

## The 24<sup>th</sup> Marathon des Sables

*Grateful thanks to my family, friends and everyone who sponsored me and sent messages of support before, during and after the race. It really did make all the difference.*

*Money raised = £5250 for Naomi House and Jane's Appeal.*

*Michaela*

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Over two years of planning and preparation, with the final weeks becoming ever more stressful, checking and rechecking kit, worrying if enough training had been done, gathering sponsorship, last minute Skype calls to team mates Debs and Sarah. The need to ensure that “normal” life could continue as I was going out of range for a week (no-one is indispensable I know...) and even then when I thought I had everything, if only I had packed waterproofs and an umbrella. Who would have thought that it would rain in the desert?!!

Debs, Sarah and I met at Gatwick airport on Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> March, along with a couple of hundred other Brits, who could have been mistaken for a bunch of holidaymakers but all looking apprehensive and most carrying red Raidlight backpacks. Zayne who we knew of beforehand asked if she could join us in our “tent” having split up with her boyfriend Jacob who was also doing the race. They were an item when they entered but 2 years is a long time! We boarded the special Charter commissioned by Best of Morocco to Ouarzazate (which nobody including the woman at passport control could pronounce). Within minutes of boarding everyone was chatting away, bonded by nerves and general excitement, we all had one thing in common, 150 miles across the desert. What struck me was how “normal” everyone seemed, or was that relative? Rob introduced himself as our “rep” for the week and said he was there to liaise with the French organisation of the race on our behalf and generally “boost morale”. The three and a half hour flight passed very quickly, people tentatively asking about each others training, kit, tips they had received, suffice to say that by the time we landed everyone then felt very underprepared and very scared!! I was panicking that my shoes were way too big at size 7 when normally a 5 and a half, it was too late now....and the guy who I sat next to told me all about the half dozen or so 50 milers he had done in the build up to the MdS... Help!! I hadn't done one!!

On arrival in Ouarzazate things got off to an interesting start when I picked up someone's suitcase at the airport by mistake and didn't realise until we arrived at the hotel. Ooops, not only was I worried all my kit had now gone missing but was definitely not going to be very popular leaving some poor person without their case at the airport. All was resolved but embarrassingly I had picked up Zayne's ex-boyfriend, Jacob's case, by mistake (definitely wasn't a plan to sabotage his race). Oh dear!

The Berber Palace Hotel was luxurious, nice place for a holiday, shame we were only there for one night. It wasn't really worth unpacking so Debs and I spent an hour or so

fixing our gaiters onto our shoes with No nails tape and Evostick, praying this would do the trick. A quick change and off for the “all you could eat buffet”, no holding back as everyone tucked in. We had been told to try and find our Tent Groups that evening which for us 4 girls meant finding 4 others to share with for the week. The only way to describe this was a bad form of speed dating, we looked around the room and ended up on a table with a couple of guys, Nick and Simon who seemed nice enough but would we want to live with them for a week?? Having spoken to them for about 15 mins they went off to get their desserts. quick conflagration between the girls...we all thought they seemed ok but would it be too forward of us to ask?? Zayne was elected spokesperson and when they returned we tactfully steered the conversation around to tent groups. They seemed keen (hey, we were a marketable bunch...2 physios, a nurse and former army captain!). Just as we thought this was a good idea, along came Will and Simon who had some tenuous link with Nick and were also on the lookout for “roomies”....they seemed like a nice bunch, we had our 8!

### **Friday 27<sup>th</sup> March**

Early next morning our convoy of buses set off for the Sahara. An hour into the 6 hour journey it started to rain, ever so slightly. A couple of hours later the sky was black, there was thunder and lightning and the rain was torrential. The mood in the bus was subdued.....was this normal for the Sahara? At this stage we still had all our kit for the race plus our suitcases. The next day was to be Admin day in the desert when the kit checks are carried out and our cases taken away (think “I’m a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here”). The bus continued, the rain got heavier, it looked more like Scotland than the Sahara and then we stopped alongside a deserted track. After much waving of arms and exchange of words, the bus driver clearly wasn’t going any further. We waited an hour or so, nobody particularly keen to get off the bus. Cue arrival of six 3 ton army trucks. We were ushered (reluctantly) off the bus and onto the trucks, trying to haul the luggage on was a challenge in itself. Off we trundled across the (very wet) desert until arrival at Bivouac (Camp) 1. We were the first arrivals and were told to pick our tents. Hmmm...most were submerged and had soaking rugs. Berber men were hurrying around with shovels and plastic sheets trying their best to make the area habitable. The camp was in a riverbed and it was still raining! After a couple of hours we were up to our ankles in mud and water and the dry river was fast becoming a wet one. Rob, our “motivator” told us we were stuck for the night as the buses had gone and the organisers were unable to reach us having been caught in a flash flood a couple of hours away. By now we were shivering, turning blue with cold and were using the bin bags from the camp to keep warm. Damn, if only we had packed the Goretex....people started “joking” about this year’s OMM and then we all got a bit nervous, at least they had coats and found a cave! Just before it got dark, Patrick Bauer, the Race Director and Founder of the MdS arrived by helicopter and within minutes decided to evacuate the camp. By now we were allowed to eat the Organisers food, being French there was even wine! The army trucks returned and within a few hours we were on our way to the nearest town some 20km away. At 10pm we arrived in a town, no idea where we were (it turned out to be a small town on the edge of the Sahara called Erfoud) , at least we were out of the rain, no hot water but there were enough beds. Frozen to the bone I crashed asleep wearing 2 layers of thermals and my fleece. Surreal!!

## **Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> March**

With no news forthcoming but a lot of rumours flying around the hotel we spent the morning in a bit of a daze and trying to clean last night's mud off everything. A small group of folk decided they were going for a run but after standing around in the courtyard and realising the rain wasn't going to let up they went for mint tea instead. We girls headed into Erfoud to pick up some plastic sheeting (in case the rain continued it meant we had something to put between our mattresses and the wet ground). Rumour had it there was a man in the local souk selling some for 6 Dirham a metre. By now most of the nationalities had arrived in Erfoud and most of the competitors were heading for the souk. The man selling plastic sheeting was making a fortune. He couldn't believe his luck! If there was one winner in the MdS so far, it was him. The next rumour dampened spirits further...the race was to be cancelled. We couldn't take this in. We had prepared for most things but not this. At 4pm there was to be an announcement in the Hotel Salem courtyard. We nervously waited and drank more mint tea. Rob arrived with a couple of the organisers, ..the race was going ahead but day 1 was to be cancelled and all Admin checks to be carried out the next day in Erfoud at Hotel Chergui. Mixed emotions from everyone, enormous relief that the race was going ahead but disappointment that we were not quite having the full MdS experience (I should add here that most of those who had been rescued from the camp the previous night felt that their experience had been added to!). So..another night in Erfoud, another all you could eat hotel buffet...this was taking the carbo loading to the extreme. In fact, nobody even felt that hungry any more!

## **Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> March**

Admin Day. This involved lots of queuing, our suitcases were taken away, our packs checked, transducers added (type of chip timing to go on the backpack), salt tablets and flares issued, Medical forms and ECGs scrutinised, water ration of the day issued and we were ushered out to the hotel pool area to wait for several hours whilst all the competitors went through the checks. We hung around in our Tent group, it was a great opportunity to get to know everyone better. Not quite the desert but at least the sky was turning blue. The mood was lifting. Sarah had a panic as her pack was starting to tear...one of the Moroccan lead competitors spotted she was having trouble and very kindly helped her stitch it together. One of his friends was worried by the weight of my pack (now up to about 11kgs...it was worrying *me*! His weighed just 6 and a half) and decided to help me sort it out. A tad embarrassing but as he cannibalised my foil food packs with his penknife (transferring contents into light plastic bags) and advised me that the flip flops were a waste of time (if I wanted to wander around camp in the dark then shoes were a much better option...rocks and scorpions out there). By the time he had finished my pack was a good 1kg lighter. Patrick Bauer arrived to make a formal announcement that the race was to go ahead (loud cheers) and then we were all bussed back to Hotel Salem, wearing race kit and carrying our packs it was all a bit odd. Nonetheless it seemed the 24<sup>th</sup> MdS was actually going to begin...nerves started to set in.

## **Monday 30<sup>th</sup> March**

A couple of days earlier we had been issued with "Road books". On each page of the book is the day's route, distance and description of the course. These were now

irrelevant as the whole route had to be redone due to the wadis (riverbeds) being too wet. So, we were driven to the dunes near Merzouga and the race to start from there. Normally the race has a “gentle” day 1 to break you in...for us 16km of dunes, a flattish stretch and then another 4km of dunes, 31.9km in total. As we got off the bus, the sight of the dunes was awesome. The start at last! Our plan as Team MDS had been to do our own thing and if we ended up together at all then it was a bonus. It was hard not to get separated at the start..everyone looked the same!! Fortunately we all had numbers front and back with our names and nationalities, nice touch by the AOI (organisers of MDS). So..into the dunes, gaiters stood up to the task and miraculously with 9km to go Debs, Sarah, Zayne and I were all together. We loved the first day, Sarah had been flying down the dunes, we had coped with keeping ourselves hydrated (temperature wasn't too bad, late 20's but following the rain high humidity of 35%). Stage 1 took just under 5 hours, mostly running but walking all the inclines. As we came over the final dunes we could see Bivouac 1 in front of us...what a sight! A ring of tents (now dry) , the arch marking the finish of the stage...we had made it. Nick and Simon were already in and had secured a tent, number 80. This was to be our tent number for the week. It didn't take too long to get used to our new home and just as we were relaxing on the rugs admiring the view of the surrounding dunes, a truck pulled up 100yds away and men started digging a hole over which they erected a plastic “tent”. It was the latrine. Apart from that the view from our tent of the dunes was superb! Our hexamine stoves were soon lit and dinner underway...day 1 and the Expedition food tasted pretty good. After sorting out kit we got our sleeping area ready, boys down one side, girls down the other. Getting air into my thermarest (sleeping mat) wasn't as simple as it looked, I was pretty useless at this until Zayne showed me the technique. Went for a wander around the camp, the results from Day 1 were pinned up on the noticeboard at the camp entrance, most people had made it through Day 1. A British guy had sadly gone off course by 8km and had been found safe but dehydrated so he was pulled out of the race. I wandered across the dunes for a little way still within sight of the camp. I stretched into a few yoga postures then sat on a dune and felt a huge sense of calm and excitement for the week. Probably then I realised I really was part of this great race and felt very lucky to be able to do it. As soon as the sun dropped over the horizon I switched on my head torch, wandered past the other tents (we were in groups according to nationality, the Brit side of the camp was spread out over quite a wide area, the French side being a little larger). Headed back to tent 80, put on the Tyvek suit (a paper suit used by decorators and pathologists!!) which added a few degrees of warmth and climbed into my sleeping bag. It was 730pm, we settled down to a cool breeze blowing through the tent, for our first night in the desert.

(On arrival at the tent, Will saw a small scorpion by our rugs, he brushed it away and actually didn't mention this incident until we woke up on the final morning!!)

## **Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> March**

38km stage, a circular route from the bivouac and back. I woke as the sun came up, got into what was to become our routine for the week, changed into my running gear (which had been hanging on the tent to “air”) inside my sleeping bag and headed off to the loo - not far to go to the latrine, which had become near unusable already. Developed a technique of lining my buff (neck scarf) with a wet wipe and breathing into that. Many had given up and gone around the edge of the camp, it wasn't long

before the toilets were redundant. Got the stove going and cooked up Expedition porridge (bit like sweet wallpaper paste although admittedly never tried that! Just as we were finishing breakfast along came the Berber men to remove our tents, by now it was around 7am, still an hour and a half before the start of Stage 2. Tents gone we were all sitting on the rugs packing our kit away when the guys returned to take the rugs as well! Around 830 we headed to the start area, ditching our empty water bottles in the designated rubbish bags. A time penalty was given to anyone disposing of an empty bottle in the desert (each bottle and lid was marked with our race numbers).

As is tradition in the MdS, Patrick Bauer and his translator stood on a platform at the start, the race helicopter hovering above us. They announced the route for the day followed by names and nationalities of those who had dropped out or been withdrawn from the race. This was then followed by singing of "Happy Birthday" to those competitors celebrating that day! Formalities over, off we went, helicopter sweeping above us, dust blowing up, the field of runners quickly spreading out into the distance and behind, a long line of runners/walkers, some marching or running along comfortably, some with a limp and taking it steadier than the day before.

We had a couple of jebels (hills) to climb early on and on the way up one we spotted our first sandviper just beside the trail we were following, it was well camouflaged in some grassy bush. I decided then to closely follow the footprints in front of me! There were some long stretches of dry river bed and more hills. I found people to run with along the way and passed the day chatting on and off as we trotted along. I was in the middle of the field and on the whole it was a sociable place to be, enough people around not to get lost and always someone to speak to if you were getting tired. I had run with Debs most of the day and in the last 6km or so she decided to push on, I had resorted to walking the hillier sections, happy to conserve some energy for the next day, the long stage which was hanging over us all.

The last 4km in the middle of the dunes, I found myself running with a Swiss ice hockey player who spoke Italian, both of us grateful for the company, we headed into camp together, satisfied that Stage 2 was now complete. My back was beginning to feel very sore and bruised from my pack. It was well taped so there was no rubbing but it felt like I'd been kicked by a horse. I had also been bothered by a small blister on my right big toe, having stuck Compeed on it in the morning, it had made the situation worse and the side of my right toe was now bulbous. Thanks to Zayne and her superb nursing skills, a syringe to draw out the fluid and some iodine (ouch, that hurt when it was injected into the blister), I then taped all my toes for the remainder of the week which seemed to work for me. I harboured a fear of having to go to the Doc Trotters (the medical team) which was unfounded as anyone who required their assistance during the race spoke very highly of their expert help.

After dinner (Expedition food), we joined the queue for the email tent to send a message home. We took it in turns through the week. Despite having to be on our feet for 40mins to an hour in the queue it was a chance to catch up with other competitors, comparing wounds! The email tent had 10 terminals, half English and half French keyboards, limited amount of characters so the messages were highly abbreviated. Back home, Clive, George and Simon Hazlitt were standing by to receive them and add them to our website.

Getting used to the evening routine, our tent group went for an “evening stroll” around camp, stretching tired legs and on return to the tent were greeted with the news that tomorrow’s stage was to be 91km.....the longest ever stage of an MdS. To say we went to sleep worrying about this would be an understatement. Some thought it was a sick April Fool. We were terrified!

### **Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> April**

We were fairly quiet getting organised the following morning, everyone deep in their own thoughts about the day and night ahead. We all said we were keen to complete the stage in one go (the time limit was 36 hours and tents were to be set up at the final few checkpoints for those wanting to grab a few hours sleep). Although I felt positive there was no room for complacency – never before had I covered 91km let alone on the back of 2 days of 20 plus miles. Amongst the usual announcements of the birthdays and those who had been pulled out of the race we were told that due to the long stage and the fact that there was to be no final day we were allowed to break into our snacks and meals for Day 7. Thoughts on the enormity of the task ahead we set off.

Some shot off, others like me decided it was to be a long day and we were happy to start at a steady walk. Will and Alex from our tent planned to walk most of it so I was happy striding out with them. We walked chatting, through long stretches of dry riverbeds, over dunes, rocky passes, a small village (the mosque we could see from a few miles back, locals gathered by the roadside to cheer us on). Alex had his Garmin and we monitored the distance between checkpoints. Our strategy was to focus on one checkpoint at a time, there were 6 in all varying from 12 to 8 miles apart. The hours passed surprisingly quickly, we learnt a lot about each other as the 3 of us marched on. 3 hours, then 6..... we spotted 3 donkeys in the distance “are you thinking what I’m thinking?”, Will to Alex and I...Michaela stupidly replies, “yes, I’m really hungry”... to ride of course....(it would have meant disqualification!)...well, it passed a few moments of the riverbed.

The afternoon was extremely hot, the most heat we had felt so far and we reminded ourselves to drink frequently and keep taking the salt tablets. As we neared 8 hours on our feet, the sun started to go down, a welcome coolness. We stopped for a little while. There were a few small bushes so the boys went one side and I the other, I took out my contact lenses and then contact lenses out (easier to do in daylight), glasses and head torches on. We walked on a little further and a couple of miles out from CP 3 and the halfway point I decided to try and run. Partly to see how my legs would feel (and if they were too tired then I would resign myself to walking the rest of the stage) but also to enjoy running along the vast never ending river bed. A part of me wanted to stay with Will and Alex, I had really enjoyed their company all day and felt it would be right to see the stage through to the end with them. However, I was now within a distance (27miles) I felt I should be able to run (no matter how slow) and the temptation of completing the stage in the early hours of the morning won out. To stay with the boys meant I would arrive in camp at dawn. I felt my strength was in running rather than staying awake through the night (I certainly wouldn’t have made great company even if I had). So, I set off, my legs feeling surprisingly ok, even my back wasn’t too bad. My pack seemed to be banging less than the previous days and it was beginning to feel less bruised. I told myself it was like being out all day on a hill walk and then

going for a run, blocking out all thoughts of the days before and the days to come. Only focus was the checkpoint ahead.

### **CP3 and beyond**

Arrived at CP3 feeling pretty good, in fact, on a bit of a high, relief to have the first half of the long stage under my belt. My card stamped, I switched tops to a long sleeve one, put on my leggings, cracked the green glo-stick and attached it to the back of my pack. The temperature was dropping, it was now completely dark with a small half moon in the sky. I wondered how far behind Alex and Will were? The boys had very kindly said that if at any point I wanted to walk or found myself isolated, to wait at the next checkpoint where they would pick me up on the way through. My only plan prior to MdS was not to find myself on my own in the dark on the long stage. So, at CP3, in the dark, on my own I looked out into the blackness beyond the checkpoint. Hmmm, on my own I headed off. It was hard to spot any glo-sticks in front which was strange, there were certainly people not far ahead as I'd seen them leave the checkpoint.

I ran on for a few hundred metres when.....WHAM.....straight into a wall of sand. My headtorch focused on the sand in front, it was so completely smooth that it looked surreal, like something from a film set. It was impossible to see how high the dune was, I swallowed hard and hoped I was still on track..ran at the dune, got halfway up, started to slide back down. We hadn't experienced dunes like this in the daylight..a whole new experience in the dark. On hands and knees I scrambled to the top and looking into the distance could see a couple of glowsticks ahead of me. It was an incentive to speed up and catch the 2 people ahead. I caught them going up the next dune, all breathless with the effort of scrambling up the bank of sand we waited until sliding down the other side to talk. It turned out the guy was Stuart Jenkins from Southampton General (so bizarre meeting someone you vaguely know in the dark in the Sahara!!). With him was Raymunde, a French lady in her early fifties who had lost her head torch. Fortunately we were scrambling at a similar pace and together we worked our way through the dunes.

Just as we thought life was getting easier (all relative in the desert in the dark) we saw a line of glowsticks ascending vertically into the sky. Hard to believe but we were about to go up a steep mountainside. My thoughts were for Raymunde and her lack of headtorch. This wasn't going to be an easy stretch. No point in dwelling on what was coming, we had to stay positive, after this there were still around 20 miles to go but our minds totally turned to the task in hand. The climb was tough and progress slow, difficult to walk let alone run. We had to pick our way through boulders and sometimes rocks slid underneath our feet. With one headtorch between us progress was slow. After what seemed like a long time on looking up we could see people at the top, some were pausing only for a moment before dipping over the other side, one or two looked absolutely beaten, sitting on rocks – I wondered if they were catching breath, surveying the view or contemplating carrying on. We reached the top. Stretched out for miles in front was the night sky and below us were more green glowsticks, like fireflies in the valley below.

The feeling of achievement on reaching the top of the jebel passed quickly as we refocused on the next stretch and navigating the boulders and slipping stones on the

way down. Another chap joined us as we descended, he was good company and the 3 of us kept each others spirits up. However, during the next stretch of dunes there were long moments of silence, each of us looking inwardly for whatever it was that would keep us going and trying to work out the easiest way across, frustrated if we had to dip down too far in order to come back up, sometimes you had no choice as you slid down the side of a dune, legs too tired to attempt another route. The markers seemed to be few and far between and we veered slightly off course a couple of times. In the middle of nowhere, bizarrely, was a group of French campers!! They were having a full desert experience under the stars...I almost felt guilty breaking the peace as we trudged past. They were jovial enough to shout "a la guache...a la guache"...I wondered how long they were going to keep up their enthusiastic pointing and directing – potentially they could be there all night for there was a long line of competitors behind us.

Eventually CP4 came into view, that familiar beep, beep as we crossed the mat and our transducers registered, what a welcome sound! There was a quiet atmosphere at the CP, a few tents were erected and were full of people, it seemed they belonged to another world, it had a village feel of people quietly going about their business, sorting out feet, cooking, some just lying on the ground. Raymunde thanked me and said she was off to look for a friend to continue on with. I wished her luck and then for the first time felt a weird sense of loneliness. For a brief moment I wondered whether to rest here for a while. However, I felt in relatively good shape, yes, tired for sure but there were 2 more stages to go, around 20 miles...I could do this. I changed into a dry long sleeved top (it had now got chilly and as the energy levels were dropping i knew i'd start to feel the cold). It was finally time for my little ipod nano..Stuart and Rory had given it to me as a Mothers Day present before I left. I had kept it tucked away in the little pocket at the front of my pack, now it was time to bring it out.

With Coldplay for company I headed off along the stoney path, there seemed to suddenly be alot of competitors regularly spaced out in front of me...my legs started turning, knees picking up and with a forward lean, my head felt clear...I wanted to run, it felt good to travel at a quicker pace. As I passed people they offered words of encouragement, everything suddenly felt positive and the energy started to rise. For stretches I was on my own, at one point I covered my headtorch with my hand just to see what it was like in the dark, I felt no fear just a sense of curiosity!

A Moroccan guy caught me up and overtook, for a while we kept passing each other and then settled into a rhythm side by side on the track, stride for stride, we didn't speak, just kept running, he pointed into the sky and looking up I could see a glow of light. It looked a bit like a moonbeam. It was the laser, a lightning bolt directed into the sky indicating CP5 at its base....the light was hazy and seemed to be almost like a whitish hazy ray but as we ran on, the ray became a faint shade of green, running still nearer the green became more definite and the laser more defined until it was a sharp edged line pointing upwards. Focusing on every step in silence but comfortable in each others company we saw in the distance a few lights, the CP seemed small in comparison to the others and suddenly we seemed to be there, beep, beep we crossed the line and into the funnel which was really short. At the end of it....Debs!! She was with a Canadian guy, they had their walking poles out. Debs said her knee was

playing up and was going to walk from there to the finish. I said goodbye to the Moroccan, he disappeared into one of the two tents to prepare some food.

I had a few bites of an energy bar, it tasted of sugar, I didn't feel hungry, an overriding sense of wanting to push on and get to the finish..it was within reach and around 9 miles away. At the rate we had been travelling I reckoned an hour and a half would do it. My slight dilemma was whether to walk with Debs and the Canadian or push on. I walked with them for about a mile but my legs felt like they wanted to run, I had a strong urge to clip away at the miles and get them done, I felt I had walked so much of the day I wanted to keep the promise I'd made to myself about running through the night. Somehow walking felt like I was cheating myself. Debs seemed fine and was in good company. They were moving at a good rate with the poles and I didn't doubt she would be ok. So, off I went, again into the darkness, rocks across the path. The lights ahead were few and far between, most seemed to be running now, pushing on to the finish, wherever it was! Most of the stage was flat, small mounds but very rocky, I took a tumble and fell heavily onto my left shoulder which hit a rock, felt a little shaken and shoulder throbbed a bit but otherwise luckily ok.

A little shaken but got back into my stride across a huge expanse of what must have been a riverbed. One foot in front of another, my iPod for company, a Spaniard went past me, he was going well, I traced his footsteps for as long as I could, which helped pass another stretch. Head down for most of the time, I picked my way through the rocks, the fall left me feeling more vulnerable, glancing up at intervals. On and on through the darkness, in the far distance there was a light....it seemed surreal and at first I didn't register what it was, not sure if that was due to exhaustion or disbelief that I'd made it. As I got closer the lights became less of a haze and more individual, moving around, they were the head torches of the organisers and at last, there was the red and white arch signifying the end of the long stage....tiredness didn't matter, I ran quicker and quicker, my ankles turning on the rocks, toes hitting some of them, my pack swung from side to side. I was so happy and relieved!

Crossing the line, two of the organisers were sitting in chairs, wrapped up in blankets and wearing thick jackets, they handed me my 3 bottles of water, my arms felt weak but I pulled them in tight to my chest and walked towards the tents of the bivouac. I headed off to the left and one of the organisers came running up, calling to me. She took me by the arm and led me up the path to the right, slightly disorientated and legs feeling empty, I followed the path of glowsticks. Many of the tents were empty and there was an eerie silence, occasionally a tent would have somebody inside curled up in their sleeping bags. It was so quiet and still. I passed Rory Coleman's tent, he was back and said well done.

Tent 80...Nick and Simon were curled up in the top corner, Zayne was also back, she turned in her sleeping bag then was still. I peeled my pack off, crouched down under the tent (it was in an unbelievably rocky area...just what you need after running 91km..some rocks under your mattress!). It was now I looked at my watch...2.18am....I tried not to make too much noise as I took off my damp top and found the only dry thing I had left. I knew I was getting chilled quickly and put my Tyvek suit on top and climbed inside my sleeping bag to prepare a REGO. My stomach felt shrunken and with no hunger I forced it down, still finding it hard to switch off the feeling of one foot in front of another, the overriding feeling was a huge

sense of satisfaction...I hadn't dared believe I couldn't complete the stage in one go but now I didn't have to think about it anymore, it was done, time to rest.

Debs arrived around 20 minutes later, giving each other a hug, so happy to be back and desperate to chat about our adventures that day but realising we would disturb the others if we did, we crashed out. Dawn broke just a few hours later, for a few seconds I couldn't remember where I was, moved and everything seemed to hurt, at least I could move a little. I lifted my head, counted the bodies...one, two, three, four...the guys were back, Zayne beside me to my right made five, looking up Sarah and Debs were still asleep, six, seven..eight of us all back, Tent 80 had made it!! No running today...sleep some more and don't move!

### **Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> April**

One by one we woke up the sun was beating into the tent. A great feeling knowing we had the day to ourselves. We congratulated each other on all getting back during the night and started to swap stories of our different experiences. Nick and Simon made it through the dunes and up the mountain before it got dark. Will and Alex had continued to walk on – Alex's feet were a mess, blistered and very swollen. Zayne had met with Jacob, Rory Coleman and some others and had pushed on, coming in in a good time pushing her high up on the overall rankings. Sarah had been at CP4 when I went past – she had looked out for me, prepared some food and in the darkness I had missed her completely. We did very little all day. The effort of standing up was a task in itself. I stretched out in my sleeping bag, rolled over so I could get onto my knees, reached for the water bottle and found the day's food pack, porridge with strawberries..the Expedition Food was beginning to taste the same now whether it was Chicken Korma or Muesli with fruit, it all seemed to meet somewhere in the middle and taste of the Spaghetti Bolognese!

I did as much as I could on my knees then got into the tent standing/crouched position before crawling out of the tent and bringing myself fully upright. My back felt very tight and legs heavy, not like a post marathon stiffness but a more exhausted overall tiredness that was now a part of me. Still felt a huge sense of satisfaction at having got through 91km.

We passed the whole day in the tent, content with each others company chatting, dozing, eating, drinking water, stretching. From the back of the tent we watched others coming in across the dunes. The sun was now getting higher in the sky and the heat rising. These people had been out there for over 24 hours. They trickled in throughout the day, others clapping and cheering them as they came in. Gradually the tents started to fill again and people were assessing blisters, swollen feet and injuries.

It did occur to me that eight people in such a cramped space in another situation would have driven each other crazy. Debs, Sarah, Zayne and I massaged each others legs and we showed the boys how to do the same. Sarah showed everyone some yoga stretches and I offered to treat Debs' knee with some of the acupuncture needles I'd put in my pack as a "luxury item". Treated Alex as well whose hamstring and back of knee was incredibly tight and then used some on my left knee, the bit of me that felt most inflamed. Word had got round about Zayne's fantastic nursing skills and a few

people came to the tent to beg for bits of melonin, syringes and tape. There wasn't an endless supply and self preservation had to come into it.

Alex's feet were in a bad way and mid afternoon he took himself off to Doc Trotters, the medical team of the MdS. Rumours abound about their syringing of blisters and cutting of feet were scary enough to put you off unless you really had to go. However, Alex returned, feet coloured a bright pink (antiseptic) and some bandaged toes. He said Doc Trotters was nothing to fear and how good they had been. He even managed to film some footage of the whole experience!

Most bizarre part of the day was late afternoon. People started wandering past our tent with small cans of fizzy drink. A tradition of the MdS is on the rest day you are given a can of drink. It was the fastest we had moved all day. We joined the queue, no one bothered by queuing, we had nowhere to go. Ah...the luxury of a chilled can of drink, mine was apple flavour, the nearest thing to fruit all week.

We did get onto the subject of food, the girls were mostly craving crisp salads and fresh fruit, there was talk of some fish with a glass of chilled crisp white wine and Alex's ideal...a Hawaiaan pizza, ham and pineapple!

(That evening I had to read my emails over and over taking my mind of eating as I was trying to force Expedition food down my throat, gagging with every mouthful, knowing I would need the energy for the next day but my stomach just rejecting the fatty sugary mush).

A few remaining people were coming into camp. Total respect, these guys had been out there for around 30 hours still going while we were resting and recovering.

We had a few tent visitors, Rory, Mark Gillet the photographer – he came to talk to Zayne but she was curled up inside her sleeping bag having a nap. The tent across from us organised a "Tent Quiz", there was a flicker of interest from Tent 80 but we didn't move. Raymund the French lady called by when I had gone to the email tent – she wanted to thank me for helping her and to explain that she found her torch at the next checkpoint, it was buried at the bottom of her pack!

Sometime after 9 the shout went round that the final competitor was coming in. Rob went round all the Brit tents to tell us that it is an MdS tradition to welcome in the final person on the long stage. Putting on Tyvek suits to keep warm, the air now much cooler we went out together. There was a long line of MdS competitors, all nationalities starting a steady clap. Way off in the distance there was the light of headtorches...slowly they moved towards us as the line started to stretch out to meet them. The clapping got louder, cheers went up, they had reached the line but still had 100m or so to reach the finish arch. TV cameras swamped them, people rushed out to shake their hands, the line either side clapped and cheered, an electric atmosphere of people full of admiration at what these guys had achieved. Our own tiredness forgotten. The 72 year old smiling Malaysian came into view followed by a larger guy with a twisted back, limping behind him. Following them the 2 camels who follow the race with 2 Moroccans leading them in open sandals. Patrick Bauer greeted the men, hugging and kissing them as they came across the line. An unforgettable moment.

## Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> April

I woke feeling more refreshed but legs still tired and very heavy. There was a very light-hearted almost flippant atmosphere, “just” a marathon to run and then we would be finished. Anyone would think we were heading out for a light jog. As I went out to brush my teeth a few yards from the tent there were a lot of people looking as stiff as I felt. Some had very bandaged feet, one guy caught my eye, his feet were bandaged and covered in the blue “hospital” shoe covers and he had been given a pair of short crutches to help him walk. Poor guy, I couldn’t help but think that the MdS was over for him.

Many had succumbed to the stomach bug now sweeping the camp. Zayne was suffering severe stomach cramps and kept her food intake to a minimum. The tents lifted and rugs taken away, unlike previous MdS we knew we had another night in the bivouac and wouldn’t be finishing near a village as planned. For me that was the only disappointment of the final day, I had always held a picture in my head of George, Stuart and Rory being there as I crossed the line and the boys running the last bit of the race alongside me. It wasn’t going to happen. Due to the rains at the beginning and the route being changed we were to finish in the middle of nowhere. Looking at the positives, Tent 80 would have a final evening together after the race, it would be lovely to celebrate together, we weren’t ready to let our tent bond go just yet.

Debs suggested that M D and S run together for the final stage. For some reason I felt it was something I wanted to do on my own. We had got through the week running on our own and there was something more familiar in that and knowing there would be no pressure on any of us to keep up or run at someone else’s pace.

The bins around the camp were overflowing with leftover food, a few “locals” were scavenging for anything useful that was thrown away. Tent 80 did their fair share of ditching...amazing how we had initially thought it would be hard to survive on the rations for the week and here we were chucking expedition packs, energy bars, drinks powders..we shared out the nice stuff, remaining Haribo..nuts and dried fruit, Will had several Pepperoni he was throwing away. I had originally refused to take these with me but took one now as it actually looked appealing.

For the first time my pack actually felt lighter. The organisers promised us a meal that evening which they would provide so all we had to carry was enough to get us through the day.

The final chat from Patrick on the start line and we were off....straight towards a jebel! The race helicopter swept back along the field, it felt like we were on a filmset. We cheered and waved as the helicopter flew just over our heads, whipping up the dust and sand around us.

My head was full of thoughts that last day and no real focus on my actual running. My legs seemed to know what to do, one foot in front of another, my pack swinging from side to side, the water bottle sloshing around. I thought about the week, how incredible the whole thing had been, now how suddenly and abruptly it was coming to an end. In a bizarre way I wanted time to stand still, I felt running forwards was taking me away from the MdS, away from the safety net of the race itself, away from

the last 2 years of preparation. After such a long build up it all seemed to be ending far too quickly. On the final day I didn't feel like pushing on as in a race, strangely I wanted to savour the last 26 miles. Heading up the jebel there were lots of now familiar faces, Raymund the French lady was alongside me early on, she thanked me again and we laughed that she had found her headtorch, there was Pez the army guy, the chap I had sat next to on the plane on the way out who had done lots of 50 milers, Bruce reached the top of the jebel as I looked back and stopped to take a photo. In front and behind the MdS chain stretched as far as the eye could see - how amazing that must have looked from the air.

My memory of the marathon stage is patchy, long stretches of flat areas, a few gentle dunes here and there, my left gaiter finally came apart and dragged around my leg until I dispensed with it altogether, ripping it off my shoe completely and ditching it in the bin at the first CP, caring less now about a few grains of sand.

At the second CP I thought I should take on some food, not being able to face another energy bar I tore the wrapper off the Pepperoni...never had something so plastic tasted so good...it was the closest thing to real food in a week, delicious!

People weren't hanging around so much at checkpoints, taking on board the water, less food to sort, less worry about things rubbing, we knew we could put up with discomfort for a few more hours and it wasn't going to impact on anything – no more days to run.

There was a particularly long stretch over what was a large wadi, children came out along the route, some shy young girls, wrapped in shawls and headscarves they stared wide eyed as we trooped past. Some of the boys tugged at our packs and the older ones were more forward and begged for food, or a prized MdS buff.

The feeling of nearing civilization was creeping in, we ran up around a hill, some trees and bushes now dotted around, more children and in front was a tiny "village", a few huts either side of a river, there was a concrete road which ran through the river and it marked our path. An MdS Land Rover circled about, keeping an eye on the competitors as we trundled along, past the locals, through the river which came up to mid shin and then back out onto a rocky winding path through some hills.

An Irish guy caught me up and we ran along chatting for a while, his pace was good and for a while I tagged along. Eventually I told him to push on and he took off towards a steeper mountainside littered with grey rocks and boulders. I picked my way up in no real hurry. At the top there seemed to be a group of people, as I got closer you could see more locals, hassling competitors as they ran past along the top of the escarpment. I then spotted the light brown Darbaroud jackets of a couple of the organisers sitting relaxed on the rocks encouraging runners on. I reached the top, went over the other side and wow.....what a view! The desert stretched out in front completely flat, a grey brown plate with a thin line cutting across the landscape in the middle. In the far distance something that almost looked part of the landscape but not quite...it was the finish. I stood for a few seconds just to take it in. It didn't seem possible. The end of the journey, 2km away. Sounds corny but something welled up inside me, and tears started to come into my eyes, disbelief, relief, absolute thrill that I was about to cross the line of the Marathon des Sables. Pez the army guy caught me

up on the way down, “come on Pez, this is it, that’s the finish!”...we took off, my legs didn’t feel at all tired, I just wanted to run faster and faster, all the way to the line. I remember there was a ditch about halfway along, dipping down and back up again, Pez told me to go on...pack swinging, my legs turning as fast as they could, closer and closer, the boys wouldn’t be there but I thought about them and almost could feel them running beside me. Competitors who had already finished were lining the route, medals round their necks. Debs was cheering me to the line..Patrick Bauer was there, a hug and a big smile, he hung the medal around my neck. I had crossed the line. I had completed the Marathon Des Sables.

**Michaela McCallum. 2009**

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