



Moroccan roller



Think running a marathon is tough? Spare a thought for John Hassell. He's getting ready to run 250km in just seven days – through the Sahara no less – as a competitor in the mind-bogglingly challenging Marathon des Sables. **text** norman burns

« portrait Aaron Bunch MDS Images courtesy Cimbaly/Per©MDS2009

Mention to anyone what John Hassell is planning and the reaction is universal: is he (expletive) nuts?

After all, what sane person would aim to run more than 30km every day *FOR AN ENTIRE WEEK*?

And it's no ordinary course either; the Marathon des Sables (marathon of the sands, or MDS) kicks off in Ouarzazate, Morocco and snakes through 250km of the Sahara, in six gruelling stages over seven days.

What's more, John, a Perth IT consultant who now lives in London, is no ultra-distance running fanatic; he ran his first marathon in Perth just last year, "as an experiment", to see how he'd shape up.

"I did the Perth Marathon in 5hrs 9mins – very slow – but more importantly did it with no training and no after-effects," he says. "I figured if I could do that, then the MDS should be achievable with nine months of full-time training."

Which is exactly what the 42-year-old has done, taking time out from the UK to return home to Perth and prepare in the WA heat.

Apart from the sheer titanic physical and mental effort it will take to reach the finish line, MDS competitors must also face sandstorms, extreme temperatures (up to 50C in the day and plummeting to an icy 1C at night) and possible encounters with snakes, scorpions and – ughh – camel spiders.

Frenchman Patrick Bauer started the MDS in 1985 and the event has become so popular (there's a rumour singer Madonna is lining up this year) around 800 runners annually now pit themselves against the desert. There are

waiting lists of up to two years for entrants from some countries.

So what inspired John to take on what is billed as the world's toughest footrace?

"I heard of it originally through a friend, and then saw footage on TV (the event is televised on Eurosport). It appealed to me on two levels really; firstly as an incredible visual spectacle – the landscapes encountered are something you don't generally see on the well-trodden tourist routes – and then as a ridiculous physical and mental challenge, it seemed to be right up there with the best of them.

"It's really quite an irresistible idea, and once it gets into your head it's rather hard to let it go..."

John has no grand ambition to win; his aim is just to finish. And it's not an event to enter on the spur of the moment; the entry fee is around \$5000 and competitors must pass rigorous health checks, including an ECG, even before they line up at the start. So how do you train for such a challenge?

"Training consists primarily of running, naturally, and I am currently doing about 100km a week road work as well as trail hiking and sand dune running," says John, who slots in competitive tennis at the weekends just to stay sharp. "Anything that keeps me constantly on my feet really is hopefully good preparation."

Competitors must carry their own food, camping gear, venom pump (gulp!), a flare in case of emergencies and be able to read a mechanical com-

pass – sandstorms can spring up from nowhere.

Electronic GPS devices and such are strictly forbidden and there's a cut-off time for each leg of the Marathon des Sables.

Water, distributed at stations throughout the six stages, is rationed to 15 litres per competitor per day.

"The trick of course is to take just enough of what you need without overloading yourself as you need to carry it all with you when you run! The biggie of course is your shoes and gaiters (special coverings necessary to stop sand getting in).

"Footwear is incredibly important as blisters and foot trauma are an integral part of the race, and you need to expect and manage this, as the

TIME OF SANDS: Perth's John Hassell, far left, will tackle one of the world's toughest foot races. Centre: Competitors in the 2009 MDS head out into the vast Moroccan sands. Left: The 250km course covers all types of terrain in blistering Saharan heat.

event will severely damage your feet.

"I am currently trialling three types of shoes and four types of socks to try and get the best combination that works for me. The one luxury item I will take with me will be a small pocket camera," says John.

Anyone thinking they can get a jump on their rivals with a sneaky look at the course is out of luck; the route (250km this year, the event's 25th anniversary) is a highly guarded secret until hours before the start.

Unlike many of the entrants, John isn't an extreme-sport junkie.

"I am not at all the sort of person who participates in 'extreme sports' or feels the need to 'push myself to the edge'.

"A lot of the runners in the MDS are exactly this sort of person, and have huge experience with this sort of event; a select few of them do this sort of thing year after year.

"I am the exact opposite of them, and my primary goal is simply to finish the event; I will certainly not be there contending for any places, I will be there to race against the desert and myself."

The 25th Marathon des Sables will be held from April 2-12. For more details, see [darbaroud.com](#).

Australians wanting to take part in future races (this year's race is fully subscribed) need to go through [dreamchaserevents.com](#). em

TICKTALK *continued from page 95*

Spirit of the Sixties

They say if you can remember the 1960s you weren't actually there, but there's no denying the impact the decade had – and is still having – on modern culture and design. The world of watches is no exception to this "ripple effect", as evidenced by German watchmaker Glashutte Original's immaculate Senator Sixties collection.

Models range from the stainless steel Automatic (rrp \$8880), to the Chronograph (rrp \$11,780) and the Square Chronograph (rrp \$12,500) and inspired, says Glashutte, by the square-shaped cushions which were all the rage in the 60s. They're all elegant, oozing the kind of James



Bond-meets-Martini-swilling-jetset cool of the era, and backed up by magnificent mechanical engineering that's a German trademark.

Particularly striking is the domed sapphire crystal contrasted with the highly stylised Arabic numerals at 12, 3, 6 and 9 o'clock.

Inside the steel, or rose gold case, beats an automatic mechanical movement, the company's own. Glashutte Original has been around since 1994 but has been part of the Swiss Swatch empire since 2000. The town of Glashutte, however, has a rich watchmaking history dating back to 1845. – Norman Burns.

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