

Craig Dixon, ran the Marathon Des Sables in the Sahara Desert and here is what he had to say

The Marathon Des Sables tag line is "The toughest foot race on earth", whilst most people would decide to stay clear, I decided this was a challenge worth taking on. The race, which took place in early April, is 150 miles split into 6



stages across the Sahara Desert in Morocco and is entirely self-sufficient except for a bivouac for sleeping and rationed water at regular checkpoints.

Having entered 2 years ago, I embarked on the training, running several marathons and thousands of miles across the North Dorset countryside with the Dorset Doodlers. Before the race began I had already done training runs, which included the Wessex Ridgeway 100km from Tollard Royal to Up Lyme, as well as other local races including the North Dorset Village Marathon. In addition,

I also visited Kingston University, in Surrey, to use a treadmill in their heat acclimatization chamber, to get used to the temperatures and humidity of the desert.

The UK runners set off from Gatwick Airport, where I met another 7 runners, we decided to make this group our tent for the week. One thousand competitors including 300 Brits, met up in Ouazzarate, Morocco, before being transported out into the desert on a 6 hour coach and army truck trip. Day one was an admin day ensuring all competitors had the necessary compulsory equipment, which included a pen knife, compass, survival blanket, whistle and anti-venom pump, as well as a minimum of 12,000 kcal of food to last the week. At the start of each day the entire camp for the 1,000 runners plus 400 support crew, was dismantled and moved on to the location at the end of the days stage, ready for competitors, so any food or equipment we needed had to go in our rucksacks. On average competitors rucksacks weighed in at 9 kg on day 1.

After a windy first couple of nights, when bivouacs regularly collapsed, we all set off on the first 23 mile "acclimatisation" stage, across valleys, sand dunes, dried up river beds and large cliffs. It was a tough day, but having prepared for the last two years, it was as hard as expected. The second stage was a shorter day of 19 miles, but involved 3 huge climbs, one of which required a rope to get you to the top. The third stage of 23 miles was the hottest when temperatures reached 54 degrees and many people struggled. At this point of the 1,000 starters, approximately 35 had dropped out. From day 1, all competitors were worried about the notorious 4th "long day" stage, which was 48 miles. As the

week went on, I strangely felt I was getting stronger and I felt confident going into the long day. For the majority of runners, this stage involves an element of running in the night, with head torches and glow stick markers to guide you through the desert and for me the last couple of hours were very tough, as I staggered through the dark desert mainly on my own, wishing to see finish area. I managed to finish in 12 hours 40 minutes, in the top 25% of the field. For those that finished in the same day, the next day was a rest day and allowed time for competitors to treat the many blisters on their feet and also re-hydrate. Many people split this long stage into 2 sections and slept out in the desert and did the final miles the next morning.

During the race we were able to send emails to supporters back home and during the race we also received messages from friends and family on a daily basis. A marathon distance stage followed the rest day and then the final day was a mere 5 miles, which was more a celebratory stage, with most people running in small groups. Overall I finished in the top 25% and was really pleased with this result, as my aim going out there was to merely finish.

Back at the hotel in Ouazzarate competitors relaxed around the pool and made best use of the large buffet and bar. It was an amazing week and for me, a once in a lifetime experience that I would encourage anyone interested to give it a look. The support I received before and after from the Dorset Doodlers has been brilliant and I even made it to training in Sturminster Newton the following Thursday, to receive my round of applause that everyone who had competed the previous week receives, whether it was 5k or 150 miles. Now time to find my next challenge!

Craig Dixon