



MAD ABOUT Morocco

As the 25th *Marathon des Sables* takes off in Morocco this month, we bring you the amazing experience from last year's edition—a thrilling escapade for adventure junkies.

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MY GOOD FRIEND, James Kydd, lay slumped on the floor of a small dusty medical tent in the midst of the Sahara, while medics strapped up his damaged ankle: the extent of the injury unknown. What was painfully obvious, however, was that every time James tried to put weight on it, he staggered in agony and nearly fell over. It was one o'clock in the morning and we had just endured one of the longest days of our lives, but the night ahead was going to be the ultimate test of our stamina, endurance and willpower. Having already clocked up 78 exhausting kilometres, a further 14 km still separated us from the finish of stage 3. Our race would now become a battle for survival. We were determined to overcome this injury setback, complete the event, and earn a highly coveted finisher's medal in the legendary *Marathon des Sables (MdS)*.

The *MdS* is one of the oldest and most well-known ultra-endurance races on the planet. It began back in the mid-80s when race director Patrick Bauer, inspired after many days of tramping through the Moroccan desert, decided to promote the experience and share his stunningly excruciating undertaking with equally crazy like-minded individuals from around the world. The *Marathon des Sables* was launched in 1986 as a 6-stage 254 km desert ultra-marathon; the equivalent of completing six marathons inside a week! As if averaging a marathon a day through the baking hot and inhospitable Sahara wasn't enough, competitors were required to be fully self-sufficient for the duration of the race. All food, equipment and personal belongings—for the entire event—had to be carried in backpacks. The only exception was a daily water allocation of 9 litres per runner. Not surprisingly, this soon earned the *MdS* a widely acknowledged reputation as being 'the toughest footrace on earth'.

This race's status was significantly enhanced in the wake of the 1994 event when an unlucky competitor, Italian police officer Mauro Proserpi, lost his way during a vicious sandstorm. He wandered lost through one of the most inhospitable deserts on earth for nine days before eventually turning up in a tiny Moroccan village more than 200 km off-course and having lost over 13 kg of body weight.

The 2009 edition of the *MdS* almost never happened. Drainage lines and wadis (dry riverbeds) that had not seen water in



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Starting out on stage one of the legendary race; cooking your own food after a long day's running; a snapshot from the night leg of the marathon stage 3



Contestants gathered together at the starting line FACING PAGE Crashing at the end of day at the tented acco

decades were suddenly transformed into raging torrents, as torrential rains destroyed the first camp and obliterated the racecourse. In the wake of Morocco's worst floods in 25 years, all 800 competitors and 1200 support staff were evacuated to the desert-gateway town of Erfoud. Cooped up in our hotel rooms, we dwelt on the irony of the situation... A desert race getting rained out!

Nobody seemed to know what to do. Finally decisions were made and the news spread like wildfire: the 24th edition of the *MdS* would go ahead! It would be a damp and inauspicious start; delayed by two days and necessitating the cancellation of two of the traditional six stages. The organisers cut stages one and six, as these were the shortest. Not wanting the 24th *MdS* to be remembered as 'the easy one', they decided to increase the mileage on the remaining stages. The race would now cover 210 km split between four legs, including a gruelling 92 km stage 3—the longest and most brutal in *MdS* history.

F.Y.I

IDEAS ON THE RUN

If this tale of hardship, camaraderie and great adventure in the Sahara has intrigued or tempted you, consult www.saharamarathon.co.uk or www.darbaroud.com/index_uk.php for the *MdS* race specifics and entry forms. Legendary endurance races traverse most of the world's great deserts. Visit www.racingtheplanet.com for more on these insanely addictive races.

The King of Morocco fired the starting gun and the greatest race of our lives was underway. The dune-dominated first stage was a harsh introduction to the race, as we crossed the massive 'seas of sand' that make up Erg Chebbi—Morocco's largest dune-field. Rolling red sand dunes, as far as the eye could see, made for a

breathtaking race setting; however, running up and down dunes for 33 km was quite literally a breath-taking, not to mention calf-cramping, experience! As we hobbled across the stage 1 finish line, someone rasped, "This race is hardcore!" No one disputed that.

Stage 2 was a tough day. We awoke to a numbingly cold wind that chilled us to the bone on the start line. As soon as we began to run the wind abated giving way to a scorching hot sun-baked desert. Knee problems that plagued me in the build up to the event

resurfaced with a vengeance. I limped along and downed a double dose of painkillers and immediately followed that up with a handful of anti-inflammatory pills. James assured me that I would be fine. "Don't worry," he said, "those painkillers are the stuff they give terminally ill cancer patients." Some reassurance that!

He was right. As my legs slowly warmed up, the meds kicked in, and the pain temporarily evaporated. We were running again, although shuffling is probably a more appropriate description of our pace, as we gradually reeled in the miles. Camp two finally appeared, as if from a mirage, at the end of yet another section of stunningly beautiful energy-sapping dunes.

It was wonderful to collapse into the shade of our tent and suck down Rego rehydration formula. Later, as we wolfed down our food ration, the news arrived the stage 3 would be a whopping 92.8 km! Our plan for dealing with the epic nature of day 3 was *not* to run. Instead we opted for a long striding pace and vowed only to run if we had the energy and stamina reserves at the end of the stage. It was a sound tactical decision that stood us in good stead to survive the distance and finish strongly.

Most competitors set off running but, as the day wore on and the temperature climbed past 45°C, those who had set off too quickly were reeled in. In the late afternoon, as we blitzed through the 60-km checkpoint, we were around 300th, but there were ominous signs for the long night ahead. James was suffering from bouts of diarrhoea and our water rations were insufficient to keep him hydrated. He was starting to lose focus and his energy levels were crashing. All we could do was push on into the night.

Racing at night with headlamps was a whole new ballgame and it was tough to spot the glow sticks that marked the route at 500m intervals. However, the real challenge was staying focused on where our feet were landing in the rock-strewn desert plains. It required extreme concentration and constant vigilance. James was suffering and he looked to be moving forward on autopilot. At 23:51, 76 km into stage 3, my running partner misjudged a rock, and went over on his left ankle. Our racing ambitions evaporated. Finishing the event became our only goal and it seemed a very long way off as James hobbled and hallucinated the last two km into checkpoint six where he collapsed into the tiny medical tent in front of a very pretty, but terrified-looking, young doctor.

OUR RACE WOULD NOW BECOME A BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL. WE WERE DETERMINED TO OVERCOME THIS INJURY SETBACK, COMPLETE THE EVENT, AND EARN A HIGHLY COVETED FINISHER'S MEDAL IN THE LEGENDARY *MARATHON DES SABLES*





The Doc Trotters' medical team has to provide medical assistance to any competitor in need; participants can only be disqualified if their condition is life-threatening, which a trashed ankle, although excruciatingly painful, is not. So, against her better judgement, Judith strapped James up, helped him back on his feet and waved him on.

In the first hour out of checkpoint six we covered less than one km! James had swallowed enough painkillers to embarrass a hardened pill-popping drug addict. He was delirious and I was scared. The wind whipped across the exposed

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT *The excruciating stage 3 challenged the fittest of the runners; injuries are a very real risk on this adventure; joyous participant, near finishing*



desert and, at this tortoise-like pace, I was chilled to my core. I became James's human crutch as we limped along. Every competitor that passed us yelled words of encouragement and solidarity before vanishing into the inky darkness ahead. I was down to my very last shivering reserves of strength and energy. After nearly 18 hours on our feet, we still had 8 km to go, which seemed an eternity at our current pace. At 03:30, as if by divine providence, our great friend, Rob Miller, materialised out of the night. He replaced me as the human crutch, I carried the backpacks, and James soldiered forward. We finally crossed the stage 3 finish line as dawn broke and, after a quick photo and thirstily draining two litres of *Rego*, we all collapsed into our beds. The desert heat roused me a few hours later and I ate three freeze-dried meals back-to-back, drained two litres of water and passed out again.

After the extremely testing and debilitating stage 3, a marathon on the final day was all that separated us from a coveted MdS finishers' medal. A kind English competitor had gifted James a pair of ski poles as makeshift crutches. The main field soon left us behind and I spent some time observing and chatting with the race's proverbial 'walking wounded'. There was a bloody-minded Englishman competing on crutches after he refused to let a cruciate ligament knee injury end his race.

There was also a friendly Scot who repeatedly excused himself mid-sentence to dash behind the nearest dune as a bug wreaked havoc with his intestines. Roughly fifty of these crazy, determined, fearless competitors struggled against the odds, their failing bodies and the time cut-offs to push on towards the finish line. They were hell bent on avoiding the 'drop outs' list that already had nearly one hundred names. All but two made it.

The Ahansal brothers, between them, have won every edition of the MdS since 1997 but, for me, the walking wounded who soldiered on and refused to quit were the ultimate competitors and true heroes of the MdS. I walked away dreaming of this crazy adventure, and planning the next one! ●

FACTFILE

Safety: During race registration a survival kit containing a distress flare, salt tablets and a luminous signal stick (for night racing) is supplied to all participants. You are required to supply your own first aid kit, although there is a large medical contingent of 55 doctors and nurses with two helicopters at disposal for medical emergencies.

Food: Each entrant must provide their own food throughout the race. Each competitor must have 14,000 k/cals, a minimum of 2000 k/cals per day, otherwise you are disqualified. Choose light weight freeze dried meals with the highest calorie content. We found New Zealand-based Back Country Cuisine (www.backcountrycuisine.co.nz) to have the best options.

Rehydration and Energy: GO, REGO and PSP22 energy supplements are highly recommended for refuelling the body. The routine we used was a litre of PSP22 with breakfast. Out on the course, half water and half GO (although we also took a few sachets of PSP22 for the longer stages). Within 30 minutes of coming off the course, we would drink 2 litres of REGO. You have a max water allocation of 9 litres per day so use it wisely!

Feet Hygiene: Almost everyone I saw crawling away from the medics trying not to be disqualified had serious foot infections. It is imperative to wear gaiters over your running shoes to minimise the amount of sand that gets into your shoes. Shoes should also be at least one size bigger, as your feet swell during the race. At end of day, take a disinfectant foot-bath.