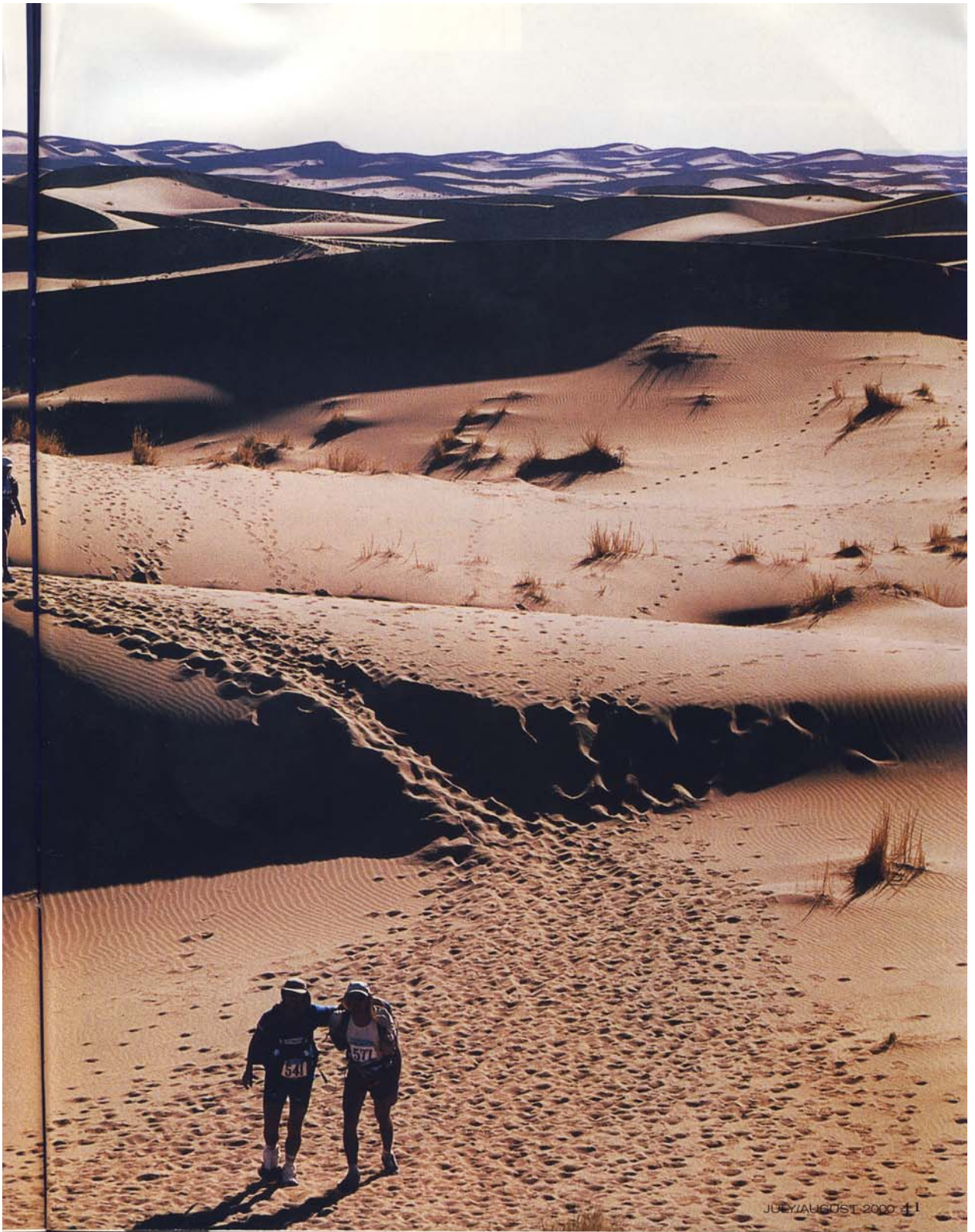


# SAND, SAND, EVERYWHERE...

SEHING SAIL ON A VERY DRY  
SEA IN THE MARATHON DES  
SABLES

by Cathy Tibbetts photos by Toni Miret



"DON'T LET YOUR JEEP DRIVERS STRAY OFF-COURSE!"

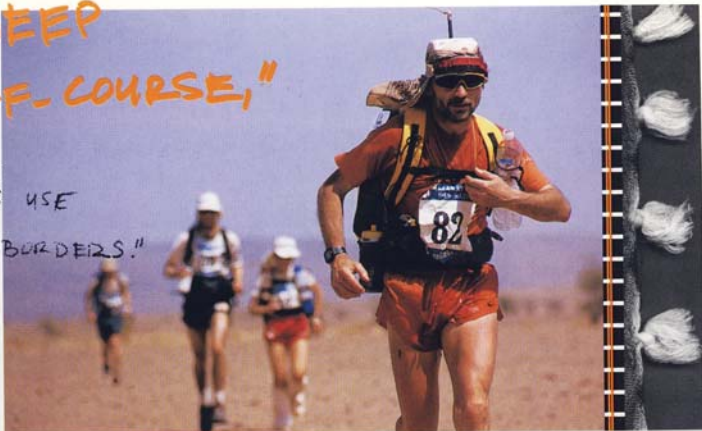
RACE ORGANIZERS TOLD THE JOURNALISTS. "THE ALGERIANS USE LAND MINES TO PROTECT THEIR BORDERS."

That's how remote the course was at this year's Marathon des Sables. American runners catching the Thursday night red-eye to Casablanca didn't arrive at the starting line of the race until Saturday morning. And the pre-race check-in was that afternoon.

Sable is French for sand and there was no shortage of it during this week-long stage race across the Sahara Desert of Southern Morocco. Racers run in six stages totaling about 150 miles, and the event's winner is the runner with the fastest cumulative time.

The course is different every year, but stages remain roughly the same distances. This year's race was 146 miles (235.5k), with daily stages of 18, 21, 23, 47, 26 and 11 miles. With 673 runners from 29 different countries, this year's 15th running was the biggest Marathon des Sables ever.

As if the heat and sand dunes weren't enough to bog down competitors, racers are required to carry supplies for an entire week — clothing, sleeping bag and mandatory survival gear. Strictly rationed, water is doled out at checkpoints along the way, usually about 6 to 8



RUNNERS FROM AROUND THE WORLD, INCLUDING ANDRÉ RABALLAND FROM FRANCE (ABOVE), CONVERGE ON MOROCCO TO RUN IN THE MARATHON DES SABLES. PREVIOUS PAGE: THE THIRD STAGE OF THE RACE INCLUDES A 14-MILE STRETCH OF SAND DUNES SO REMOTE ITS ONLY ACCESSIBLE BY HELICOPTER.

miles apart. That, and an open-air tent made of burlap sacks, are all you get for your \$2,500 entry fee. Still, there's a waiting list to get in.

The trick is to keep packs light while bringing enough food and gear to stay healthy. Or at least ambulatory. I was running it for the fourth time, and still hadn't gotten things right. At least I knew you could never bring too many potato chips.

We spent Saturday afternoon exchanging ideas on how to shave off fractions of ounces. Three-time finisher Ray Nyce was carrying 1 pound less than the year before, but with 3,000 more calories. The 49-year-old systems administrator from Denver had researched food to

optimize calories per ounce, and was even carrying a small toothbrush made for cats.

I opted for seven-day, extended-wear contact lenses and saved myself 8 ounces in contact lens supplies. This might not sound like a lot, but it's a whole meal at the Marathon des Sables.

Pre-race jitters subsided quickly with the "short" first and second stages. The oven was on high broil, it was windy, and packs were heavy with food. But



BLACK-ROBED WOMEN SCURRY ABOUT IN THE CASBAH OF MAHMID EL ROZLANE ON A PORTION OF THE ANCIENT CAMEL ROUTE TO TIMBUKTU. THE NEON GREEN, RED AND ORANGE EMBROIDERY ON THEIR ROBES ARE THE ONLY BRIGHT COLORS ON THE MOROCCAN FRONTIER, OTHER THAN THE ORANGE COURSE MARKERS RACERS FOLLOW.

"I FOUND MYSELF WISHING  
that I HAD, IN FACT, BEEN SHOT."

competitors held up well — only a handful dropped out the first two days.

Stage 3 was another story. For once, the French race organizers spoke to us in English. Normally, the daily briefings included 45 minutes in their native language, followed by a 30-second summary in English. Lucky thing for me, I was once fluent in French and still comprehend about 95 percent of the spoken tongue. Apparently, they wanted everyone to understand the third stage included a 14-mile stretch of sand dunes accessible only by helicopter and with no extra water along the way. When they gave us two bottles of water (as opposed to the usual one) at the last checkpoint, it was a red flag the size of Omar's tent.

I filled both my water bottles and cradled one of theirs in my arm like a football as I began my long assault. Sand is easy for me and I drink less water than most runners — still,



RUNNERS DO WHATEVER THEY CAN TO SHIELD THEMSELVES FROM THE SCALDING SUN, EVEN IF IT MEANS WRAPPING UP IN 100-DEGREE HEAT.

I barely made it. Soaring temperatures and dehydration soon had my fellow competitors setting off emergency flares, begging to be rescued.

Bob Johnson of Grand Rapids, Michigan, had just passed another runner when he heard a loud explosion.

"I thought I'd been shot," he said. "My next thought was that it's really true that you don't feel it when you got shot."

Then he saw that it was a flare — not him — whizzing toward Heaven.

"The next day, halfway through the 47-mile stage, I found myself wishing that I had, in fact, been shot," he remarked.

With no time to recover from a torturous day in the dunes, runners began the 47-mile stage across a long expanse of dunes in violent headwinds. Dunes are small dunes, probably stunted because the rest of the sand is blowing in the air making everybody miserable.

When the wind stopped, it only got worse. The temperature shot into the 100s, and I spent the afternoon crossing a plain of baked dirt and scorched rocks. When my head felt ready to explode, I'd slow down and squirt precious water on my head to cool off.

"I HATE THIS SAND!"

By sunset I noticed white-shirted runners staggering in the distance like small sailboats tacking into the wind. Many pulled over to eat and catch a few hours of sleep.

I ran on, into the casbah of Mahmid El Rozlane. Casbahs are the old, walled part of Moroccan cities, where residents once lived in castles. Mahmid El Rozlane happens to be on the old camel route to Timbuktu, and it didn't look like things had changed much since then. The few women scurrying about were completely covered in black robes, intricately embroidered with neon green, red and orange. They were the only bright colors on the Moroccan frontier, other than the orange course markers we were following.

Hoping I wouldn't make a wrong turn, I carefully followed the course markers through the maze of adobe walls. I wanted to get through the casbah as fast as I could. With my bare arms and legs, I might as well have been totally naked as far as cultural sensitivities were concerned. The men who weren't out picking dates or spending time with their families sat around and got an eyeful. I don't speak a word of Arabic, but it was pretty obvious what they were saying about me.

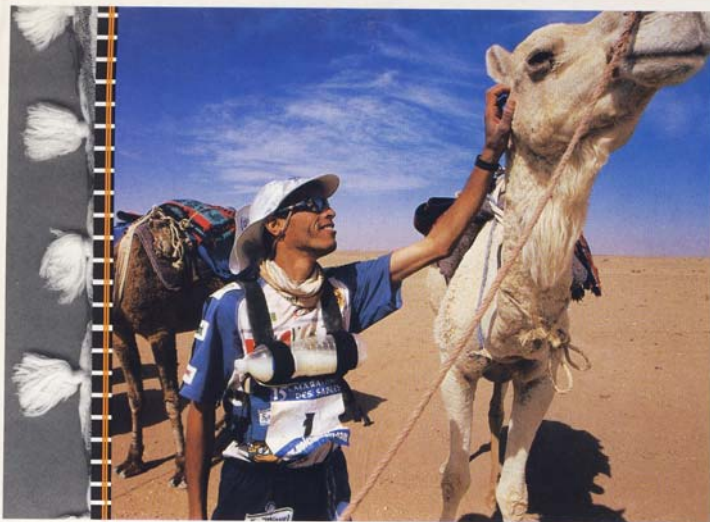
I emerged from the casbah relieved that the locals hadn't pointed the orange course markers into a dungeon. Seeing the next marker, I veered right, only to find myself in the middle of a soccer game. Somebody had taken a marker to use for a goal post — the course was actually to the left.

Day 4 wasn't done with me yet. Three miles from the finish line my flashlight suddenly died. I hated to waste 10 minutes changing the bulb, but I was afraid of spraining my ankle on the rocky terrain. Groping around in the dark, I somehow changed the bulb. It still didn't work. I made it to the finish line at 11:30 p.m., both my mood and flashlight kaput.

Everybody else there was also pretty much kaput. James Pentigal, a 34-year-old systems analyst from Seattle, arrived at camp at 7:30 a.m. "I feel dizzy," he moaned. One look and a fellow competitor led him to the medical tent, where he was detained for 24 hours. The following day his sodium level was dangerously low and he was helicoptered out for further medical attention.

Competitors are allowed 48 hours to complete the 47-mile stage and we had been looking forward to a day of rest. Allah had other plans for us. Winds blasted us all day and night. It was impossible to wash your feet, as blowing dirt caked them the instant you squirted water on them. Sand was in our hair, eyes, noses, mouths — even in our sleeping bags. There was no escape. By midday a good half-inch of sand covered everything in our tents. Repeat competitor Ken Baker of Atlanta stormed out of the tent yelling, "I HATE this sand!"

And to add to the stress, there were scant few carbo to load for the marathon the following day. I had eaten most of my food on the previous stage. By the middle of



LAHCEN AHANSAL OF MOROCCO GETS THE COLD SHOULDER FROM A SUPPORT CAMEL. AHANSAL WON THE 2000 MARATHON DES SABLES IN A CUMULATIVE TIME OF 18 HOURS, 3 MINUTES, 25 SECONDS

the fifth stage, the scorching heat and fatigue had reduced me to a walk. The Sahara had just about conquered me.

Even worse, I heard Simone Kayser, a top female competitor from Luxembourg, coming up from behind.

"Come on, you're almost there," she encouraged.

Her kind words did something. I started running again, gradually picking up the pace. Inspired, I ran past Fabrice Guerineaux, a French competitor who was walking, and said, "Come on, come on." He came alive, and we raced across the desert together for miles, crossing the finish line holding hands. He hugged me for a long time afterward and followed it by a gritty kiss (not a French one).

Racing with the Frenchman was fun at the time, but it left me with nothing for the final day. The shortest stage always seems the longest to me, since I normally expect it to be over quickly.

Jim Benike, a 1995 Grand Slam finisher from Rochester, Minnesota, was also wasted. "That day, instead of being on the first column of finishers on the printout, I was way over on the third page," he lamented.

If he was on the third page, I must have been on the fifth. But after seven days in the Sahara, I finally made it to the finish line.

First, someone handed me a shiny gold finisher's medallion. Then, someone else handed me a Coke, which almost meant more to me at the time.

Joining my friends sitting in the dirt, shaded by a crumbling adobe wall, I sipped my Coke and began to forget the wind and the sand. I contemplated going back to faxes, phone calls and frantic deadlines. To a house full of stuff and a life full of responsibilities. I had just spent a week living out of a pack smaller than most carry-ons and wondered why all that had once seemed so important.

There's a sign in nearby Zagora that says, "Tombuktoo 52 jours." I considered joining the next camel caravan to Timbuktu for that 52-day journey across the frontier. Instead, I sadly boarded the bus back to civilization and started planning my race strategy for 2001.

*Cathy Tibbetts practices optometry in northwestern New Mexico. She was the third female finisher at the Marathon des Sables this year.*

THE HOT SAND CAN REALLY SCORCH A RUNNER'S FEET.

