

Moroccan Madness

Heat. Hallucinations. Dehydration. Diarrhoea. Nothing can prepare you for the six-stage, 250-odd kilometre desert race known as the Marathon des Sables

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

THE MARATHON DES SABLES – or “Marathon of the Sands” – is one of the most infamous ultra-endurance races on Earth. It traces its origins back to 1984, when curiosity prompted Patrick Bauer to embark on a 200-mile (320km) solo excursion into the Algerian Sahara. The experience inspired him to start an annual event, and in 1986 the Marathon des Sables was launched as a six-stage, 254km desert ultra-marathon: the equivalent of completing six marathons in a week.

And as if running the equivalent of a marathon a day across the baking sands of the Sahara wasn't enough, competitors would also have to be entirely 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 nine litres per runner. Not surprisingly, the Marathon des Sables soon became known as the toughest footrace on the planet.

How tough? Try this: in 1994 one competitor, Italian police officer Mauro Prosperi, lost his way during a sandstorm and wandered off course. He showed up nine days later in a tiny Moroccan desert village, more than 200km away, having lost over 13kg in body weight.

We considered the irony of the situation: a desert race, across the parched Sahara, had been rained out



He survived his horrific ordeal by catching and eating bats raw.

Contemplating this, I entered the twenty-fourth edition of the Marathon des Sables last year, alongside James Kydd and Rob Miller (two friends whom I'd met at Stellenbosch University), and Rich Sell (a mate of Rob's from England). The four of us trained and fundraised together, and although we all entered as individuals, James and I made a pact to run the race together.

But the race nearly didn't happen. Torrential rains and severe flooding meant that drainage lines and wadis (dry riverbeds) that hadn't seen water in decades were transformed overnight into raging torrents. The first race camp was destroyed and the course was obliterated. The locals called it the worst flood to hit Morocco in 25 years. All 800 Marathon des Sables competitors and 1 200 support staff were evacuated to the desert gateway town of Erfoud.

As James, Rob and I sat cooped up in our hotel room, we considered the irony of the situation: a desert race, across the parched Sahara, had been rained out!

Nobody seemed to know what to do next. But when the decision was finally made, the news spread like wildfire: the event would go ahead. It would be a damp and inauspicious start; delayed by two days and necessitating the cancellation of two of the six stages.

The course was completely changed, with camps set up at random in the middle of the desert. The organisers had cut stages One and Six, as these were the shortest legs. And – not wanting the twenty-fourth Marathon des Sables to be remembered as “the easy one” – the organisers had increased the mileage on the remaining stages.

The race would now cover 204km, split between four legs, including a gruelling 92km Stage Three: the longest and most brutal in the race's history.

STAGE 1 CROSSING ERG CHEBBI (33KM)

The King of Morocco fired the starting gun and the greatest race of our lives was under way. The 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 sands, as far as the eye could see, made for a breathtaking race setting, but running up and down dunes for 33km was quite literally a breathtaking – not to mention calf-cramping – experience. As we hobbled across the Stage One finish line, Rob rasped: “This race is not for sissies!” No one disputed that.

Miraculously, only two competitors have ever actually died during the event. In 1988 a young Frenchman collapsed on a dune and died of a massive heart attack, and in 2007 another Frenchman, 49-year-old Bernard Julé, died of cardiac arrest in his tent at the end of Stage Four. While their deaths offer a chilling reminder of what is at stake in this arid terrain, this remains a staggeringly low mortality rate considering the more than 10 000 athletes who've taken part in the event.

STAGE 2 A DAY OF PAIN (37KM)

Stage Two was rough. We awoke to a numbingly cold wind that chilled us to the bone on the start line, but as soon as we began to run, the wind gave way to a scorching hot sun-baked desert. Knee problems that had plagued me in the build-up to the event resurfaced with a vengeance. I limped along and downed a double-dose of painkillers, immediately followed by a handful of anti-inflammatories.

James assured me that I would be fine. “Don't worry,” he said, “those painkillers are the hardcore stuff they give terminally ill cancer patients. You'll be good to go in half an hour.”

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. We trudged on through spectacular desert scenery and gradually reeled in the kilometres. Camp Two finally appeared, as if from a mirage, at the end of yet another section of stunningly beautiful energy-sapping dunes.

As I collapsed into the shade of our tent and sucked down two litres of rehydration formula, I reflected on what had been a frustrating and agonising day of racing. As soon as I had the energy, I went in search of the medical tent.

I joined a line of anguished competitors, limping in on badly blistered and bleeding feet. Collapsed runners covered every inch of available floor space as they received treatment on their mangled feet. Some were casualties of water loss, sunstroke and heat exhaustion.

The more serious cases were hooked up to IV drips as they shivered uncontrollably on stretcher beds, racked by dehydration and shock. This was not a happy place and I didn't want to linger.

I quickly located a race medic and persuaded him to give me a cortisone shot in the right knee. I left that medical arena vowing not to return.

Back in our tent, as we wolfed down our daily food rations and rehydrated our parched bodies, we revived our flagging spirits by reading the day's messages from friends and family. A note from my wife read: “I hope this message finds you alive and kicking! It looks like your next stage is 92km. It is seriously inhumane to subject you to that!” The confirmation soon arrived from the race organisers: Stage Three would indeed be a whopping 91.8km long.



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STAGE 3 THE LONGEST IN RACE HISTORY (92KM)

James and I had devised a plan to deal with the epic nature of Stage Three. We would not start running. We would fast-walk the stage with a long striding pace and run towards the end if we still had the energy and stamina. It was a sound tactical decision that helped us survive the distance and finish strongly. As the day wore on, the temperature climbed past 45°C and we began to pass loads of competitors who had set off too quickly.

In the late afternoon, as we blitzed through the 60km checkpoint, we were placed around three-hundredth, but there were ominous signs for the long night ahead. James was suffering from bouts of diarrhoea and it was clear that our water rations weren't going to be enough to keep him hydrated. He was starting to lose focus and his energy levels were crashing. All we could do was soldier on into the night.

Racing at night with headlamps was a whole new ball game and it was tough to spot the glow sticks that marked the route at 500m intervals. But 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 like he was moving forwards on autopilot. In our exhausted and debilitated states we were pushing our luck and tempting fate.

At 23h51, 76km into Stage Three, my running partner misjudged a rock, stumbled and went over on his left ankle. In an instant our racing ambitions evaporated. Finishing the event became our only goal – and even that seemed a very long way off as James hobbled and hallucinated the last two kilometres into Checkpoint Six, where he collapsed into the tiny medical tent in front of Judith, a pretty (but terrified-looking) young medic.

The race regulations specify that medical teams must provide medical assistance to any competitor in need, and participants can only be disqualified if their condition is considered to be life-threatening. James's trashed ankle, although excruciatingly painful, wasn't putting his life in danger, so (against her better judgement), the young French nurse strapped him up, helped him back onto his feet and, with a shake of her head, sent him on his way.

In the first hour out of Checkpoint Six we covered less than one kilometre. James had popped enough painkillers to put an addict to shame. He was delirious. I was

scared. The wind whipped across the exposed desert and, at this tortoise-like pace, I was chilled to my core. I became James's human crutch as we limped along together. Every competitor who passed us yelled words of encouragement and solidarity before vanishing into the inky darkness ahead of our torch beams.

Our progress was painfully slow and I was down to my very last shivering reserves of strength and energy. After nearly 18 hours on our feet, we still had 8km to go. It would be an eternity at our current pace.

At 03h30, as if by divine providence, our friend Rob Miller materialised out of the night. He replaced me as the human crutch, and I carried the backpacks as James soldiered forward. We finally crossed the Stage Three finish line as dawn broke. It had taken us 20 hours, 18 minutes and 49 seconds to complete the stage. After a quick photo and thirstily draining two litres of rehydration fluids, we all collapsed into bed and slept like the grateful dead.

The desert heat roused me a few hours later and I cooked and ate three freeze-dried meals back-to-back, drained two litres of water and promptly passed out again.

STAGE 4 MARATHON DAY (42KM)

After the nightmares of Stage Three, a marathon on the final day was all that separated us from our coveted Marathon des Sables finishers' medals.

A kind English competitor had gifted James a pair of ski poles to act as makeshift crutches. The main field soon left us behind and I got to spend some time observing and chatting with the race's walking wounded. There was a bloody-minded Englishman competing on crutches after he refused to let a cruciate ligament knee injury end his race. I also met a friendly Scot who repeatedly excused himself mid-sentence to dash behind the nearest dune as a gastrointestinal bug wreaked havoc on his system. Roughly 50 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 boasted nearly a hundred names. All but two made it.

At the other end of the field, Mohamad Ahansal claimed his third Marathon des Sables title with a blistering-quick time of 16h27m26s after his brother, 10-time winner Lahcen Ahansal, dropped out at the end of the notorious Stage Three. Between them, the Ahansals have won every edition of the Marathon des Sables since 1997. For me, though, the walking wounded who soldiered on and refused to quit were the ultimate champions and true heroes of the Marathon des Sables.



MARATHON DES SABLES

If this tale of hardship, suffering, camaraderie and great adventure in the Sahara has intrigued or tempted you, go to www.saharamarathon.co.uk or www.darbaroud.com/index_uk.php for entry forms and more information on this epic annual event. The Marathon des Sables takes place during March/April each year.

