**Marathon Des Sables by Colin Haylock (And Keith – brother)**

The MdS has been on our bucket list for quite a few years and were offered entry for the 2018 event.

We spent the next 12 months researching and buying the kit and provisions needed for the event. The ethos is self-sufficiency – so for the full 7 days of the event you need to carry all your food, sleeping bag, sleeping mat, stove etc and mandatory safety equipment such as signaling mirror, compass and an anti-venom pump!

We have around 60 marathons between us and did some heat chamber training before we started. Our backpacks weighed 13kg (Keith) and mine 9kg (Colin) backpack loaded with around 6kg of food. We also did quite a few jogs around Richmond and Bushy Parks with the back pack. This helped with the distance, but not the endless dunes, Jebels as high as Snowdon nor the heat range from 45ish degrees to -2degress at night.

The 6th of April 2017 came round very quickly and on the plane to Ouarzazate a city south of Morocco‟s High Atlas Mountains, known as a gateway to the Sahara Desert. From there we had a four and half hour coach journey into the desert to the first bivouac from where the race would start 36 hours later.

We arrived just after it got dark and I was allocated a slot in a berber style tent (#123) including Pip a 69-year-old lady and 72-year-old gentleman called Mahmut (both having completed several hundred marathons between them) and a crazy motor-cyclist called Dominic.

The next day, Saturday, was given over to registration and allowed us to get a little used to the heat of the desert. Food for previous Friday evening and all of Saturday was provided and served in a massive tent adjacent to the main encampment.

The size of the MdS means that a huge amount of effort and logistical planning is required to make it happen. With around 1000 runners and 700 volunteers and paid staff over 300 tents are needed to house everyone and provide covered space for a medical center, communications and a canteen/kitchen to feed the staff and volunteers. At the end of each race stage the whole camp has to be taken down loaded into trucks and then unloaded and erected at the next bivouac ready for the arrival of the first runners early the same afternoon.

Other facts about the logistics of the race:

* 120 000 litres of mineral water,
* 120 all-terrain vehicles,
* 2 “Ecureuil” helicopter and 1 “Cessna” plane,
* 8 “MDS special” commercial planes,
* 25 buses,
* 4 camels,
* 1 incinerator lorry for burning waste,
* 4 quads bikes to ensure environment and safety on race,
* 57 medical staff,
* 6.5 kms of Elastoplast, 2,700 Compeed, 19,000 compresses,
* 6,000 painkillers, 150 liters of disinfectant,
* 1 editing bus, 5 cameras, 1 satellite image station,
* 10 satellite telephones, 30 computers, fax and internet

**Food**

Breakfast consisted of Porridge and blueberries, followed by lunch of Peperami, nuts and various snack bars. At the finish of each stage it was always important to consume a protein shake within 20 minutes and popping of blisters with lots of Iodine before cooking dinner, which was usually a curry or pasta with a high calorific value.

**STAGE ONE**

Patrick Bauer, the French founder of MdS, likes to start everyone off gently. So, the first day was just 30 kilometers on a relatively easy course with a few sand dunes to negotiate. As is the tradition at the MdS each stage is started by Patrick whilst AC/DCs “Highway to Hell” is blasted out from the sound system!

Water is rationed and you only have enough for drinking whilst on the move during the day and for cooking meals in the morning and evening – not really much left over for washing ourselves or our clothes. By the end of eight of days living like this I think we all smelt a lot! You must take a salt tablet every 30 minutes to avoid dehydration in the 40+ degrees temperature.

Whilst running each stage there would be two or three checkpoints spaced out every 10 to 12km where we would be given 1.5 or 3 litres of water.

During that night a strong sand storm (winds around 120 mph) blew through our camp and collapsed our tent, which continued for 4-5 hours. We had to be dug out that morning, after getting only 2 hours sleep.

**STAGE TWO**

“After yesterday's warm-up, today's stage is much harder”, announced Patrick Bauer gleefully before the departure. Those who had struggled through the dunes for stage one must have been muttering under their breath. But he was right – the distance was now 39km and as well as the obligatory sand, there was a fantastic rocky ascent to the top of Jebel el Otfal (at over 3000 feet this was as high as Mt Snowdon) up a steep valley and then a spectacular descent to the end of the stage where we lost 250 metres in just under a quarter of a mile.

**STAGE THREE**

This was another shorter stage of around 32km – but what it lacked in distance was made up by a very varied and difficult terrain. On leaving the bivouac we had some small sand dunes to negotiate before crossing a flat plain that seemed to be a dried up lake. We then arrived at a range of rocky mountains (jebels) that we had to climb and then run along the very rocky ridge for a kilometer or so before dropping down, via a steep stretch of sand and rocks using a fixed rope, into a valley to arrive at the first checkpoint of the day.

Next we returned to the Jebel el Oftal which we had traversed the previous day and crossed it via the same rocky valley which we negotiated in reverse. Again there was a lot of soft sand to be run on and most runners had been to see “Doc Trotters” to get their blisters seen to by this stage of the race. We had been taping our feet every morning, so managed to prevent significant blisters

At the front of the race there were the favorites – the two El Morabity brothers from Morocco.

**STAGE FOUR**

Stage four was the long double marathon stage (actually a bit more at over 86km), and the one that most people, including myself, dread. One thing we did look forward to was the prospect of a cool, small can of Coca-Cola promised when we finished! There was a very generous 35 hour cut-off time for the stage so, providing I did not have an accident or succumb to the heat, I was fairly confident I would finish it and actually get some rest on the official rest day! During the night stage, you must wear head torches and cover around 30km of Sand dunes, trying to miss the nocturnal scorpions and camel spiders.

I finished around 4am and Keith at 8am the following day.

**STAGE FIVE**

After a full day and night of rest it was the last day of racing with an exact 42.2km marathon distance stage. Running separately, we both decided to push hard on the last day and try to climb the rankings.

Towards the end of the stage we passed some old mine workings and the ruins of an abandoned village. Finally, the next camp and the inflatable arch of the finish line came into view across a flat rocky plain – just another 2km. As I crossed the line Patrick Bauer greeted me and placed the finishers medal around my neck; he did the same with all the finishers.

That evening we were treated to another cold Coca-Cola (or beer if you wanted one). The race had now finished. I came in 559th and Keith 695th

**STAGE SIX**

The final stage on Saturday morning was in aid of a children’s school in Morocco, but did not count towards the overall finish positions but had to be done or you would be disqualified from the final rankings.

It was only about 7km and all across some sandy dunes which were almost orange in colour. Hardly anyone ran – the idea was that we should all complete it roughly together. Everyone was in a relaxed mood at the start with their medals already won and just a short (maximum two hours) stretch of desert to cross. Some people’s feet were so bad by this stage they had been given crutches to help them walk.

After finishing the stage we boarded coaches and were transported back to Ouarzazate – it took us 6 hours to get back. A longer journey than a week earlier as we had covered 150 miles on foot over the last 7 days! We than had two nights in a 5-star hotel, the Berbere Palace with buffet breakfasts and evening meals where we could eat as much as we wanted to try and regain all the weight we had lost in the course of running across the Sahara.

And finally, a note about the Official Guinness world record running the London Marathon in Ski Boots.

After a lot of pain and water during the hottest London marathon on record; 5h 52 minutes later the GWR certificate was presented. Unfortunately, the Ski boots are no-longer usable for skiing and fortunately no longer usable for running.