



## Welcome to hell: The Navy SEAL Adventure Challenge

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It's 32 C and I am lying on my back while a six-foot-tall man who is reputed to have blown up enemy ships and tracked down Taliban is blasting orders like machine-gun fire in my face.

"I said, 'Sit up!' I said, '10 more!' "

That would be 10 more sit-ups with a 13-kilogram sandbag on my chest. Though my tormentor's face is only about six inches from mine, his features are blurred because: a) I don't have my reading glasses on; and b) my eyes are full of salt and sand. I've just spent two hours crawling on my belly through the sand, then swimming in pounding surf in fatigues and jungle boots.

Welcome to the Seal Adventure Challenge. I and 25 other merrymakers (all of whom are half my age) are in Navy Seal training. Okay, not exactly "in" Seal training. I am in the faux variation. Each, for our own reasons, has chosen a compressed version of Navy Seal Hell Week as a vacation.

We are not the only holidaymakers forsaking Caribbean all-inclusives. While the North American waistline is expanding, so does our taste for brutish boot camp holidays. Call it the Code Orange effect: Now, you can sign up for SWAT training in a luxurious resort in Idaho, fun counterterrorism wilderness survival vacations, and even holidays that feature a relaxing bit of G force and zero gravity in jets and rockets. These adrenalin adventures - or special ops-lite getaways - may not replace wine tours, but they are increasingly popular.

A little wine tour in Tuscany or, better, a simple cappuccino in Rome is just what I'm in the mood for after the first four hours of a workout that started at dawn and included running through tangles of thorny vines, in deep sand and on grass, asphalt and gravel punctuated by intermittent commands to "Drop!" for great numbers of push-ups for mysterious infractions. Only hours in, it seems as if days have passed. But wasn't it just yesterday my daughter dropped me off at the airport in Boston?

Holidaymakers like me have two choices for the Navy Seal escapade. One is a Hell Week, seven days of land and sea combat training including a 13,000-foot parachute jump. The other version, sans the midair helicopter frolic, boasts 24 sleepless hours of hard-core training. I sanely choose the latter, but what kind of vacation is only 24 hours? Well, the event itself may be short, but the trip begins the moment you sign up.

Six weeks before arriving at Camp Story in Norfolk, Va., preparation begins not with reading Fodor's, but poring over a 50-page tome of exercises by Seal trainer Stew Smith. His brutal daily regimen is intended to get all "recruits" in shape to meet minimum Seal standards. It is a combo of push-ups, pull-ups, sit-ups, jumping jacks, running and swimming under and over water while breathing as little as possible. For almost two months, predawn

Spartan runs, military presses and combat swimming strokes became my life. Every day from 6 to 8 a.m. I was getting ready for my "vacation."

Although not part of the official Seal holiday curriculum, in the evenings I complemented my training by studying all eight seasons of *24*, every *Rocky* film and, of course, *GI Jane*. I weighed the merits of various army-issue boots and MRE's (meals ready to eat), and shopped for the vacation wear on a list sent to me by the Seal folks (Lesson 1: Cammies are not camisoles, but camouflage uniforms).

Nothing, however, prepared me for the experience. The 24-hour challenge is divided into physical training for land and water operations, combat training and an intelligence-gathering mission that takes place at hours when most good citizens are asleep.

I am what the French call *une femme d'un certain age*. Had it been available, I would have taken this challenge on decades ago as did the three young women suspended on the pull-up bars in front of me, fatigues still sandy and soaked from an earlier adventure. After a splendid performance of one pull-up with assistance, in a generous "save-face" gesture, I have been assigned to keep track of how many each of the younger recruits has done. About half of my co-vacationers are either about to go into the navy or are seriously considering it, like my push-up partner (who executes 110 push-ups and kindly cheers me through my huffy-puffy 10) and a 17-year-old who "wanted to be a Seal since I was 5."

Half a day in and temperatures soaring, we have learned to march, halt, execute sharp turns left and right and yell "hooyah!" at various intervals. We have crawled on rocks, tread water with our hands tied tightly behind us, dragged bricks, mannequins and each other many lengths of a pool and eaten nothing. No one has quit despite a welcome from Don Mann, one of our instructors and a legend among special operations types: "Some people will cry. Some people will vomit. Some people will get hurt." So far, only one person has vomited and it wasn't me.

Late afternoon involves swimming in surf in our clothes, a 3.2-kilometre (two-mile) run to something called Hill of Doom, a 30-metre climb up a sandhill in 21 C heat, followed by more than a dozen obstacles to race over and under and fall from. My favourite was scaling a two-storey-high wall. I falter, fail and fall while the buff bolt and leap.

As the sun sets and whippoorwills and crickets kick in, we finally eat, swatting mosquitoes and ripping open plastic sealed sacks of pressed squares of meats and cubes of carbohydrates. A few more people vomit and a couple of thirtysomethings here for a break from raising kids just pass out. I use these few minutes to remove my boots. My socks are bloodstained and for a moment in my great fatigue and minor pain, I feel a deep sadness for the troops sitting on the ground somewhere in Afghanistan or Iraq.

It is night and we do push-ups by moonlight in the piney Virginia woods. In small groups under the guidance of Seal instructors, we paint our faces the colours of the forest and head out into the dark on a reconnaissance mission pursued by "bad guys" in trucks and on foot. Silence except the crack of boots on branches and the whippoorwills. We locate the enemy helicopter. We decode and report their plans. It's dawn and Alpha, Bravo and Charlie companies can now go home.

It's been hell, but I've learned something. Instructor Mann, when not shouting orders, pelts us with encouragement, and one thing he says sticks with me: "You can be 10 times more than you think you can be."

I'll keep that. Worth the bloody socks and 250 bucks.

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*Want to go? U.S. Army Ranger Captain Jeff Soule's full-week Special Ops Academy costs \$2,1047 (1-808-291-5036). The 24-hour no-sleep SEAL Adventure Challenge costs \$204 ( [www.SEALTrainingAdventures.com](http://www.SEALTrainingAdventures.com)).*

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