

Wild and free

Active travel has taken off in Southeast Asia, with travellers making physical pursuits central to their holiday plans

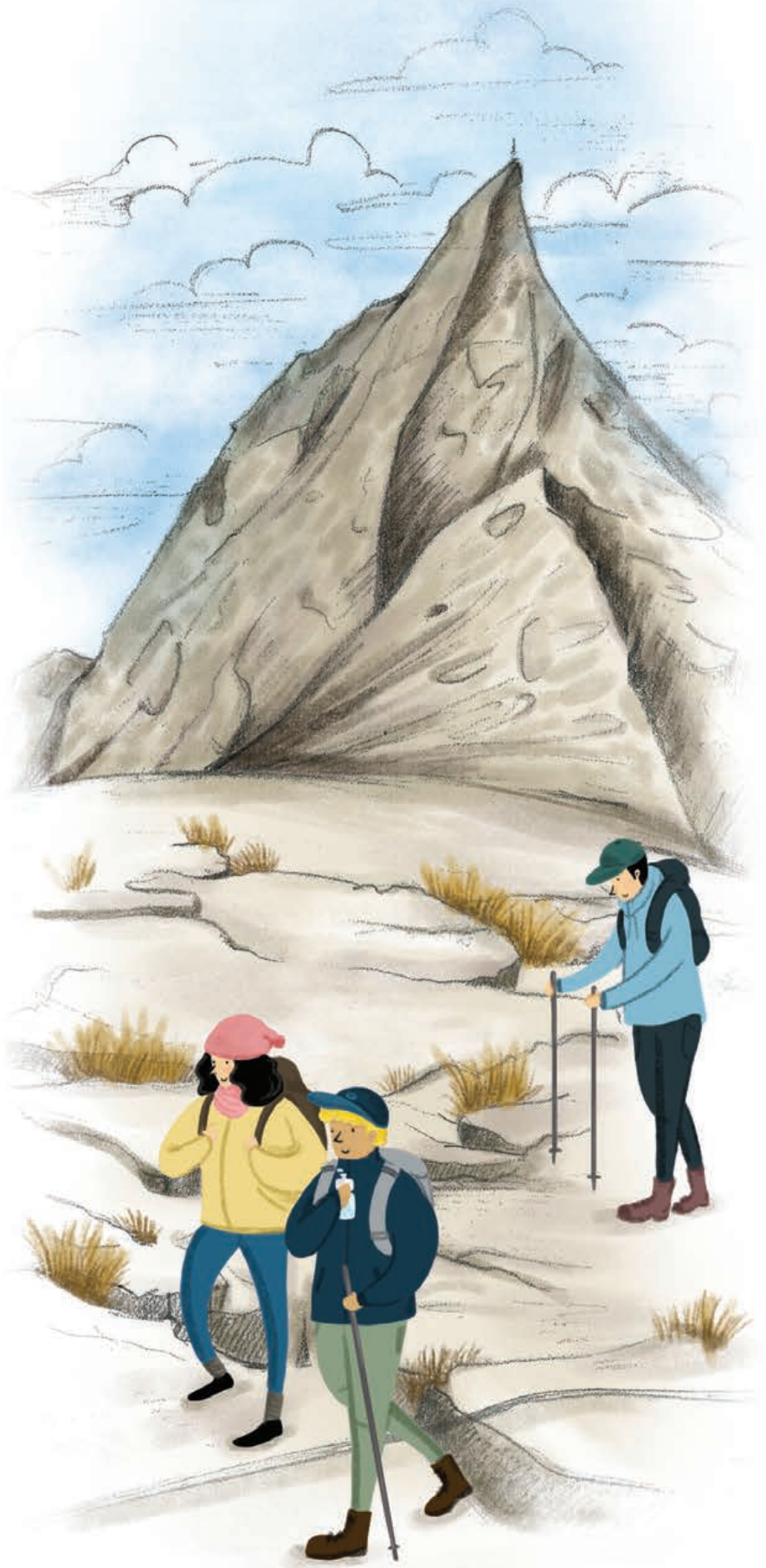
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It's 4am, and my legs feel like lead as I plod up a rocky path, clambering over boulders in slow motion. I'm minutes away from summiting Malaysia's Mt Kinabalu. I haven't trained for the climb, but I credit my relative speed to an active lifestyle, which has made the 20-hour ascent not only achievable, but actually enjoyable.

Conquering Mt Kinabalu has long been a rite of passage for adventurers in Southeast Asia, but there are now more active holiday options than ever before, a welcome trend for people like me who want their energetic daily lifestyles to extend into their vacations. And I'm not alone. Global travel trend experts TrekkSoft listed adventure activities, such as caving and trail biking, as one of six trends for 2019.

Swimming tours are among the newest active ideas to make waves in the region. In 2018, Britain-based open-water swimming tour company SwimTrek launched Southeast Asia's first multi-day swimming holidays in Flores, Indonesia, and Lan Ha Bay, Vietnam. The tours proved so successful that a swimming tour in Palawan, the Philippines, was added to the roster this year. Swimmers are divided into groups of three according to their speed, and they're free to get out of the water whenever they like.





“It works for people looking for a challenge, but also those wanting to take things at a more leisurely pace and enjoy the scenery,” says Graham Buckley, who heads up SwimTrek’s tours in Vietnam.

Running is also an emerging way to enjoy the region’s varied landscapes, with an influx of new options in recent years. Thailand Mountain Trail launched in 2017,

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pioneering multi-day trail running adventures that take you across the northern mountains at speed. In Vietnam, Topas launched a series of trail marathons that offer a unique and breathtaking (literally!) way to enjoy the country’s rural scenery.

“I enjoy the experience of a different environment with different terrains,” says Singapore-based Vanja Cnops, a biomedical researcher who hunts out marathon opportunities across the region. “Running is one of the best ways to discover these places.” For competitive runners like

Cnops, these events punctuate a broader healthy lifestyle.

Others are inspired by active holidays to take exercise more seriously. Phuong Phan, a US-based engineer and entrepreneur, did no specific training before undertaking an expedition to central Vietnam’s Son Doong, crowned the world’s largest cave in 2009. Much like climbing Mt

Kinabalu, Son Doong expeditions have entered many bucket lists, but are only available to those with a certain level of fitness.

“The Son Doong experience motivated me to stay active,” says Phan, who visited the cave in May. “I want to make sure I’m always ready for the next expedition.”

Despite having explored Southeast Asia for the past decade, I am still discovering new mountains to summit and caves to explore, which is all the impetus I need to maintain an active lifestyle.

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