Hardley Runner Sue Stone ran 100k in Morocco – here's her report

THE MADNESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER

ON THE ROAD TO MARRAKECH

12 November 2010 05:30 Gatwick Airport

After months of training the time has arrived to join my fellow group of runners for our Morocco Challenge in aid of Motor Neurone Disease. Twenty three runners were to take part in this challenge and some were meeting each other for the first time on arrival at Gatwick Airport.

On arrival at Marrakech we were met by some members of the "ground crew" who were to take very good care of us during our stay in Morocco. We now had a 5½ journey across the Atlas Mountains through the Tizi-N-Tichka pass. This was an extremely long journey, but the scenery was amazing. The Atlas Mountains certainly did have spectacular scenery.



Running Day One: Ait Benhaddou (Moroccan Sahara's most visited town) – Ouarzazate

16 miles of stone desert – this was quite a challenge. It was undulating at times, hot and very barren. There was the occasional piece of greenery, the occasional goat and twenty three crazy runners, all at various distances from each other along the route. It was amazing. We ran past areas that were used for the filming of Gladiators, Raiders of the Lost Ark and other movies. (I have to admit I have never watched Gladiators).





As you can see from the photo there wasn't much around. You might just be able to see a couple of runners coming along the path.

On completion of day one of running we visited the town of Ouarzazate. We visited a wonderful spice shop and had demonstrations of different medicinal potions as well as learning what the spices can be used for.

Running Day Two: Skoura Palmerie

Today's 16 miles started on a straight, flat, tarmac desert road, until we moved off of the road on to flat, stone track leading to winding dirt roads through ancient palmerie (date palm plantations). Again we were allowed up to three hours to complete the run. Towards the end of the run at about the 14½ mile mark we had to cross a massively wide river bed, luckily for us the river was dry apart from a very small stream of water in the middle. Prior to this we had run through a small village where women had been washing there clothes in streams and irrigation gutters. Small children were cheering us on at this point, but I think they thought we were all totally crazy.

Today after the run we went for a guided walk through the village, visiting an olive oil factory – health and safety didn't exist in this factory, and the smell was also not pleasant. We were then invited to join a Berber family for tea. What an experience. They made us so welcome; the women

produced cakes, bread, olives and the famous mint tea. We stayed with the family for almost two hours, hearing stories of the Moroccan Sahara and the Berber people. This is something that no tourist would experience and we felt highly honoured to be their guests. We did take photographs of the house and male members of the family, but the women had to stay out of sight and were not allowed to be photographed.



The above picture shows part of the olive oil factory.

Running Day Three: Telouet Kasbah & Valley

Sixteen miles to run again in three hours. Today was tough. We travelled back in to the Atlas Mountains, we were told that today would be hilly, but mostly descending. Altitude starting at 2260 m and finishing at 1795m. We started our descent south from the Tizi-N-Tichka pass. This was a strong downhill decent, many curves and with the possibility of heavy traffic. We then moved on to quieter rural roads which descended steeply for 5 km to a river at valley bottom. From 11.5 km the climb began, we continued to carry on uphill at various degrees of intensity. At 15.8 km we reached the top of the hill and the descent began again, now there were blind corners, steep at times, sandy roads, village houses and a canyon. We also had some small children thinking it was fun to throw stones at us whilst we ran along. At 20 km we reached a river crossing followed shortly after by salt pans. The final short steep climb took us to the village centre and finally our finish line for day three. We were certainly pleased to reach the finish line today. A small cafe provided lunch for us and also showers, but these consisted of warm water in a bucket and a jug to throw the water over us. My feet until this point, had remained blister and bruise free, but whilst sampling the delights of the bucket shower I managed to stand on a Moroccan wasp and got stung on my toe. Moroccan wasps stings are just as painful as British ones.

Today, following lunch we had a 3½ hour transfer back across the Atlas Mountains and the Tizi-N-Tichka pass. What an adventure that was. We were all enjoying the beautiful scenery and twisty roads until the cloud decided to drop and we were in thick fog. It was certainly an experience. Our Moroccan driver insisted on trying to overtake whilst we had no visibility whatsoever, and if he wasn't overtaking he was on his mobile phone. We thought we were going to disappear over the edge of the mountain. Needless to say we were all extremely glad to reach our destination. The pace where we stayed also sold beer, so we thought that after the journey across the mountains we certainly deserved a beer. Only one though as we had to run again the next day.

Running Day Four: The road to Marrakech

We started our final 16 mile run from a small village outside of Marrakech. It was another extremely hot day. We started running along a very straight road out of the village towards Marrakech. As we ran along we noticed that at certain points there were very smart looking men in suits watching us and at the same time making telephone calls. We carried along this rural road until we reached our 15 km water stop. At the water station were police on motorbikes. As we left we were accompanied by our own police officer on a motorbike. At first we thought they were just getting us across the road as it was becoming quite busy as we got closer to Marrakech. We were wrong, the police escorted us all the way to finish. Apparently 150 Moroccan police were on hand to escort the 23 runners to our finish line. It made us feel a tiny bit pressured as the running speed quickened to keep with the bike. We were thankful to see the gardens of the Kotoubia Mosque as we knew this meant we did not have far to go. That was the 23 km marker. After some winding around the gardens and crossing a few other busy roads we reached our final destination. We had arrived at our finish line in Marrakech.

We were running the 100 k for Charity. There are so many things that I could report on that happened during the time in Morocco. There was an awful lot of laughter and also it was a very emotional journey, so there were many tears. People hit their lowest points whilst struggling with the hills and the heat of the Atlas Mountains, but they also reached their highest points at the completion of each day of running. Taking part in an event such as this is not easy. We are up usually at 5 in the morning, moving from place to place and spending only one night in each stop. Please remember that some of those running may not necessarily have been runners, they may have just taken up running to take part in that one event. Some of the runners were doing this for a family member, or friend. The finish line was an extremely emotional place and as each runner crossed the line there were many cheers and many tears. Most importantly we have raised a massive amount of money for Motor Neurone Disease, whilst we were in Morocco we had raised in excess of £70,000 and the final amount has not yet been declared.

We had one day in Marrakech to take in the sites of the souk's and the Plaza Djemaa El Fna.

