

Marathon Des Sables by Piers Keenleyside

Now back from the MdS with my medal. Definitely the hardest event I have ever done. Having said that, if you can keep going with your feet in shreds, it is doable given the generous cut off times of each stage. Just been looking at the full results - I was 675th of 1094 finishers and the 1167 who started with me last Sunday - so nearly 100 DNFs. I was 19th of 38 within the 60-69 age group with an overall time of 48:15:13.



The MdS has been on my bucket list for quite a few years but the expense was always the sticking point. However I was lucky enough to get offered a voluntary redundancy package from my job at British Airways at the end of 2015 very close to my retirement date. So with encouragement from Kathryn and enough cash in the bank last March, I applied for a place in the 32nd edition of the MdS taking place in April 2017.

I then spent the next 12 months researching and buying the kit and provisions I would need 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 signalling mirror, compass and an anti-venom pump!

I did very little specific training such as running on sand or in a heat chamber - I just did a few more marathons than usual (upped it to 2 a month) and did 2 or 3 off-road ultras (30 miles) carrying my MdS backpack loaded with around 6kg of food and my MdS kit. I also did quite a few jogs around Ealing with the back pack - often delivering vests and other Ealing Eagles kit to club members.

The 7th of April 2017 came round very quickly and after a last minute hitch with getting my medical sign-off (my ECG seemed to suggest that I had had a heart attack!) I was 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 an 8 man berber style tent (#102) with 6 soldiers form the Irish Guards regiment (5 guys and one girl) and a Ukrainian guy who has been living in the UK for the last 15 years.



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 Sunday 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 1200 runners and 700 volunteers and paid staff over 300 tents are needed to house everyone and provide covered space for a medical centre, 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

STAGE ONE

Patrick Bauer, the French founder of MdS, likes to start everyone off gently. So, the first day was just 30.3 kilometres 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!



Despite the ease of the terrain I had a very bad day and in the final few kilometres of the stage I became rather ill with dehydration and/or heat stroke. After feeling ill for an hour or more I started throwing up (mainly water and ‘chopped’ nuts) on the course. I wasn’t wearing a GPS watch so did not know how far I still had to cover but shortly after I crested a sand dune and could see the horseshoe shape of the next camp about 2 km across a flat desert plain - I suddenly felt a whole lot better!

Not surprisingly I was the last person back to my tent. Since there are no lights except that provided by individual head torches most runners settled down for the night between 8:00 and 9:00pm after eating an evening meal which for most including me involved rehydrating freeze dried meals. Just about everyone in my tent was using the Expedition Foods brand.



During the day I ate snacks of beef jerky, nuts and Pepperami and always a recovery shake when arriving back from a day's running. 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 our selves or our clothes. By the end of eight of days living like this I think we all smelt a bit!

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. I usually just took 1.5 even when 3 was offered to save on the weight!

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.



I found it impossible to run for much of the day due to the soft sand and the steep inclines. At the start of this stage I had a chat with a mad Japanese guy doing the MdS for the third time dressed as a cow!



After the problems of the previous day I changed my salt strategy a little to ensure I would actually end up a finisher. On the first day I was taking a salt tablet every hour and I now upped this to one every half hour and then two every half hour after 2pm. I also made a conscious effort to drink a bit more - sometimes difficult when the water is so warm! And finally to avoid some of the hottest weather of the day I would rest in the shade of a tent, for half an hour or so, when reaching the first checkpoint after midday. This seemed to work and I had no further issues with the heat over the following days - even

when the temperature often peaked in the high 40 degrees Celsius out in the desert when there was little wind!

I wasn't last back to the tent this time - it was the turn of a couple of the Irish Guards to get dehydrated and they arrived back about an hour after me and one of them then spent the next 3 hours on a drip over at the medical tent.

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 kilometre 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.



Having collected water and rested a little at the checkpoint we returned to the same ridge via a steep sandy incline - so steep that there was another fixed rope for us to use to ensure we could manage the climb! We then ran (or rather walked!) along the ridge again before descending back to a flat oued (dried up river/lake) via a steep dune with sand so fine and soft it appeared to flow like water as we ran down it - very weird!



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 - however I was lucky and was still blister free - running so many marathons over the last four or five has conditioned my feet very well. Most people in my tent had actually got their first blisters on day one!

At the front of the race there were the favourites - the two El Morabity brothers from Morocco and a virtual unknown Brit - Thomas Evans - a soldier from the Welsh Guards. He was in 3rd place at the end of this stage and in touch with the two leaders. In an illustration of the camaraderie that is the heart of this great race Thomas dropped his check card, which you have to have to get tagged at all checkpoints or risk disqualification. However the race leader, Rachid El Morabity, found it and lost some time in getting it back to Thomas to ensure he could complete the stage.

Before getting some sleep that night I prepared for the following day's long stage by sorting out provisions for the next day. Back in London before starting the MDS I had envisaged finishing the long stage on the same night and thought I would have late meal after finishing at perhaps just after 11pm. I now realised that I would probably be out in the desert until the next morning. I decided my strategy would be to stop in the early evening and cook myself a hot meal to sustain me through the night.

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! The main worry for me was how many big blisters would I get!

There were 7 checkpoints spread over the route - one every 11 or 12km. We started at 8:15am and I stopped at the second checkpoint at about 12:30am for about 30 minutes to get some shade and eat my lunchtime snacks. I also approached the medical team as my shoulders, which had started aching on day 1 from the weight of my backpack, were killing me! They gave me a couple of paracetamol based tablets with strict instructions not to take the second until six hours after the first. They must have been strong because they actually worked quite well and soon I was able to progress at a brisk walk and even a slow

jog without flinching. I carried on to checkpoint 4 where I stopped to cook and eat an evening meal of chicken korma and rice. This somehow took me an hour and twenty minutes - still I was not worried - all I wanted to do here was get to the end and receive an MdS finishers medal! Before leaving the checkpoint I also took a couple of Pro-Plus caffeine tablets (never done this before) to try and ensure I did not fall asleep on my feet during the long night ahead.

The course during the day was much easier than the previous day and during the night the route was also quite easy - quite flat and not too rocky. The worst of it was small dunes and then some quite soft sandy flat ground to cross. After 7pm we all had to have our head torches on and hang a yellow glow-stick on our backpacks or risk time penalties.



Although the route was now quite easy and runnable I walked most of the time to save my shoulders and to ensure I didn't trip up on unseen rocks etc. I think the Pro-Plus tablet did more than keep me awake - they provided me with a bit of a boost and I seemed to be the fastest walker on my bit of the course. During the night I must have passed 30 or 40 people whilst only 5 or 6 joggers overtook me.

Eventually I could see the lights of the finish area and sprinted the last 100 metres to overtake a couple more people and crossed the line at 4:50am. I quickly found my tent and got into my sleeping bag to try and sleep. After less than an hour the sun began to rise and I only managed to sleep for 30 or 40 minutes. Surprisingly I wasn't that tired during the rest of the day which I spent sending out a few emails to friends back in the UK and looking out for other people to finish. One lady who I had got to know in the tent next to ours didn't finish until 3:30pm - over 10 hours after me. It must have been very hard to spend a second day out in the heat of the day and then have so little rest until the final stage the next day. Another woman I had got to know via the MdS Facebook group and at a few events which we had both used as training runs failed to finish the stage and was transported back Ouarzazate. Whilst physically OK she had a bit of a wobble when she found herself at times alone in the middle of the desert in the pitch black of the night. I can sympathise as although the route was marked with green glowsticks at night, on occasions, the next stick was not visible from the last so there was sometimes a doubt that you were going in the right direction.

At the front of the pack it was a hard-fought battle between the two Moroccan brothers and the new Brit on the block - Rachid eventually took the stage and Thomas Evans ran his legs off to come in second - a bravura performance. In the ladies race Elisabet Barnes of Sweden was beaten by Nathalie Mauclair but didn't lose her overall lead.

As expected I did have some small blisters after the double marathon stage - however after queuing up to be seen at Doc Trotters they thought the blister to be so minor as to require no immediate treatment. They sent me away with some tape to apply the next morning to reduce friction and prevent the blisters from developing properly. I'm told that Doc Trotter recorded 550 foot care interventions after stage 4 - so about 50% of runners were treated.

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. As with the long stage 4 this route was also quite easy with several flat firm plains to be crossed and just small sand dunes or low rocky hills in between. I made quite good progress and thought that I might climb up the rankings a bit - the trouble was that everyone else also found it easier as well so I hardly moved at all!



The most interesting bit of the course was in the middle when we passed close to a village from which quite a few children had come out to watch the race and see if they could get any spare snacks (or money) from the runners. And then 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 or so and we would be there. As usual in a race I managed a sprint finish and overtook four or five others in the final 400 metres. As I crossed the line Patrick Bauer greeted me with a kiss and placed the finishers medal around my neck.



Later that afternoon it was great to see Duncan Slater the double amputee complete the Mds after failing last year and having the determination and drive to have another go!



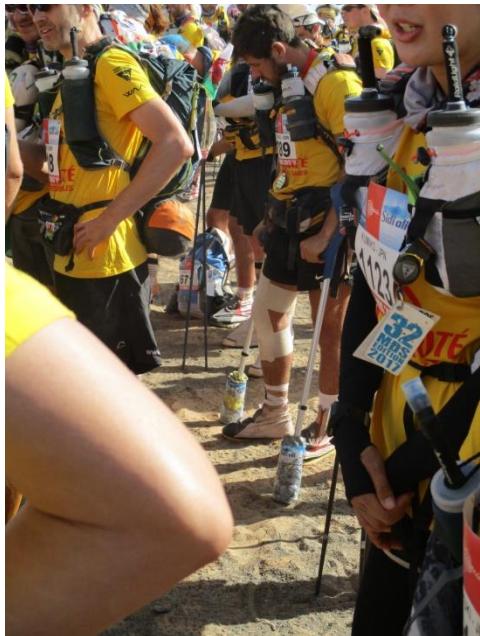
That evening we were treated to another cold Coca-Cola (or beer if you wanted one). The race proper had now finished with Thomas Evans, in third place, being the highest ranked Britain since the start of the race in 1984.

The starts of last two stages were split with a mass start at early in the morning and then the fastest 50 then setting off a couple of hours later. This meant that we all had a chance to see just how fast the front runners could move through the desert despite the heat, the sand and the backpacks.

STAGE SIX

The final stage on Saturday morning 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 8km 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 then 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. Possibly the best part of the hotel experience was having a shower and a shave for the first time in over 8 days!



And finally a note about my 18th London Marathon (and 130th marathon/ultra):

It turns out that finishing a steady Marathon Des Sables the week before the London Marathon is the ideal taper! I finished Sunday's London Marathon in 3:23:18 - my best time in over 3 years and my 8th fastest of all time. And most of the faster ones were done 20 years ago. Had a really good run - enjoyed running on tarmac again without a backpack! Great support (as ever) from Ealing Eagles and family around the course and especially at Mile 23. Set off at 3:15 pace (as usual) but felt sure that the MdS would catch up with me in the latter stages but it didn't seem to. I think a couple of Pro-Plus caffeine tablets helped as did two Clif energy gels (also laced with caffeine) taken over the last 8 miles.