

THE
ULTIMATE
GUIDE TO MARATHON DES SABLES



2023 EDITION

— *Intro*

What is the MARATHON des SABLES?



Over 30-years ago (1984), **Patrick Bauer**, filled up a pack with food and water and trekked off alone into the Algerian Sahara to cover 350km's on foot in a self-sufficient manner.

Little did he know at the time, but this journey was the start of something incredible, the **Marathon des Sables**.

Marathon des Sables offers more than just running, it offers a challenge, it offers something quite unique – the Sahara strips the runner back to basics and deprives them of all luxuries.

Runners find themselves in the desert.

However, the challenge can often daunt a new participant, let's get one thing clear, the Marathon des Sables is not complicated.

The Race

The Marathon des Sables is a five-stage journey through the Sahara desert in self-sufficiency. The only items provided are a bivouac tent shared with seven other participants and rationed water. Days are typically between 28 to 42km and there will always be a long-day of 75 to 85km taken over 2-days.

If you want to increase your chances of completing your chosen race, commit to the training required, get your head in the correct place and then finish off with the appropriate equipment for the job.

MDS is a journey, an enhancement of you as a person. It's easy to become obsessed, ultimately most runners at MDS are enthusiasts, if you keep that in mind the journey will be a complete one. Keep 3-key things in mind:

1. Set a hard but just manageable goal.
2. Figure out what steps it takes to achieve that goal.
3. Largely forget the goal and focus on completing the steps.

Formulate a long-term plan and don't rush. The sooner you start this process, the greater your chance of success and the less chance of injury. Plan stepping stone races and don't be fooled into thinking that you need to run marathons day-in and day-out. You don't! Training is about ALL the training you do and not about anyone run. Count back from the race date and plan blocks of say 3-week build/ 1-week recovery. A really specific multi-day training plan can be 6-months and if you are an experienced runner, this can be 3 or 4 months.





Patrick Bauer

Marathon des Sables has new owners, **Patrick Bauer** is no longer the race director. His legacy of 37-years lives strong.

Changes for the 38th Edition.

1. The 38th Marathon des Sables (2024 edition) will take place over 5 stages instead of 6 previously. The total distance, around 250 km+/-, does not change.
2. Self-sufficiency will include for this 38th edition the day of your arrival in the desert, and the day of control preceding the race.
3. MDS will charter fewer planes, only 400 places will be available from Paris, and 200 from London.
4. Free coaches will be available to transfer from Marrakech to Ourzazate.
5. DocTrotter will no longer be present on the race and will be replaced with Dokever.
6. Ice will be made available at checkpoints to facilitate cooling in excessive heat.
7. Women, who wish, can choose to stay in 100% female tents. Of course, those who prefer a mixed tent will be able to make this choice.
8. A provision of cabins will be reserved for women to allow them to change in complete privacy.
9. Toilets reserved for women will be present at the bivouac and at the checkpoints.
10. Periodic protection (towels and tampons) will be available at the bivouac and at the checkpoints for the duration of the event.

“DocTrotter will no longer be present on the race and will be replaced with Dokever - considered among the leaders in Europe and we believe they can increase the quality, we will have the same number of doctors, podiatrists and nurses: 60. Also, there will be new management of vehicles by keeping the current system but adding a rapid intervention force with SSVs. Always with the helicopter as back up.”

- Cyril Gauthier

How to train for Marathon des Sables :

There is no one answer or solution in regard to training for an event like Marathon des Sables. So many factors come into consideration, such as:

1. Past experience.
2. Ability.
3. Available time.
4. Objective, such as complete or compete.

Ultimately, you need to sit down and answer the four questions above and with those answers formulate a plan. If in doubt, get a coach and a bespoke training plan. Consistency is key. Training is never about just one run, but all the runs/ walks you complete in a period of time. This accumulation of stress, and importantly rest, is what will prepare you for the challenge of 5-stages in the Sahara. Add some strength and core work. Cross train to give your body a run rest.

Break training down in monthly blocks, looking to build over 3-weeks and then rest and recover on the 4th week. Do not get obsessed by milage and distance as more often than not, training is influenced by time available.

Add 'B' and 'C' races that you can use to test yourself, nutrition and equipment. Be careful adding too much weight when training, it's important to adapt and prepare for the race, but too much weight and too often increases the risk of injury.

Have a plan, as an example, a 6-month plan could look like the following:

Month 1: week 1 5-hours, week 2 6-hours, week 3 7-hours and week 4 5-hours

Month 2: week 1 6-hours, week 2 7-hours, week 3 8-hours with **C Race** and week 4 5-hours

Month 3: week 1 8-hours, week 2 9-hours, week 3 10-hours with **B race** and week 4 6-hours

Month 4: week 1 10-hours, week 2 12-hours, week 3 Race Simulation Week and week 4 6-hours

Month 5: week 1 12hours, week 2 14-hours, **Peak 1** week 3 16-hours **Peak 2** and week 4 8-hours

Month 6: **Week 1** 10-hours **Peak 3**, week 2 **Taper 1**, week 3 **Taper 2** and week 4 **RACE**

In the final 2-weeks before the race, add heat acclimation, ideally in a heat chamber, with 6-8 sessions. If a heat chamber is not possible, be creative with saunas, hot baths, bikram yoga etc.

Marathon des Sables is a running race, but the reality, for most, is that walking is a key factor to success and therefore learning to walk can make a huge difference.

Walking:

If we exclude the top 50-100 runners (who also walk) most of the field spend a huge amount of time walking. Many think they will run 80% and walk 20% - NO! It is the opposite, and many are lucky to run 20%. Learn to walk! Believe me, it's a huge tick in the multi-day box and rest assured that if you can walk at a good consistent pace (barring injury or dehydration) you will finish.

Poles:

If you are looking to race a multi-day, figure in the top 10% and can run in 'most' scenarios, poles will not help your experience. However, once we get out of the top 10% and, once you start to look at the mid to back of the pack, poles may well provide a huge advantage. They provide stability, momentum, drive and in soft sand (for example), they are a little like 4-wheel drive. My recommendation would be trying training sessions with and without poles and see what works for you. Don't get poles 3-4 weeks before a race and think it will be okay, poles require technique and yes, they will impact on your shoulder, arms, and neck.





The
Marathon des Sables
Runner

SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Equipment will not make you complete any race.

What it can do is make the process easier and more comfortable.

Equipment is something we all must take to any race and finding out what works and doing the research is part of the fun.

What Equipment Do You Need?



Tomomi Bitoh

Pack – Must fit, have enough room (but not too much) for all your equipment and provide easy access to fluid and you must make sure that your race numbers are visible as per race rules. Pack development has changed over the years as technology changes, what works for one person, may well not work for you. So, it's important to try packs and see how they fit. Make sure you add weight, remember on day-1 of the race your pack will be 8kg (or more). A pack feels and fits very different with weight. Remember, as the races goes on, your pack gets lighter as you eat the food contents.

Packs to consider:

Instinct XX 20L
Camelbak Octane 25L
Ultimatedirection Fastpack
Raidlight Legend 24L
OMM Classic 25L
Salomon XA25
OMM Phantom
Raidlight Ultralight 24L
Montane Trailblazer
Montane Gecko
Rab Aeon Ultra 20
Inov-8 Venturelife 25
Six Moon Designs
WAA

Sleeping bag – Must be lightweight, packs small and is warm enough. I would always recommend a sleeping bag with the addition of a down jacket as it offers more flexibility, reduced weight, and reduced pack size. Popular sleeping bags year-on-year are PHD, Rab, Yeti, Sea to Summit and OMM.

Clothes – You just need what you will run in. However, a spare pair of socks is often commonplace, and many runners have one or all of the following: a warm base layer, a lightweight down jacket or waist coat, buff and maybe long lightweight pants. A sample clothing list is as follows:

Minimum:

Hat

Buff

T-Shirt

Shorts

Socks

Shoes with gaiters

Extras:

Down jacket

Extra socks

Shoes and Gaiters – Shoes are personal and must be suited to you, the individual. Consider your gait (neutral, supinate or pronate), consider time on feet, consider your weight, consider how much you will walk (and then double it) also consider shoe drop and how much cushioning you need. It's impossible to recommend any one shoe because of these variables. You will see top runners using a lighter shoe, remember, these shoes only need to last 20-30 hours. However, you may well need a shoe for 40, 50 or 60-hours. Do you need a trail shoe? No, you don't need a trail shoe, but I would say that many trail shoes are more durable as they are designed for the rough and tumble of variable terrain. Do you need an aggressive outsole? No, you don't, but I do think some grip is better than none and therefore I would use a trail shoe over road. Protection? Toe box protection is a good idea as deserts include lots of rocks, far more than you may think. Do I need a size bigger? Shoe sizing does depend on what is 'normal' for you. I always recommend a thumb nail of space above the big toe; you don't need any more than this. Recommendations of going a size bigger is bad advice in my opinion. A shoe that is too large allows your foot to move, a moving foot causes friction, friction causes blisters, and the rest is the same old story that I see at desert races all over the world. However, I would recommend a shoe with a little more width in the toe box, this will allow for some comfort as the days progress. If you are prone to feet swelling, discomfort, blisters and so on, get a strategy sorted before you head out to your chosen race. Get your Velcro sewn on your shoes and make sure that when you get the shoes back the fit has not been altered.



Gaiters protect feet from the sand.

Food – You need a minimum number of calories per day typically specified in the race rules and how those calories are made up are up to you. This for many is a difficult one. It raises many questions and yes, it's good to find out what other people do and use but ultimately, YOU have to eat it. The decision to use a stove is another question mark but most runners like that hot water option. Remember though, you can make a fire from twigs, shrub and branches that surround bivouac. Also note here that food choices and what you eat during running varies greatly depending on how fast you run. For example, the top runners are done and dusted on the marathon stage in 3-4 hours, and they are using carbohydrate as a fuel, they therefore can get away with 1-2 gels. If, however, a typical day for you will be 6, 7, 8, 9 hours or even longer, gels are not going to be a good choice. Fat and real food are going to be essential. Understand this now and you can start making the necessary adaptations in training so that food choices will work for you. Training the stomach is a key element for a successful multi-day. Food is also the heaviest and most bulky thing you will carry, think about repacking in smaller bags and making everything as small as possible. Remember, every day you get water in a bottle. Cut a bottle in half, this makes a perfect bowl for you to rehydrate food. **Please note:** Each competitor must have 14 000 k/calories, a minimum of 2,000 k/calories per day, otherwise he/she will be penalized (see ART. 27 and 28). Any food out its original packaging must be equipped, legibly, of the nutrition label shown on the product concerned.

Water and Salt Tablets – These are provided by the race and it's easy really, take the tablets as recommended and drink the water. Dehydration is one of the main reasons someone will DNF at a multi-day race.

Feet – Look after them, along with dehydration, blistered and damaged feet are a key reason for failure in any multi-day race. If you are prone to blisters, plan accordingly and work out strategies.

Mandatory Kit - As one would expect, is mandatory! So, purchase what is on the list. You can save weight by shopping around. Simple rule: the lighter and smaller, the more expensive it will be! You will require: 10 safety pins, Compass with 1deg precision, Whistle, Knife, Topical Disinfectant (not tropical), Venom pump, Signal mirror, Survival Blanket, Sun Cream, 200-euro note, Passport, Road Book and Medical certificate.

Extras – Optional extras are very personal, an MP3 player and earphones may be a good idea? Unless you have a legitimate reason for a phone (family emergency) I would say leave it at home. Do yourself and tent mates a favour and embrace the isolation, embrace a simple life - you will find you have a new perspective at the end of the race.

Required:

Head torch and spare batteries. My advice is using a torch that takes batteries (not rechargeable) and look for 200 lumens or more. Flip flops or similar allow some comfort for your feet after running.

Optional:

Esbit stove or similar.

Esbit cooking pot.

Esbit fuel. (You order this and collect in bivouac).

Items to consider - Toilet Roll, Wemi Wipes, Spork with long handle, Matches/ Lighter, Antiseptic, Toothpaste, Toothbrush, Super Glue, Monkey Tape, Zip Ties, Hand Gel, Blindfold, Ear Plugs, Needle and Thread, Foot Care Kit, Lip Balm, Gurney Goo, Tea/ Coffee - anything else?

Minimum pack weight is 6.5kg plus water, get as close to this as you can. Additional weight is additional stress and just makes the journey harder. Luxuries are ok if they improve the journey and make it easier, music is a good example of an additional extra.



Friends :

You are going to share bivouac with 7 other people, and you are going to have some serious highs and lows. These tent mates will pull you through and motivate you. They will become friends for life. Ideally find tent mates before you head out to your chosen race.

The Mind :

The legs, lungs, heart, and feet will only get you so far. The mind is what will get you to the finish. Broken individuals with bodies in tatters but mentally strong finish the race. Always amazing to watch people leave a CP with a smile, hobbling at a snail's pace and then to see them cross the line later in the day. Despite the hardships and pain, they embraced the journey and mentally were superior in strength. It was the mind that got them to the line. Endurance and persistence are qualities that are largely trained and learned.

Laugh :

If you laugh, you are having fun. Laugh when you hit rock bottom, why not? Laugh when you are going to the toilet in a brown plastic bag and most of all, laugh with and at your tent mates and fellow runners. The camaraderie of a multi-day is quite unique, embrace it.

Admin and preparation that you may not think of:

- Take essentials on the plane and wear run apparel and shoes. That way should a baggage disaster happen your chances of racing improve. And trust me, baggage does get lost!
- Take food and drinks with you for the travel.
- Night 1 and night 2 in bivouac are NOW (2024 edition and moving forward) self-sufficient so take extra food, snacks and drinks to cover this period. They can be large, bulky, heavy etc as they are not part of the mandatory race kit.
- Take an inflatable bed and extra clothing options. May as well have 2 comfortable nights and a comfortable day before racing starts. Have additional items such as a base layer, sleeping bag liner and other items that may be on a 'question' list for the race. On night 1 and before you go to admin, you can make final decisions of what to and what not to take. Particularly important if you think you may be cold at night.
- Admin day is often a lengthy multi-hour experience, just make sure you take some water and a little snack food. Maybe take an umbrella to provide shade from the sun.
- Keep sunscreen on and keep hydrated. No need to drink vast volumes – drink to thirst before the racing starts.
- Remember that after bag drop and check-in you have no access to any additional items, however, you only become completely self-sufficient when you start the race. With that in mind, you can have additional food and luxuries with you until day 1 kick-off.

Conclusions :

Racing a multi-day is a magical and life changing journey. It really is a true challenge of mind and body to race over many days, irrespective if you complete the race in just over 20-hours or 60+ hours. It's a hark back to a more primitive time, a time without clutter and modern technology.

Embrace this. Embrace the silence of the surroundings and the simplicity of placing one foot in front of the other, eating, resting and sleeping and then doing it all again.

MDS is a relatively simple process, you need a minimum of kit, some food, regular water and a level of fitness to complete the challenge. Yes, it is THAT simple.

Plan, do some research on kit but it's not rocket science. Just find out what works for you and then pray the multi-day gods are on your side. Dropout rates are relatively low (usually) considering the challenge; however, shit happens that you just can't plan for. Ultimately get the mind in the right place and the body will follow. A plan 'A' is great but have a plan 'B' and 'C.'

Finally, set yourself a realistic goal (that may just be to finish) so that you manage not only your expectations but pace. Way too many start too quick and most dropouts come on days 1 and 2.





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