, we're closely connected to the Kilian Jornet Foundation, with whom we develop initiatives to restore trails – for example, improving access to the mountains and promoting trail running as a way for more people to connect with nature.

Outside of this, any runner can run more consciously – carrying less, leaving less, repairing more. And learning, educating others, and supporting local conservation and regeneration efforts.

QUIET A BUSY MIND

Gen Z are almost always stressed – and while they prioritise mental health and use exercise as a tool to manage it, their wellness needs remain unmet.

Nature can provide a counterbalance; among its many benefits, for example, time in nature can reduce cortisol levels.

But the inspirational settings that trail delivers also offer something else.

A connection to something bigger than ourselves. We can find awe on the trail and, in turn, perspective: awe-inspiring locations remind us of both the precariousness and resilience of human life.

Trail's emphasis on community also shifts runners from a competitive mindset to a connected one, and this combination – awe, exercise, connection – frees the mind from rumination, overthinking and anxiety.

“I ALWAYS SAY THAT TRAIL RUNNING IS FOR WHEN I WANT TO BE OUT OF MY HEAD, AND ROAD RUNNING IS WHEN I WANT TO BE IN MY HEAD.”

LILLY (20)



INFINITE TRAILS

THE ADIDAS TERREX INFINITE TRAILS TAKES PLACE IN THE SALZBURG ALPS, WITH ROUTES THROUGH THE GASTEIN VALLEY'S WATERFALLS, PINE FORESTS, ALPINE MEADOWS AND SUMMIT VIEWS. THE EMPHASIS IS EQUAL PARTS NATURE AND COMMUNITY; THE FOUR-DAY RACE PROGRAMME IS DESIGNED TO CONNECT RUNNERS NOT ONLY TO THE MOUNTAINS, BUT TO LOCAL PEOPLE, CULTURE AND FOOD.

We're in a new era for trail running – and there's still space to make a move. Here's how:

01. Leave no trace

Reconnect Gen Z to nature, and a desire to protect and restore it.

02. Reconnect to self

Show the link between body, mind and nature – reconnection is vital to our health.

03. Build belonging

Help Gen Z build outdoor skills and confidence, so that they feel they belong.

#4. Soft Adventure

GO

GENTLY



Image courtesy of SATISFY

New sports can be intimidating. Social media can amplify this by setting an expectation that new runners ‘should’ be able to build time and distance within weeks. Yet seasoned trail runners caution against going out hot and emphasise that the best way to get started is just to start – slowly.

“NOT EVERYONE SHOWS UP READY TO RACE 100 MILES. THAT’S WHY WE OFFER DIFFERENT WAYS IN. OUR GEAR IS OBSESSIVELY CONSIDERED, FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO GO DEEP. BUT WE ALSO CREATE EXPERIENCES THAT DON’T COST ANYTHING TO JOIN. OUR LSD RUNS ARE FREE, OPEN TO ALL, AND GROUNDED IN COMMUNITY. YOU CAN SHOW UP IN WHATEVER GEAR YOU HAVE.”

TOMMY HUBERT, SATISFY

MAD

“Trail running is an adventure that’s fun, refreshing, and rewarding. The scenery adds to the enjoyment, and the varying terrain keeps it exciting while also challenging me in new ways.”

MOLLY (22)

VIEWS

NIKE X ALPINE RUN PROJECT: THE VERTICAL KILOMETRE

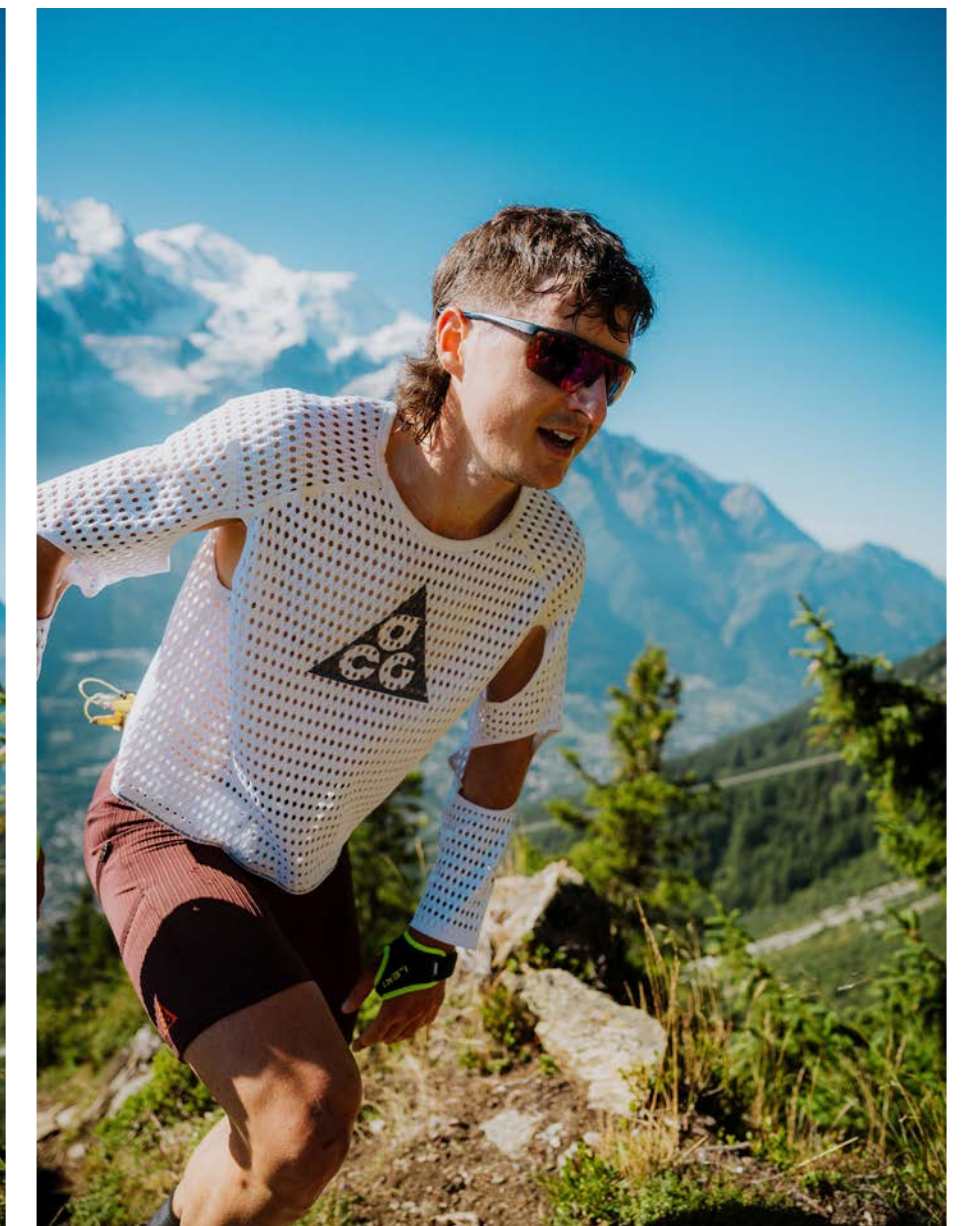
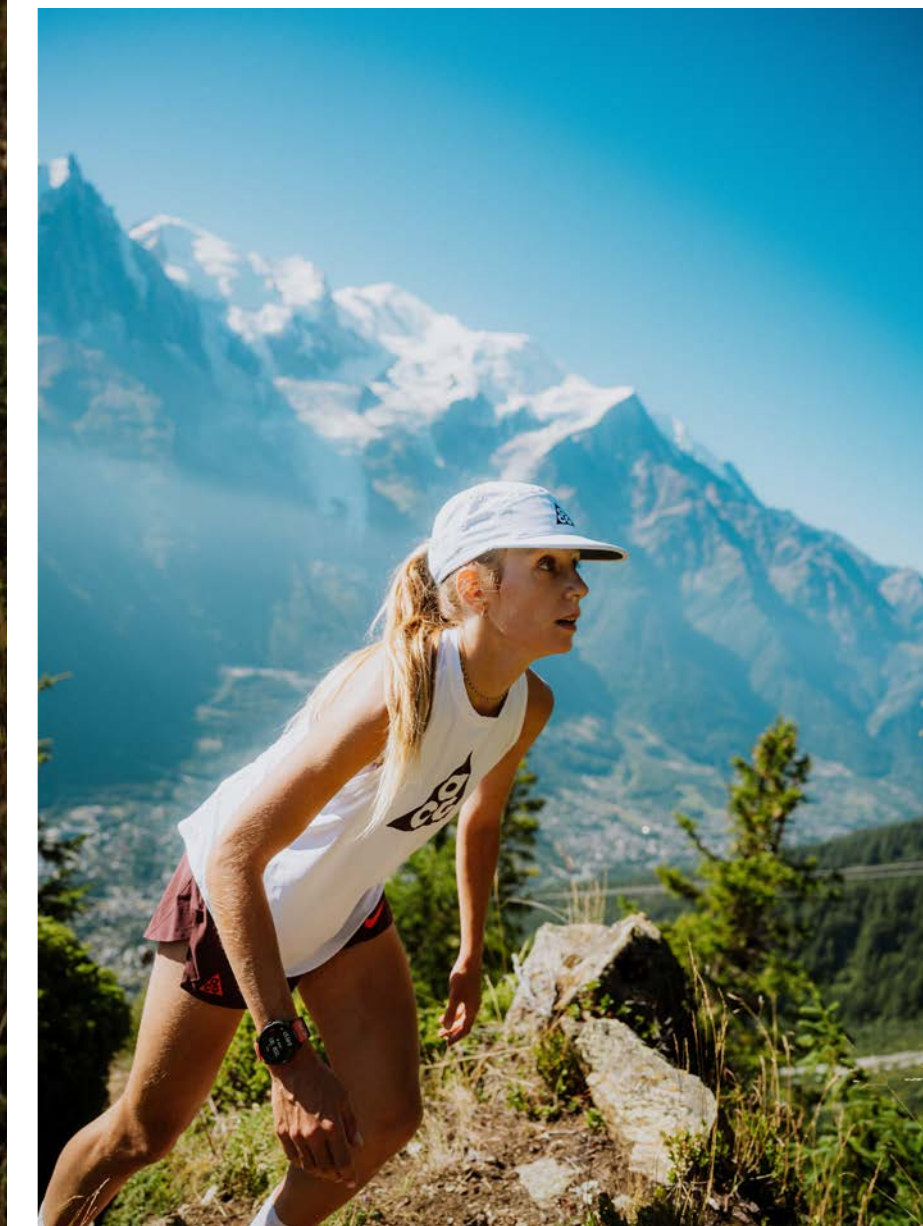
Alpine Run Project is a beautiful thing. Launched by Nike triathlete John McAvoy and Youth Beyond Borders in 2023, and backed by partners that include Nike and Strava, ARP opens trail to young, urban runners who might otherwise not see themselves there. It puts 16 to 23 year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds through a six-month training programme before entering them into international races. It takes a cohort to UTMB, for example, and this year ARP runners took on Chamonix's Vertical Kilometre with Nike's ACG elite racing team – a route that climbs 1,000 metres in 3.8km and is one of trail's most memorable experiences.

Sports photographer Nathan Phua documented the runners along the way. "Trail running gives me a sense of euphoria," says Phua. "It's the feeling of moving over long distances; that sense of joy at being out in nature."

For Nike, ARP helps overcome the barriers that those in inner-city communities face – which sometimes is as simple as raising awareness of a sport they might not know is open to them. The ambition is big: to get thousands more into trail in the next few years.



Imagery courtesy of Nathan Phua



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Being out in nature – in the mountains, in open spaces – can show young people that there is a world beyond the boundaries they see every day. That experience can help reframe what they believe about themselves, what they can achieve in life.

JOHN MCAVOY, NIKE ATHLETE

LOW RISK

HIGH IMMERSION

With snobbery creeping into run clubs – social posts critiquing fits and those without the “right” gear – soft adventure counters that pressure. It’s a concept that lets Gen Z experience the outdoors without investing too much in skills or equipment first; just turn up and try.

So, it eases them in, and tacitly recognises that the cost-of-living crisis, job insecurity, time poverty and difficulty accessing places to run trail can all create barriers.

“A LOT OF PEOPLE STRUGGLE WITH FINANCIAL ACCESS OR ACCESSIBILITY OUTSIDE OF MAJOR AREAS OR CITIES; IT WOULD BE GREAT TO SEE MORE TRAIL RUNNING GROUPS DESIGNED FOR AND BY YOUNG PEOPLE.”

LILLY (20)

THE PEAK DIVIDE

THE PEAK DIVIDE STATES THAT IT'S "NOT A RACE." INSTEAD, IT'S "A HOSTED TRAIL SHUFFLE" ACROSS THE UK'S PEAK DISTRICT NATIONAL PARK THAT DESCRIBES ITSELF AS AN ADVENTURE FOR THE CURIOUS - MAKING IT EXPLICIT THAT IT WELCOMES ALL.

We're in a new era for trail running – and there's still space to make a move. Here's how:

01. Easy does it

Make trail running accessible by showing how easy it is to try out.

02. Mind over matter

Show that the “right” fit or kit doesn't exist; the right mindset does.

03. Be adventurous

Dial up the desire for adventure, and use the excitement of the trail to overcome barriers.

#5. Wild Spirit

LIVE

FREELY

Trail isn't just a sport. It's a movement.

AS THE LINE BETWEEN ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE AND FASHION BLURS, TRAIL CULTURE IS EXTENDING INTO STYLE CODES, ADVENTURE, MUSIC AND FESTIVALS.

FROM SATISFY'S LSD RUNS TO HOKA'S COLLABORATIONS WITH UP-AND-COMING DESIGNERS AND THE LOVE TRAILS FESTIVAL, TRAIL RUNNING IS A MOVEMENT.



Image courtesy of SATISFY



LOVE TRAILS

FUSING TRAIL AND ENDURANCE RUNNING WITH WELLNESS, MUSIC, TALKS, FOOD AND ADVENTURE WITH A SUMMER FESTIVAL – LOVE TRAILS PUTS AN EMPHASIS ON “OUTDOOR CULTURE.” WITH RACES FROM 3KM TO ULTRAS IT CREATES SPACE FOR FIRST-TIME AND EVEN NON-RUNNERS, WHILE THE OVERALL FEELING IS OF INCLUSIVITY AND CELEBRATION.

New Aesthetics

TRAIL IS CHARACTERISED BY A MINDSET: OPEN, INCLUSIVE, SOLUTIONS-FOCUSED, JOYFUL. AND, ALONGSIDE, RUNS A FIERCELY INDEPENDENT MUSIC, ART AND MEDIA SCENE.

TRAIL HAS ITS OWN AESTHETIC, TOO, A DISTINCT LOOK THAT'S LOOSER, MORE COLOURFUL, A LITTLE BIT DIY, AND DOMINATED BY NICHE BRANDS THAT DEMONSTRATE DEEP CONNECTION TO THE SPECIFIC DEMANDS OF THE TRAIL.

“EVERY PIECE IS DESIGNED TO FEEL BETTER, MOVE BETTER, AND PERFORM WITHOUT DISTRACTION. NOTHING IS THERE FOR SHOW. EVERYTHING SERVES THE ADVENTURE AHEAD. IN EXPERIENCE, THAT CARE BECOMES HOSPITALITY, AID STATIONS THAT FEEL LIKE HOME BASE: SHADED SEATING, WARM FOOD, COLD TOWELS, REAL RECOVERY.”

TOMMY HUBERT, SATISFY



Image courtesy of SATISFY

A CONVERSATION WITH EAT CLEAN RUN DIRTY FOUNDER AND EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Jessica Vandebush.



Image courtesy of Eat Clean Run Dirty

“IT’S DIRTY, WARPED, TATTERED, BOLD AND A LITTLE QUEER. PUNK ROCK. IT’S COCKY BUT HUMBLE, AND JUST CRAZY ENOUGH TO TRY. IT’S WHAT HAPPENS WHEN... YOU’VE TAKEN IT TOO FAR AND GET KNOCKED ON YOUR ASS BUT KEEP COMING BACK FOR MORE. IT’S DEFINITELY ON THE SPECTRUM. IT’S PROVOCATIVE. UNCENSORED. IN OTHER WORDS, IT’S JUST LIKE YOU.”

This is the intro to Eat Clean Run Dirty, the magazine, podcast and trail running community created by Jessica Vandebush in 2015 – and while it describes the magazine it also does a good job in summing up what makes trail running so distinct.

Jess started ECRD in response to being new to trail and falling for a community she discovered was inclusive and real. “No one wants to know what job you do, or what car you drive. It matters more what kind of person you are, how you treat other people and the outdoors. I love this even playing field that’s so separate from our regular life.”

Since 2015 Jess has tracked trail as it has grown and traces its culture back to the “old timer” pioneers. “Trail used to be frugal, a little bit punk rock; before they had water bottles runners would carry a syrup bottle cleaned out from the kitchen, makeshift things like that.” Now, of course, brands have entered the game, “but there is still this core culture where everyone will welcome you in and make sure you have a place at the table.”

For Jess, trail is at a crossroads. “As more money is involved, there are more events and some – especially those who have been running a long time – don’t want to see it commercialised. But for the sport to grow and for there to be prize money for the pros we need brands. It’s a tricky relationship and how brands show up is really important

– they need to do so with an understanding of the community they’re joining. Some do it well, some make mistakes.”

She points to races being bought by brands who then hype the competitive element to the degree it creates backlash (bearing in mind that competition in trail is very different to road or track), or to brands marketing something they don’t understand – “and they put out content that falls flat, it doesn’t speak to a niche audience.”

But – she also sees growth and diversification as a positive, not least because if more people get into trail, more people “might have a new found or deeper appreciation for protecting public land.”

As for Jess, the joy of trail running is very simple. “It’s about feeling wild again. Whatever’s weighing on you from that day, you kind of feel like you’re wringing clean, like a dish rag squeezing out that extra water. It might take a mile or two, but you can quiet the noise, clear your head, and find yourself connected to yourself. You can find this beautiful peace in movement in the outdoors.”

“THERE IS STILL THIS
CORE CULTURE WHERE
EVERYONE WILL
WELCOME YOU IN AND
MAKE SURE YOU HAVE
A PLACE AT THE TABLE.”



Make mistakes, get messy

Pragmatism and trail culture go hand in hand – an attitude that anything worth working towards takes time and effort, yes, but also requires vulnerability and a willingness to make mistakes.

In trail, as in life, perfection is an illusion. Trail culture embraces the chaotic reality of what it is to be human.

“YOU HAVE TO BE WILLING TO BE MESSY – AND THAT INSPIRED ME. BE MESSY IN PURSUIT OF ATHLETIC GOALS, BUT ANYTHING ELSE TOO, WHETHER YOU WANT TO BE A WRITER OR WHATEVER. THERE IS FAILURE ALONG THE WAY. THERE ARE UGLY PARTS OF IT, BUT YOU HAVE TO BE BRAVE ENOUGH NOT TO WORRY ABOUT THAT. YOU DESERVE THAT FOR YOURSELF.”

JESSICA VANDENBUSH, FOUNDER &
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF EAT CLEAN RUN DIRTY

We're in a new era for trail running – and there's still space to make a move. Here's how:

01. Pursue messy

Celebrate mistakes, failure and imperfection in the same way that the trail community does.

02. Love indie

Reflect the joy, inclusivity and independent mindset of trail in design, product, events.

03. Fuel connection

Celebrate the wider community – off the trail as much as on it.

#6. Playing Out

THE

URBAN

HYBRID

TRAIL IN THE CITY

IN THEIR PURSUIT OF ADVENTURE, GEN Z REDREW THE BOUNDARIES OF TRAIL SO THAT THEY COULD EXPERIENCE IT WITHOUT LEAVING THE CITY. PARKS, FOOTPATHS, TOWPATHS, DECOMMISSIONED INDUSTRIAL AREAS – THEY'RE ALL THE PLAYGROUND FOR URBAN TRAIL.

TRAIL ESCAPE

STARTING AND ENDING IN THE CITY, THESE DUAL EVENTS (MARATHON AND 25KM) FOLLOW TRAFFIC-FREE COURSES OUT OF CITIES INTO THE COUNTRYSIDE AND BACK AGAIN. SLOWING DOWN TO "TAKE IN THE BEAUTY OF WHERE YOU'RE RUNNING" IS ENCOURAGED, AND THE EMPHASIS – IN TRUE TRAIL SPIRIT – IS NOT ON TIME, BUT TERRAIN.



Image courtesy of Trail Escape



20%

OF RUNNERS SAY THAT TRAIL WAS THEIR
FIRST RUN EXPERIENCE.



64%

SAY THAT ROAD RUNNING WAS THEIR
FIRST RUN EXPERIENCE.

SOURCE: ITRA 2022

Talk to any run club runner and they'll probably say they got into it because it was easy – shoes on, out the door – which means that most first run experiences are on road. But the run club boom has created a new hybrid.

All Terrain

THE GEN Z ATHLETE LIKES TO MIX IT UP. FROM THE RISE OF GRAVEL BIKING IN EUROPE TO THE GLOBAL EXPLOSION IN THE ULTIMATE HYBRID SPORT – HYROX – VIA THE CROSSOVER BETWEEN TRAIL AND OTHER OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES (FASTPACKING, BIKEPACKING, ORIENTEERING, EVEN CHINA'S DOG TRAIL-LIKE OBSTACLE COURSES), GEN Z HAVE MOVED AWAY FROM MONOCULTURAL SPORTS TOWARDS THOSE THAT ARE MULTILAYERED AND MULTI-SENSORY.

URBAN TRAIL SITS EXACTLY IN THIS SPOT: ADVENTUROUS, SOCIABLE, FREEDOM-FOCUSED, AND A LOT OF FUN.

“FOR RUNNERS IN THE CITY, WHO ARE EAGER TO RUN TO THE NEAREST PARK AND FIND PLEASURE IN A MORE NATURAL SETTING, GRAVEL IS A MOVEMENT, A MINDSET, AN ATTITUDE; IT'S RUNNING NOT JUST FOR PERFORMANCE, BUT FOR THE SHARED PLEASURE OF BEING WITH FRIENDS, EXPLORING AND SPENDING TIME TOGETHER.”



SALOMON'S NEW GRVL SHOES ARE INSPIRED BY GRAVEL BIKE TIRES, WITH EXTRA-GRIP SOLES THAT ADAPT TO DIFFERENT SURFACES – PERFECT FOR URBAN TRAIL'S MIXED TERRAIN.

Training in the city

Urban trail comes with its own challenges. The lack of elevation or long distances off-road can, for example, make it harder to train.

But Gen Z runners are getting creative, finding diversity within city limits by mixing up hard and soft surfaces, doing 'hill' repeats on steps and staircases, technical footwork on cobbles, endurance on long towpaths.

ECO TRAIL, PARIS

EXCLUSIVE ACCESS TO PLACES NORMALLY OFF LIMITS; CULTURAL ICONS; UTMB LINKS, DISTANCE AND ELEVATION - THIS 30KM TRAIL TICKS ALL THE BOXES. IT STARTS AT THE OBSERVATORY OF MEUDON (NORMALLY CLOSED TO THE PUBLIC), ENDS AT THE EIFFEL TOWER, AND FEELS DESIGNED FOR DISTANCE ROAD RUNNERS CURIOUS ABOUT TRAIL.



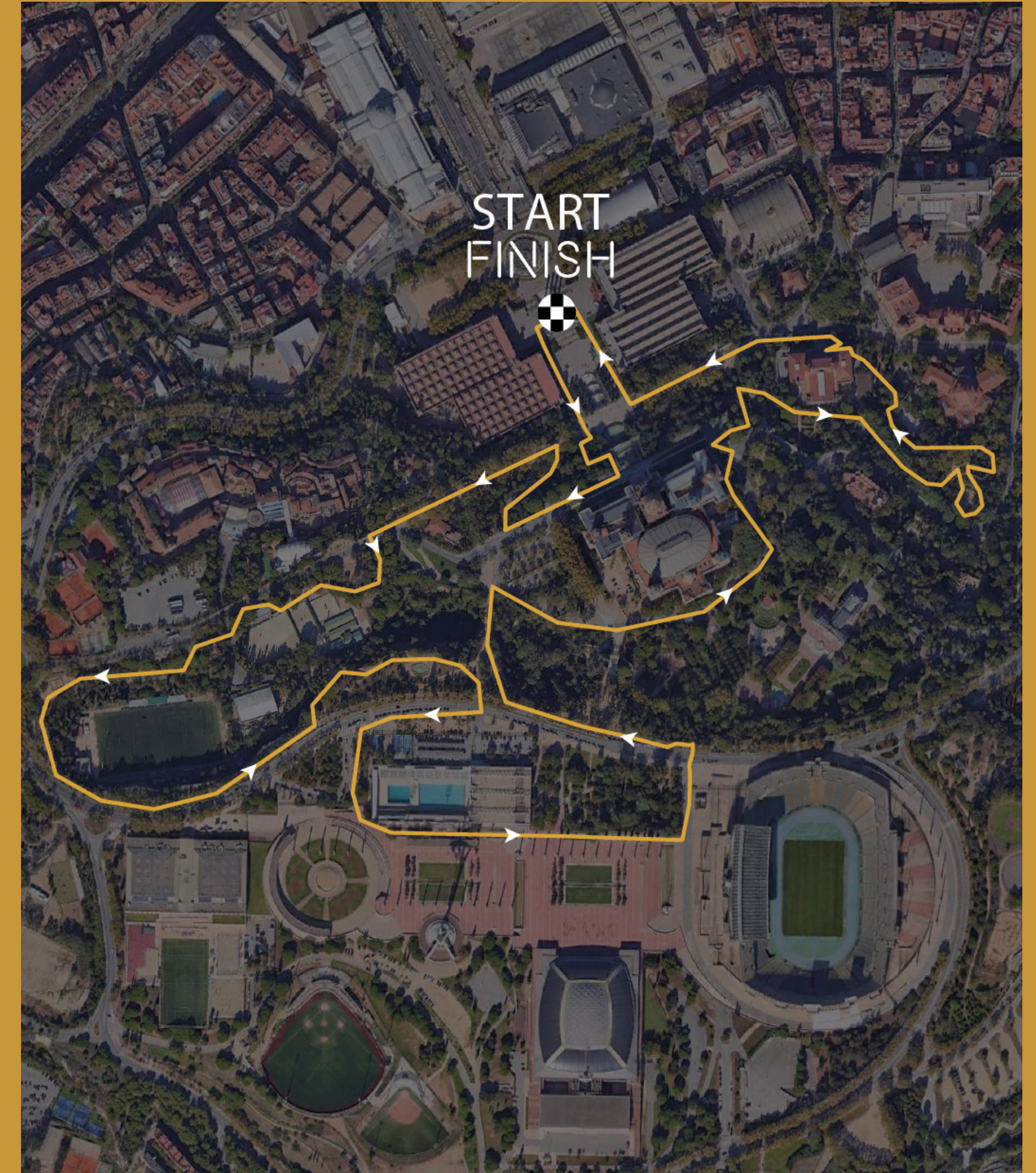
Image courtesy of Eco Trail

Urban exploring

Urban trail reveals an unseen city. Pockets of wildness and wildlife. From the London Loop – a network of footpaths that creates 153 miles of hybrid running on a route circling the UK's capital – to the parklands and hills of Barcelona's Montjuïc, every city offers hidden routes for curious runners willing to find them.

SALOMON RUN BARCELONA

SHORT BUT PUNCHY, THIS IS A FAST, TECHNICAL COURSE THAT COMES IN AT 5K AND 10KM – WITH A MIX OF URBAN AND TRAIL SECTIONS THAT INCLUDES MONTJUÏC AND VIEWS OF ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST BEAUTIFUL CITIES.



HOKA LET'S FLY HACKNEY

HOKA FLY GUIDES ARE NEIGHBOURHOOD RUNS CREATED IN COLLABORATION WITH LOCAL RUNNERS AND CLUBS THAT JOIN THE DOTS BETWEEN PARKS, OPEN SPACES AND LOW-TRAFFIC ROUTES. THE HACKNEY EDITION SAW YOUR FRIENDLY RUNNERS CREATE VARIOUS START-TO-FINISH RUNS THAT OFFER UP SCENIC, PARK, STREET ART OR BAKERY LOOPS.



OFF LICENCE
OPEN
TILL LATE

We're in a new era for trail running – and there's still space to make a move. Here's how:

01. Out and back

Meet urban trail runners where they are with routes that begin and end in the city.

02. Join the dots

Join up tracks, trails and paths, and create new urban trails with and for Gen Z.

03. Be an explorer

Celebrate the unseen city. Reconnect Gen Z to nature, by showing where it lives in the city.

We're in a new era for trail running – are you ready to build common ground? Here's how:

#1

Start young, run long – promote younger, more diverse trail runners to drive lifelong participation.

#2

Map the meaning to connect on a new, deeper level, and ignite emotional synchrony.

#3

Awe beats algorithms every time. Show Gen Z the power of nature – and that they belong in it.

#4

Go gently – make the adventure of trail easy, accessible and fun.

#5

Live freely – reflect a mindset and culture that lives as much off the trails as on it.

#6

Urban hybrid is here. Help Gen Z discover the wilderness and the wild-life in urban areas.

With gratitude to everyone who contributed their insight, viewpoint and perspective:

SITO LUIS SALAS

CEO, NNORMAL

JURIAN ELSTGEEST

FOUNDER, 4T2

TOMMY HUBERT

PR & COMMUNICATION, SATISFY

JESSICA VANDENBUSH

FOUNDER AND EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
OF EAT CLEAN RUN DIRTY

JOHN MCAVOY

NIKE ATHLETE & FOUNDER OF
ALPINE RUN PROJECT

PARIS BETHAL

OPENING UP THE OUTDOORS (OUTO)
COUNCIL MEMBER

DR. CARL MORRIS

AUTHOR OF DIRTBAG DREAMS A HISTORY
OF MOUNTAIN, ULTRA AND TRAIL RUNNING

SABRINA PACE-HUMPHREYS

CO-FOUNDER OF BLACK TRAIL RUNNERS

NATHAN PHUA

SPORTS & LIFESTYLE PHOTOGRAPHER
AND VIDEOGRAPHER

RICH GILL

PHOTOGRAPHER & TRAIL RUNNER
TEAM NORTH FACE UK

GEN Z TRAIL RUNNERS:

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THE PEAK DIVIDE, LOVE TRAILS, TRAIL ESCAPE,
ECO TRAIL AND SALOMON RUN BARCELONA.

Want to discover more? We're a cultural research and strategy agency focused on the impact that sport, movement, and connection have on our wellbeing.

CONTACT:

JANICE@WEARECOMMONGROUND.COM

SUSIE@WEARECOMMONGROUND.COM

WEARECOMMONGROUND.COM

COMMON GROUND