It’s 8 p.m. on a Friday in San Francisco and 42-year-old Dean Karnazes is preparing for a jog. To Sonoma. For those unfamiliar with California geography, that’s a run of 70 miles, or roughly two and a half marathons. It’ll take him 11 hours to complete, but for Karnazes, who has run 200 miles seven times in his life, it’s just another workout. “My 70-mile runs are training runs,” he says.

The training pays off. Last fall Karnazes completed his longest run ever—262 miles, the equivalent of 10 marathons. He ran for 72 hours straight. “I ran without sleep. It was psycho,” he says while tightening his shoelaces outside his home. “It rained for 22 hours. On that third night I was soaking wet and on the verge of hypothermia. I wasn’t even thinking about what was going to happen the next 10 feet. Every step was just survival.”

Despite the hell of 262, he’s training to go even farther. “I think 300 miles is within reach,” he says. “And I don’t think I’ll stop there.”

Tonight, cold rain dumps into the 50-degree air, as Karnazes—clad in running shorts and a windbreaker—heads for the Golden Gate Bridge. At 5-foot-10 and 156 pounds, he’s far more solid than a typical anorexic marathoner. His greatest gift, though, may be his feet, which hit the ground perfectly level, allowing him to run punishing distances injury-free. Karnazes has come to dominate the world of ultramarathons, aka events that stretch longer than 26.2 miles. Usually much longer. The staple events for most ultrarunners are 100 to 150 miles, but Karnazes has left those races behind. Now he enters multi-day relays that are designed to be completed by teams of people—and runs the whole course himself. Without stopping. And then he adds on more distance.

Dean Karnazes, and his massive calves, leave home for a 70-mile “training run.”
Once across the Golden Gate, Karnazes clicks off seven-minute, 30-second miles like a metronome. Although he ran in high school, Karnazes had abandoned the sport until the night of his 30th birthday. That evening, he realized that although he was raking in dough as a marketer, he felt empty. “I looked around and thought, ‘What am I doing getting drunk at a bar? There has to be more than this game.’” He stumbled out of the bar and started running. “I ran for 30 miles,” he says. “I was wearing some silk jockey briefs and crosstrainers I use for gardening. When I finished, everything hurt—my chest, my arms, there were rashes up and down my legs. I felt really happy.”

Longer distances were next and Karnazes soon entered—and won—a 50-mile race. After finishing, he crawled into his Lexus LS400. “I projectile-vomited all over the steering column,” he says. “I was baptized in my own bile. It felt glorious.”

Pounding through the darkened town of Sausalito, Karnazes dashes into a convenience store to buy a bag of trail mix. “I’m not really burning the calories yet,” he says. “I’m kind of cold and want to really get into it.” He nibbles the trail mix on the move. On his long runs, Karnazes shovels in junk food like a couch potato with a tape worm. “My diet is usually really good, but that goes out the window when I’m actually racing,” he says. “If you try to eat natural foods, you end up getting full but you don’t get enough calories. Whereas if you eat a Pringle, you’re just getting pure calories. It’s like jet fuel.”

At 18 miles into the run, Karnazes pulls out his cell phone and dials the closest Round Table Pizza. It’s time for more quick calories. “Round Table will deliver a pizza, even if it’s not to your residence,” he explains. “Domino’s Pizza gets really anal and asks a lot more questions. With Round Table, I estimate where I’ll be in 30 minutes and just give them a street address.”

Half an hour later, the pizza guy stands in front of a grocery store with a warm pepperoni pie. Slowing down long enough to pay, Karnazes hits the road with the pizza box in one hand and a hot slice in the other. “When I’m running 200 miles, I usually have my family follow me in a support car with food and water,” Karnazes says. The crew also keeps a list of Round Table Pizza joints handy. “I didn’t think my body could take the punishment on my first 200-miler,” he continues. “On some hills, you’re climbing up 2,500 feet from sea level, so if you can do 25-minute miles, you’re doing pretty good.”

He grows so weary, Karnazes has even fallen asleep while running. “Once, at 4 a.m. on my second night of a race, I woke up and there was a car honking at me. I’d been
sleep-running out into the middle of the road. I must have covered a couple hundred feet while asleep.”

Well into marathon No. 2, Karnazes hasn’t slacked his pace. “The hardest part at this point is stopping,” he explains. “You get cold and it’s hard to restart the engine.”

Given the need for motion, he pulls down the front of his shorts and pees while running. “I learned this in a race,” he says. “I saw these squiggle marks in the dirt and thought, ‘Somebody emptied their water bottle.’ That makes no sense. Then I came upon a guy and saw exactly what he was doing. After that, I said, ‘Enough stopping on the trailside.’”

As the night progresses, Karnazes finally admits to a soreness in his quads—but it’s nothing compared to a 262-miler. “Then my pain receptors were working overtime, so my whole body hurt,” he says. “I touched the tip of my nose, and even that hurt like hell. There were points when the pain was so intense that I just felt like saying, ‘It’s unbearable.’ But then, I’d think, ‘If you quit, that’s going to be even more unbearable.’ At that point, it becomes a mental battle.”

And that’s the point Karnazes relishes. “I like seeing how far the human body can be pushed,” he says. “You learn a lot about yourself. Running is very symbolic of life lessons. How do you respond when you hit a wall? Do you pack it up, or do you push through and keep going?”

Dawn breaks as Karnazes climbs a steep mountain road near Sonoma. He’s nearing the end of his route. “Finishing the 262-mile run felt like being in a train accident coupled with the worst hangover I’d ever had in my life,” he recalls. “I was destroyed. But it was my son’s 7th birthday, so after I finished the event, he said, ‘Dad, look, I have tickets to the boardwalk!’ So I rallied to celebrate his birthday.”

Then the next day, Karnazes went to work. “After the long runs, I feel bad for a week, but after two days, this mental euphoria takes over,” he says. “The pain’s still there, but I get this runner’s high, which I imagine is like heroin—although I’ve never tried heroin. The high can last three weeks.”

At 7:30 a.m., Dean charges onto the grounds of the luxurious Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa. In anticipation of his arrival, the staff has set up a finish line. As he breaks through, Karnazes looks, talks and runs just as he did nearly 12 hours earlier. “My eyes are a little dry from the wind, but I feel fine,” he says.

The staff is awed by his performance. “You just ran 70 miles?” one employee asks. “Why do you do that?” It’s a good question, and Karnazes gives it real thought a few moments later. “To me, life is about struggle. If I’m not pushing myself, then I’m not happy,” he says. “People think if we had every damn comfort available to us—if we removed all the struggle—we’d be happy. I think there’s a lot of miserable people out there, and one of the reasons is, there’s no struggle. They’re taken care of every day. But I think there’s a lot of happiness in suffering.”

He turns to head to the spa’s showers, before adding, “I wouldn’t mind running back to San Francisco if I had the time.”