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**With body, mind and soul at the
Marathon des Sables 2008**





Dedication

*Again, in deepening beauty, ye float near,
Shadows, dimly imaged in the days gone by -
Is that old fancy to the heart still dear?
To that old spell will ye again reply?
Ye throng before my view, divinely clear,
Like sunbeams conquering a cloudy sky!*
(Goethe's Faust, Dedication, Verse 1-6)

Faust and his devilish companion Mephisto would be my running mates. „What about you, Andreas?“ My dear friend Albert with his inquiring eyes, after a dinner in the summer of 2007.

The shadows of hobbling runners at the Marathon des Sables appear in my mind. Eight days, first running, then walking, stumbling, many giving up. Heat, sand, thirst and pain, but also indescribable beauty of the desert, true camaraderie within the team, insights into the depths of ones soul and the sheer happiness of crossing the finish line.

Like in a cinema, pictures of the Marathon des Sables resurface to my inner eye: sand everywhere, in my food, shoes, eyes; ecstatic happiness while wandering through the Sahara under a full moon and a view far beyond the milky way. Dehydration, bleeding feet and sick stomach. To be there just once again, being part of the worlds toughest



foot race, 230 km and more through gravel, sand, rocks, dunes and salt flats. To be there, or not to be? That's the question.

What would be different this time compared to 2006? Of course I have the experience, I would not repeat the many mistakes I made back then with my training, kit, nutrition, health, clothing. But more important than that, I made life style changes since then and I could prove their point: No more occasional pipe smoking, no more alcohol, adopting a vegan nutrition. This resulted in extraordinary health benefits and improved my running more than any training plan.

Nine months time to prepare for the Marathon des Sables 2008. How would I use them? Mountain marathons, 24-hour race, Thames Meander with 90 km, plus a few regular marathons and ultras, that must be enough to not upset my family and professional life.

„What about you, Andreas?“

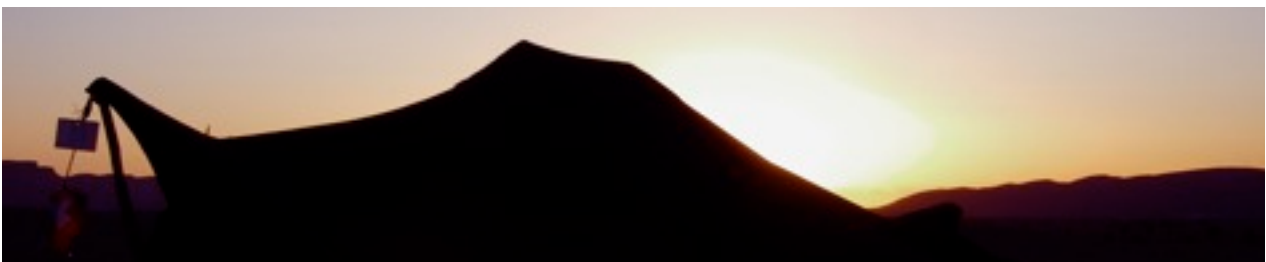
Mind and body are one. Besides training and racing, my mind must be ready for this challenge. At the moment, Goethe's drama Faust keeps me enthralled. Quadflieg and Gründgens, two German actors as Faust and Mephisto, provide their company during training runs on my music player. A leather-bound copy of the drama, printed in 1876, has its place in my bag on business trips. Enough mental preparation for the Marathon des Sables? During the race in 2006 I read selected writings of the stoic philosopher Seneca which helped me cope with pain and anxiety.

Mens sana in corpore sano are just two thirds of the medal, we have a soul, too! I would carry a small pharmacy of classical music on my mobile music player with works such as Beethovens string quartets, Bach Goldberg variations, Tchaikovsky symphonies and Smetana chamber music. That takes care of harmony between body, mind and soul.

How would I explain my family? My dear wife Uschi would not be amused, after all she was nervous and scared during the 2006 race. I would have to invest some valuable vacation days which I would rather spend with my family. And what about all the training effort, the racing in preparation to the event? Finding sponsors for charity? How would I find motivation to train through the dark winter months with rain, wind and frost? Finally, how would I cope, should I drop out of the race this time? Questions, so many questions, like shadows appearing in my mind day and night.

„What about you, Andreas?“ My dear friend Albert, inquiring after a dinner during the summer of 2007.

„Yes, I'm in!“



The Marathon des Sables

The Marathon des Sables is considered to be the toughest foot race on earth. Of course, every runner has his own view and there is a growing number of competing events like the Atacama Crossing (250 km) or the Libya Challenge (190 km non stop). Still, the Marathon des Sables is the one „must do“ event for serious ultra runners.

The Marathon des Sables spans a distance of about 230 km, to be run in six stages. Location is the Moroccan Sahara with temperatures reaching up to 55 degrees Celsius, no shadow, sand storms. The terrain is sand, gravel, rocks, mountains, dunes, salt flats, dried river beds. The organisers provide 9 litres of water per day and participant, plus simple berber tents and thin rugs to lie on. Each runner must carry a backpack with his entire food, clothing and compulsory items for the week. This backpack will weigh about 8-12 kg on the first day, getting lighter as the race unfolds.

The adventure starts at Heathrow airport. As one of the first passengers to leave the brand new Terminal 5 on its inaugural day, I am very lucky that my luggage arrives on time in Frankfurt. Other runners are not so fortunate, their bags, together with 40.000 other lost items, disappear for days in the catacombs of Heathrow T5. Lucky me. In Frankfurt I board an Air Maroc plane to Casablanca where I have to wait in transit for six hours. After midnight I arrive in Ouarzazate to grab a few hours of sleep at the hotel La Gazelle. Next morning a long bus tour across the Atlas mountains to the edge of the Merzouga dunes. After two days of travel the Sahara has got me back!



Health check

Think anti-cyclical at the Marathon des Sables. With 800 runners finding their way through airport terminals, bus stops, dinner buffets, check points, medical tents and control points, queues are bound to form. You can get in line and wait in the heat, or avoid the queues by getting there ahead of the pack or returning later on.

The day before the race is for the compulsory health and equipment check. Each hour, 100 runners are called to the control tent – to wait in line. 50 minutes later the queue is down to zero, 10 minutes after at the full hour, 100 runners are baking in the sun. I watch this spectacle from the shade of my tent as the hours pass.

Eight minutes ahead of my official time to report to the control tent I go there, show my passport, hand in my suit case, receive my emergency flare and water card, have my kit checked. All within four minutes.

Then the medical check with the nurse of the Doc Trotters team. The lady hands me a bag with about 50 white tablets. „These are salt tablets. Please take three tablets for every 1.5 litre bottle of water!“ „Three tablets?“ „Yes, three. Your first Marathon des Sables?“ „My second“ „Any questions?“ „None“ „Good luck!“

The entire procedure took less than 10 minutes. Leaving the tent, 99 runners are forming a nice queue in front of the control tent. It's 11:02.

Later in the afternoon the official welcome by Patrick Bauer and his team. The oldest participant from Japan is over 70, unfortunately she would not finish the race. The youngest athlete from Italy with 18. The long stage is dedicated to Bernard Julé who passed away during the race in 2007.

At 7pm water for everyone. 799 runners line up to form a perfect queue, a delightful sight. I sort my stuff in my tent, roll out the sleeping bag, get ready for tomorrow's first stage. Ten minutes to eight I go to get my water bottles, no queue, enough time to flirt with the French ladies. Think anti-cyclical at the Marathon des Sables.



My backpack

„Reduce to the max“ is the strategy for your backpack at the Marathon des Sables. Take as few items as possible, but as many as absolutely necessary.

There is no ideal list of what to take along. Every runner must decide for himself. There are a number of compulsory items, such as the emergency flare, compass, torch, whistle, emergency blanket, 14000 calories, sleeping bag. Everything else is at the runners discretion.

Of course, the food takes most of the weight and volume in the backpack. 2000 calories per day are mandatory, more are advisable. My daily diet consists of 200 gr of cereal, 400 gr nuts, 200 gr fructose sugar, vitamin tablets and a freeze-dried Travelunch meal for dinner. I have tested this at different races and over several days and can cope well with it. However, the high amount of calorie-dense nuts are not everyone's cup of tea and should be tested thoroughly.

I am keeping my clothes to a bare minimum. I run in black tights and a black running shirt. Against the chill of the night I have an extra long tight and long shirt, plus one pair of spare socks and underwear. My black hat sports an extra sun protection for ears, back and shoulders which my wife has sewn in a most professional manner. The rest of the stuff in my backpack is pure luxury: My old book of Goethe's Faust drama, my small music player, sun lotion.

The most important part of the backpack is the front pouch. That's where I am carrying my 1.5 l bottle of water and everything else that I need during the day: Fructose sugar which I dissolve in my water bottle, 50 gr per bottle, nuts, sun glasses. The front pouch counterbalances the weight of my backpack and allows me to run upright.



Fist stage - 31 km

It had been posted on the official web site a few weeks prior to the race: It was to be the longest Marathon des Sables in history, covering a distance of 245 km. According to several race veterans, the first stage of 31 km would be one of the toughest ones as well. To start, 15 km across some of the highest dunes in Africa to the first check point, after the second check point even more sand. So Patrick Bauer wants to sort out the good from the bad this early into the race? Maybe the 2007 Marathon des Sables wasn't hard enough?

Every morning the same ritual. With the first rays of sunlight the berber squad tears down the tents and rolls up the carpets. From 6:30 on I am sitting in the sand, eating my oats with water and a handful of nuts. I sort out my clothes and backpack, a last glance into the road book. At 7:00 one bottle of water per athlete, I line up at 6:55 or 7:50. At 8:30 we are to proceed to the starting line, I go there at 8:50. 8:55 our daily morning prayers: „Please remember to take three salt tablets per bottle of water!“, a Happy Birthday! for the birthday kids, a few words about temperatures and terrain, followed by the count down from 10. The Eurosport helicopter above our heads chopping like machine gun fire, 800 runners crossing the starting line. I am on my way.

Like every year a few hundred runners sprint ahead as if they were serving free beer after two miles. There they are, sitting in the ocean of steep dunes catching their breath and complaining about running out of water. The first runners drop out of the race after only 14 km at check point one. What a sad record.





Running through the dunes is difficult. The sand absorbs all energy from your feet. Instead of running, I walk through the dunes, searching for my own path away from the crowds. After half an hour I spot a French lady runner ahead of me, about 80 yards to the side of the track that the majority of the runners are using. She reads the dunes with their soft and hard sand very well, obviously being experienced in running through dunes. I follow her at a distance, her leadership shows confidence, strength and expertise. Anticyclical to the majority of runners that trod through the softened sand left behind by the hundreds of runners ahead of them.

I started the race with 2.2 litres of water. By the time I see the first check point in the distance, I still have 0.7 litres left. I indulge in the luxury of pouring some water on my face, on my head and neck. By the time I reach the first check point, my water is gone.

At every check point the same procedure: Put the chip card to the card reader, an innovation in 2008, have your water card clipped (compulsory under race regulations), take your water bottle. Then the nurse from the Doc Trotters medical team: „You must take three salt tablets per bottle of water!“ I know. „Are you OK?“ With her French accent her English has a singing, musical touch. „Absolutely“. I give her my warmest smile which she kindly returns. She would recognise me every time at the latter stages of the race as that runner who always smiles. I tell her then that I am here to enjoy my holiday, and that I pity her that she has to work under these climatic conditions. I guess that changed her perspective.

The sand storm of the previous night had died down, there is no wind but 45 degrees of heat. The terrain is flat, stony gravel to the second check point. Now I can start to run after the tiring march through the dunes. My shoulder starts to hurt, then my spine. My backpack had a weight of 9 kg at the starting line, including the water. It will get lighter every day, though.

After check point 2 more dunes. They seem so harmless. You see one and think „no sweat!“. On the crest you see the next, slightly higher one. OK, one more. You get to the top only to find out there is another, even higher. And this goes on and on. After about a dozen or so I can see the bivouac.

I am the third runner back home in our tent number 67. Sharon Gayter, since 12 years the UK champion in 24-hour and 100km racing was first, followed by Paul. This order would remain unchanged the next two days. Later on, Steve, Gavin and Colin reach the tent, having fought hard through the dunes.

I take care of my feet, heat water for my ready-meal of tofu with potatoes and vegetables.

Sunset, darkness, cold of the night. I am lying in my sleeping bag and read a few pages of Goethe's Faust at the light of my torch. Above, the clear sky, planets, stars, the milky way. I can see into the depths of the universe, a distance beyond human comprehension. A humble, humbling moment and emotional end to the first race day.



Life at the Bivouac

Six to eight runners share one of the hundred tents at the bivouac of the Marathon des Sables. The tent is a black canvas held up by some wooden sticks. Two sides of the tent are open to allow the breeze go through.

Two rugs cover the floor of the tent. They don't provide isolation but I found them adequate enough to opt against carrying a Thermarest sleeping pad. Another 400 grams of weight spared.

Early in the morning the tents are torn down and loaded on army lorries, to be carried to the next bivouac place where they are all set up by the time the runners arrive.

The tent mates form the family for the duration of the Marathon des Sables. It doesn't matter if someone snores at night. After a days running, you could sleep next to a Jumbo Jet taking off. A culture of bartering develops: „I offer a ready-meal pasta napolì in exchange for two rations of cereal, anyone?“.

After sun set, every runner receives a print out of email messages that friends and family have sent during the day. This is a very special moment, most runners share their mails with their tent mates.

So, life at the bivouac is reduced to the most elementary human needs: Eating, sleeping, socialising, barter trade. So very different from our complex western societies.



Second stage - 38 km

Sunrise at 6:00, ten minutes until they tear down the tent and roll up the rugs. Just another day in the Sahara. I slept well, my oats with water taste good, a few nuts. At 8:00 the official Marathon des Sables photo of all the participants, taken from the helicopter. Rory as always with his super-sized Union Jack flag. Then the line up at the start, our morning prayers, „three salt tablets per bottle of water, please!“. Of course, when sweating out up to 9 litres of water per day one must replenish those minerals, or the body would dehydrate dangerously.

On my way to the first check point I am not feeling well. I know that's normal for me, I need two to three hours of running to warm up and feel at my best.

After the first check point I see a runner with a Mexican flag on his backpack. „Hola Mejicano, ¿qué tál?“ His name is Antonio, he is happy to have someone to speak Spanish. In his tent number 13 there are five Mexicans, I would come and visit a few times. We talk a lot, share some un-quotable jokes and continue at our own paces.

Before reaching the second check point a dried salt flat, temperatures exceeding 50°, my shoulders and back are starting to hurt again. I reapply some sun cream. After check point 2 I run next to a Japanese pop star. Poor chap, he is constantly chased by a Japanese TV crew, can't even do his human necessity without half of Japan as witness.





Having become supporting actor in one of Japans TV channels for half an hour I am fed up, I pick up my speed, Sayonara, and find peace of mind to enjoy the beauty and solitude of the long distance runner.

Check point 3 is half way up a hill. Water card clipped, „three salt tablets per bottle of water“. A few children watching, they are cheerful and waving. How motivating! I think a lot about my wife and children back home, I miss them.

A gorgeous view from the top of the hill. I take pictures of Antonio who caught up with me. With back pain I reach the bivouac. Three bottles of water for the night. I know, three tablets of salt per bottle.

Pasta with tomato sauce tonight. Steve, Gavin and Colin are coming, looking bad. Bleeding blisters on their feet, painful visits to the beauty farm of the Doc Trotters team. It's good not to hear those screams from the medical tent at the bivouac.

I try to focus on Goethe's Faust, but can't tonight. I give up and change program, listening to Tchaikovsky's Pathetique Symphony on my mobile music player. I admire the starry night sky, a windless night, listening in humility to the sounds of that Russian genius who, only days from passing away, put his heart, soul and presentiment of death into this tremendous music. Is there a better place to feel this passion, this suffering than in the darkness of the night and the loneliness of the Sahara desert after a days pilgrimage?

Shoes

They are the most important piece of kit. Every runner has different feet, has a different running rhythm. Finding the perfect pair of running shoe is a runners joy. For the Marathon des Sables, it must be a trail shoe. The thick sole provides stability and protection against thorns and sharp rocks.

The feet swell up under the extreme conditions of the Marathon des Sables. Thus, the shoes should be two sizes larger than normal, or bigger. I wear two pairs of socks initially, to fill out the space in my shoe and for extra cushioning, dryness and protection from sand. After two or three days I wear a single pair of socks, the swollen feet requiring more space.

Gaiters are important to keep the sand out of the shoes for as long as possible. I made good experience with a commercial model that is fixed to the shoes with velcro tape. Unfortunately, these gaiters were torn apart after three days, but they were effective until then.

Other runners use nylon socks which they wear over their running shoes. Although these nylons won't last more than a day, they are quite effective. Other runners make gaiters of their own, glued to their shoes and tied to their shanks.

Regarding blisters, each runner has his own ideas. Some go to see the Doc Trotters at the end of the day, others don't treat their blisters at all. My therapy for blisters: Punctuating with a safety pin, drying them, applying some disinfectant and letting the Sahara air do the healing.



Third stage - 40 km

Thomas from tent number 70 has severe pain in his knee but would finish today's stage. Brigit, the heroic desert veteran with racing experience from all over the world, has pain in her shin and would have to drop out of the race today.

The more I get to know my fellow runners, the more I am impressed. Not only are they exceptional athletes with tremendous experience in long distance running. They are also wonderful personalities, pursuing their values in their families and at the workplace with perseverance. Do you have to be mad to run the Marathon des Sables? My running mates prove the opposite. Those leading a stable and successful life are the ones fighting hard at the Marathon des Sables.

It's April fools day, and all the runners imitate the movements of the English translator at our morning prayers. Patrick Bauer is irritated at first, then has a good laugh.

Start is at 8:30, after the morning prayers, „three salt tablets“ and Happy Birthday! Again plenty of sand, dunes and beautiful landscape. Half way to check point 1 Paul passes me. Incredible, he must have nerves of steel with those bleeding blisters he's got on his feet.

Half way to check point 2 a steep ascent, then a tremendous view from the top of the ridge. More dunes to come, the second check point hidden behind a dune. Patrick



Bauer, since 23 years the organiser of the Marathon des Sables, likes those games of hide and seek.

After the third check point the ground becomes solid again. Today I am really enjoying myself, one mile before the finish line I pick up speed and sprint to the finish.

Same procedure, three bottles of water with the reminder to take three salt tablets per bottle. Today I am having Couscous, and as dessert a few pages of Goethe's Faust.

Like every evening I go for a stroll along the German tents. The heroic Thomas is cheerful as always, his knee still in pain, Dorothe is calm and happy, Andree always ready for a joke, Ralf smiling in content, Tim is our Lawrence of Arabia and Jürgen surprises me every day with his tremendous endurance. All of them are still in the race, Anna getting her strength from within and upright in perfect Alexander pose.

Then Steve comes with a neon wrist band, his race numbers taken away. Poor Steve, he had to give up, dehydration, possibly a virus. Colin would give up the next day before the start to the 75 km stage, bleeding feet. Paul would give up at check point 3 of the long stage for the same reason. Our proud tent number 67, reduced within 24 hours from six down to three athletes. Depressing, but also motivating to save the honour of our tent, our team.

Sharon and I are looking forward to the long stage tomorrow. We love the long distance, running for 12 or more hours lies in our genes.

Night falls, a chilling wind blows through our tent, a sparkling nights sky, Faust is asking for my attention. I give him the honour, he takes away my anxiety for tomorrow's stage, fills me with calm and confidence.



Nutrition

Every runner must carry his food for the 7 days of the Marathon des Sables. 2000 calories per day are the compulsory minimum, more is highly advisable. Runners burn up to 8000 calories per day, but no-one would carry that much in his backpack.

It is important to consider not only calories, but also proteins, vitamins and minerals. Of course the diet must be tested at other races to prevent unhappy surprises.

Since more than a year, I am a total vegetarian, following a vegan diet. No meat, no fish, no milk or dairy products, no eggs, no foods that are derived from animals.

Initially I started this as an experiment for three months. Shortly after, I noticed some stunning changes to my health and running, and I feel no need to return to previous dietary habits. Things that have changed include: Normalisation of my high blood pressure, disappearance of my tinnitus, some weight loss, improved endurance over long distance, greater speed and better recovery after hard training, reduction of allergic reactions (hay fever). At an emotional level, I have a better nights sleep, more energy, better mental focus and greater calmness. But most of all, I have the wonderful feeling of not harming animals for my life style.

At the Marathon des Sables, my breakfast consisted of oats with raisins and nuts. During the race, I consumed fructose and maltose sugar, dissolved in water, and nuts. In the evening, I had a vegan ready meal and nuts. Twice a day a vitamin tablet and the salt tablets from the Doc Trotters team. That's it. It worked very well for me, but it isn't everyone's cup of tea.



Fourth stage - 75 km

Morning prayers, salt tablets, Happy Birthday. At 9:00 we set off for the 75 km stage. I know part of the terrain from 2006, except that today it's the other way around.

After 6 km a steep, long and dangerous ascent. I feel like on a hiking trip in the Alps. From the top a tremendous view over the desert. Then dunes before the first check point. This is one of the most difficult parts of the race.

Up to check point 2 flat, stony but hard terrain, perfect for running. I remember the landscape from two years ago, the rock formations. Then shadow, palm trees at the check point! Many runners take a rest, gather strength for the upcoming climbs.

A salt flat that I recognise from 2006. Lots of runners dropped out in this area back then, it was the high degree of humidity that forced them out of the race.

The sand takes an almost orange colour here. Ups and downs over some rocky areas, then a climb up a hill with a tremendous view after check point 3, a feast for the eyes! Then a long, slowly descending ramp of sand, very difficult to run, leading to check point 4 at the next salt flat.

The sun starts to set at the check point, I get ready for the night, mount my head torch, fix my signal stick on the back of my backpack. „Please, three salt tablets for each bottle of water“. Yes, I know.





The night has fallen upon us runners. Like a swarm of fireflies, we dance through the night in pursuit of the next check point, in search for the finish line.

This is the moment I have been waiting for a year. I am on my own in the middle of nowhere, I run fast on the salt flat, enjoying the chill of the night. I power on my small music player and listen to Beethoven's late string quartets Opus 127, 130 and 131, played by the Emerson string quartet. What a heavenly joy, the Cavatina from Opus 130, out of this world. It takes an old deaf genius to pull such sounds from higher spheres down to our earthly lowlands.

A piece of bone, possibly from the spine of a dromedary, reflects the light of my torch. I pick it up and carry it with me as symbol of this special moment. Emblematic as it seems, it was pain in my spine that was my biggest problem at the Marathon des Sables. However, with this spare part on board, I was well prepared, and the pain in my shoulders and spine would not come back for the rest of the race.

Reaching check point 5, „three salt tablets, I know“, I refuse the bottle of water as I still have plenty left, and go straight on. At check point 6 the same procedure, I take some salt tablets but decline the water, having enough to take me to the finish line. Now I am listening to Bach's Goldberg variations, played by András Schiff. I am filled with the highest joy! When I depart one day from this world I long to do so under this wonderful clear night sky, Bach in my heart, Goethe in my mind, courageously stepping into the night that lies ahead.



I reach the bivouac at midnight. I lie down, only to wake up every hour, shivering in the cold of the desert, my body has used up its energy during the long stage, my mind is empty, my soul slowly detaching itself from the beauty of the night run.



Charity

When I completed the Marathon des Sables in 2006, I said „never again!“ ... famous last words ...

The gruelling conditions of the Sahara at the Marathon des Sables form a spirit of camaraderie among the competitors that may best be compared to the fraternity that I have experienced among families in the SOS children's villages: Helping a fellow runner that may be struggling with dehydration or blindness in a sand storm goes without saying, even at the expense of loosing a few hours or risking disqualification for failing to meet target times at checkpoints.

Running for endless hours through completely deserted land, guided by nothing but the sun and a compass lets one focus inward as if on a pilgrimage. Carrying no worldly possessions except for some food and a few items of clothing reminds me of the orphaned children I knew in war-torn El Salvador in the 1980's that arrived at the SOS children villages in hope to find a welcome.

Experiencing pain, dehydration, hallucinations or blackout confront the competitor of the Marathon des Sables with his own physical and mental limits and let him contemplate about the inevitable, final barrier no human being can deny. There have been accidents and casualties at the Marathon des Sables in the past, although the medical teams are well experienced and equipped state of the art.





The most vibrant experience of my 2006 Marathon des Sables was running through the night in the Sahara under a full moon and a sky filled with stars as I've never witnessed before. I switched off my head lamp and let myself be guided by the soft silvery shine of the moon. Having run for over 12 hours that day, I tuned my small music player to Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony, the Pathétique, the brilliant recording with Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic, and all the sudden I seemed to be in a different world: refreshed with new energy, gone the pain of those bleeding blisters on my left foot, stages of my life from my childhood in El Salvador, it's civil war and the faces of the many homeless children started to appear before my mental eye - I felt like being in a giant picture gallery with the sky being a huge canvas and I knew I had to run this race again in benefit of the SOS families.

The Marathon des Sables is not just any sporting event or challenge of endurance, but an emotional travel that shakes each competitor down to his roots. It is a transformational experience - no runner will be the same after. And no-one runs such an event for himself alone.

I dedicate my race to the brave children and families of the SOS children's villages around the world and welcome everyone to sponsor generously! Please visit

<http://www.justgiving.com/adoerfler>

All donations go 100% to SOS Children's Villages, there is no financial or other benefit for me.

The day off

The time limit for the long stage is 36 hours. Those runners finishing at night have the next day free. But many runners sleep at one of the later check points and continue their race on the second day.

After some restless hours I wake up at the break of dawn. My breakfast consists of Couscous with vegetables and hot tea, pure luxury under the modest conditions of the Sahara.

I use the day off to read and memorise the two remaining stages of the race. This allows me to anticipate the challenges of the terrain and my needs for water.

Now I find out that Paul had to give up on the long stage. His feet look terrible, he can not walk at all and has to be driven in a Jeep from the bivouac to the dining tent by the Doc Trotters. Paul has fought very hard, harder than anyone of us in the tent. The Sandblasters team of four is down to a single runner. Gavin who reaches the bivouac in the early afternoon is the teams champion and hero.

Then I read the final pages of Goethe's Faust, the tragic end with the death of Gretchen's brother, mother and baby. My sadness for my comrades intertwines with the drama of the Goethe's play. I keep to myself for a few hours, shrouded in my own thoughts.

Around 4:00 in the afternoon the last athletes are approaching the finish line. All runners walk, or hobble, to the finish to cheer them in. A very touching moment. Of course the achievements of the fast runners are tremendous, but the magic of the Marathon des Sables is the camaraderie among all participants, from the slowest to the fastest. No one is left alone, the ideal Olympic spirit of fairness is alive!



Fifth stage - 42 km

Another restless night, I wake up at dawn. It is warm, a bad sign for today's stage. Temperatures should exceed 50°. A double serving of cereal, our morning prayers, „three salt tablets per bottle of water!“, Happy Birthday! and off we go.

The terrain is flat and easy to run up to check point 1. I pass Bridgid several times, the youngest participant from the UK, then she catches up with me again. „You are unbeatable!“ I say, she smiles happily and tells me that she lives in Devon near the coast where she trains on the coastal path - ideal training grounds with sand, dunes and plenty of hills.

After check point 1 two ridges to cross which I remember from 2006. Both of them seemed impassable back then, now I take them in minutes.

It becomes obvious that we are starting to move out of the desert. A few huts made of clay, some children here and there, coming from nowhere. Most of them very cheerful but shy, the girls some 20 yards away from the boys.

Then this English runner sitting in the sand, crying his eyes out, Army backpack, Union Jacks all over. „Come on, for queen and country!“ yells another runner. He: „Would the queen run this nonsense for me?“ He used a somewhat spicier language, but I concede the point to him.





After the second check point the Sahara heats up, lots of sand, slow progress. I reapply sun screen. Some palm trees, lovely! The third check point hidden behind a few trees, I almost missed it. A typical Patrick Bauer joke.

Then a dozen Jeeps, tourists with video and photo cameras on safari. They must be out for the big five: Lion, buffalo, elephant, marathon runner, leopard. I feel like being in the zoo, me being the animal, as if they were about to throw some bread crumbs to feed the wild athletes. What do those tourists think about us stinking, bearded, lunatic runners? Better not to know.

Bridge passing me again, she is unstoppable, a beautiful smile and gone she is.

I feel bad, maybe dehydration, happy to reach my tent. Two litres of water later I feast on potatoes with vegetables. I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, just the water with fructose sugar during the day.

Sharon got to the bivouac an hour ahead of me, Gavin would make it as well. Paul had a private session with the Doc Trotters. They operated on his bleeding feet in their beauty farm, no anaesthetic. Brave man, he deserves the Patrick Bauer medal of honour in gold.

It's the last night in the desert. Shortly after night falls we have a concert by a chamber orchestra from Paris. Lots of Mozart, played quite well considering the conditions of the Sahara. I talk to some of the musicians afterwards, the cellist studied with Christoph Henkel in Freiburg. It's a small world.

Comparison

The 2008 Marathon des Sables went so much better than in 2006. This time it has been a great event, good running, a joyful race. But what made the difference? What did I do different this time?

The most fundamental difference was my change in nutrition, adopting a vegan life style. Also, we were lucky with the weather: Two years ago there was high humidity in the air, up to 40%, which is fatal at temperatures of 45° and more.

In 2006 I was wearing mostly light, white clothing, while I wore black in 2008 like most of the veterans and the local Tuaregs.

The fructose/maltose sugar, dissolved in water, proved to be very effective during the race. In 2006 I had nothing but solid food which I couldn't eat at all during the day.

My packing had improved as well, no isolation mat, no second pair of trainers, less clothes, less food, resulting in a much lighter backpack.

Each one of these factors contributed to my success in 2008. However, I feel that my vegan nutrition and the resulting improvements in health and fitness outshines all the other factors combined.



Sixth stage - 17 km

Today, the tents are not torn down, what luxury! At 9:00am our morning prayers, „please remember to take three salt tablets per bottle of water!“. Unfortunately, four runners dropped out on yesterday's marathon stage, in total 54 dropouts for the event.

The terrain is flat and stony. Check point 1, I grab my bottle of water and on I go. Soon after I can see Tazzarine in the distance, where this year's Marathon des Sables is to finish. The last mile or so is on a tarmac road. It feels so strange, after endless miles on sand, rocks and gravel. A lot of cheering, the entire town on their feet to greet the runners. I pick up speed, cameras flashing, a smile for the local media, Patrick Bauer with the medal.

The nurse of the Doc Trotters looks at me, „are you OK?“ „Yes, I am fine. By the way, how many salt tablets is it per bottle of water?“

She just stares at me.



Now what?

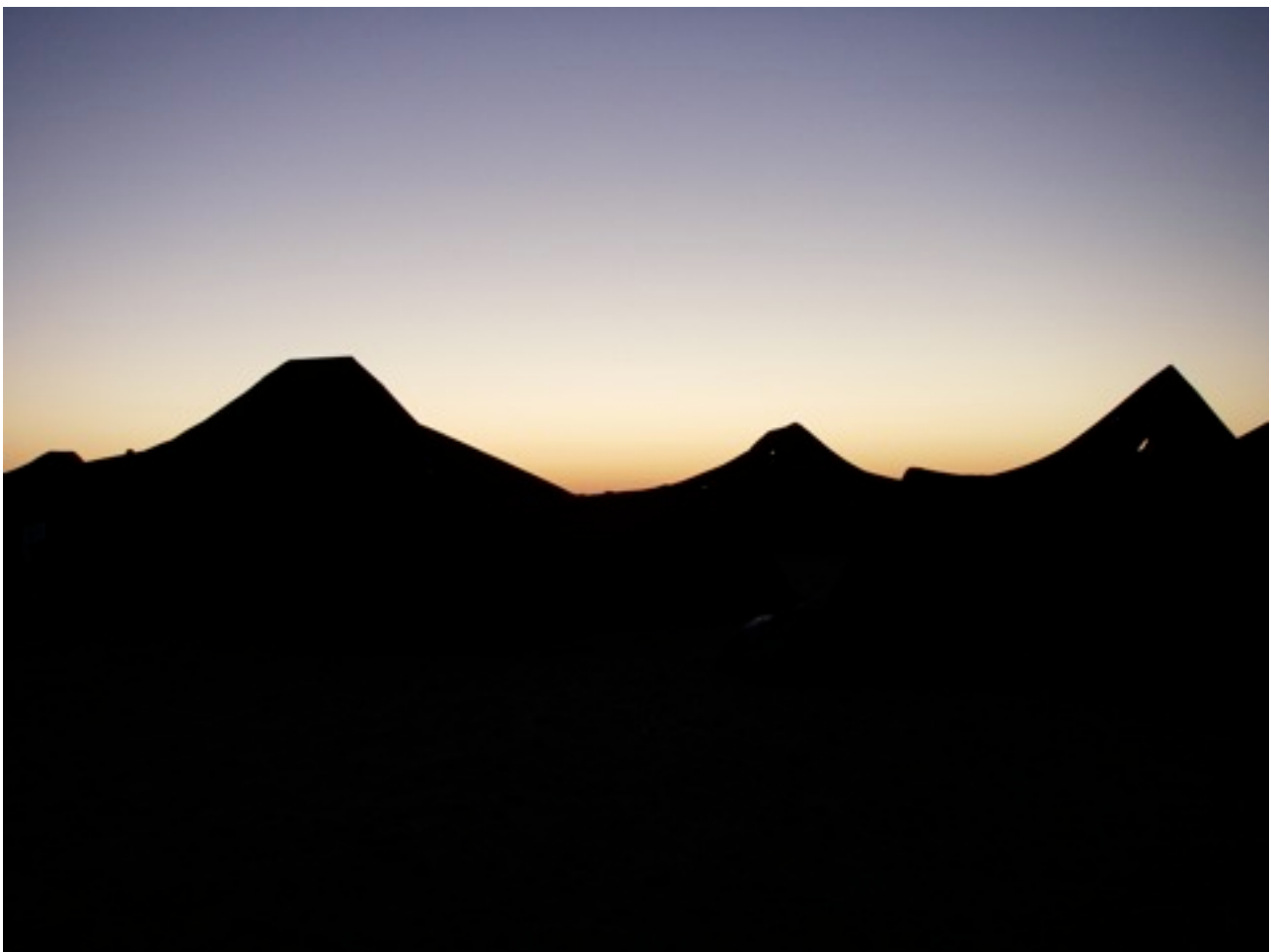
Would I run the Marathon des Sables again?

In 2006 I would have said never again, now I am more cautious. But I would need a very, very good reason for a third run. This time around I had this special purpose, wanting to put my change in nutrition and life style to a test.

*Again, in deepening beauty, ye float near,
Shadows, dimly imaged in the days gone by -
Is that old fancy to the heart still dear?
To that old spell will ye again reply?
Ye throng before my view, divinely clear,
Like sunbeams conquering a cloudy sky!*
(Goethe's Faust, Dedication, Verse 1-6)

The combination of mental challenge (Goethe's Faust), emotional joy (late Beethoven string quartets, Bach Goldberg Variations) and the physical challenge of the Marathon des Sables was unique. It could not be repeated. No, this was a one-time, unique thing.

Now I belong to my wife and family. The next holiday will be at the beach, with sunshine and all-inclusive.





„What about you, Andreas?“ The words of my dear friend Albert ringing in my ears.

New goals, new horizons. My mind longs for Faust 2 and Kant’s criticism of reason. My heart is burning for the string quartets of Béla Barók.

And my body? I will give him some time to rest, decide what to endeavour next during the summer. There is this race across the Atacama desert, another one in Libya.

But that is for later to decide. Now I live on the memories of the Sahara, images that might pale with time but will become more real. As Heinrich Spörl said, „the only truth are the memories that we carry inside, the dreams we envision, the longing that drives us.“

Andreas Dörfler
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