



The author running in this year's Marathon Des Sables.

MARATHON DES SABLES. LESSON LEARNED.

Gaël Couturier 08/02/2022

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[Marathon Des Sables \(MDS\)](#) never shows mercy. I have taken that race for granted a few times and suffered the consequences. Over the 15 years that I've been racing it on and off, the world-famous stage race has often ruined my feet for weeks, forced sand in my mouth daily, and dehydrated me so severely that doctors had to infuse me directly on the dunes once or twice. I've seen tough guys cry in the Sahara, and tiny women thrive. MDS is life-changing. It is not your average ultra. You make friends for life during a hellish, week-long event under 100 degrees heat as you watch gigantic, carnivore desert ants, yellow scorpions and stealth vipers hide, hunt, kill, and be killed. All this while camels and local Berbers smile at you when drinking hot green mint tea at the finish line every day. The Marathon Des Sables is a satisfactory pain cave—an experimental ultrarunning lab. There's always something new to learn. To improve your endurance and strengthen your grit in the desert, you sometimes have to reset some buttons. Some of the new things I tried went unexpectedly sideways this year. But hey, it's all good: I survived and finished. Here is my humble take on a few items.

[Oakley Motocross Goggles](#)

I came. I saw. I conquered. The sandstorm we had this year on day two led to 70 DNFs. At first, all my tent mates laughed at me when I unpacked my motocross goggles. All 1,000 runners from the campsite may have laughed at me, too. But on day three, no one said a thing. Case closed. Even the doctors and other race volunteers pack ski goggles each year. Yes, this is a bulky toy and yes, swimming goggles would protect your eyes, too. But clearly not as well. Nothing is more comfortable than motocross goggles to face a sandstorm. Sandstorms in the desert are scarce. But they're no joke. This is a \$42 product. I've been packing them for years now and wore them at camp regularly to mess around with people. Those goggles are my good luck charm.

Pros: Very protective, not that heavy at all (8oz)

Cons: Bulky

My advice: Goggles are a must, whether for skiing, motocross or swimming.

[Suprabeam Danish Headlamp](#)

From 1988, “custom-made” pneumatic hoses for European tool manufacturers to powerful LED torches, Suprabeam is a brand that needs publicity in ultrarunning. I used their M6xr model.

Pros: It weighs 4oz, last for 260 hours, offers 2000 lumens, is rechargeable and fits inside your hand.

Cons: 2000 lumens are way too much once you're in the tent with seven other people looking for a good rest.

My advice: Nothing beats a Petzl-like simple headlamp with red lighting for the night in the tent. But nothing beats a Suprabeam M6xr in the desert during pitch-black nights and I will take both next year.

[Delmera Emergency Sleeping Bag](#)

This emergency sleeping bag is 3.08 ft. x 6.73 ft. and weighs 4.6oz. It is the size and the weight of a pair of socks, but it has a significant drawback: it's not breathable. At all. Imagine sleeping in a plastic bag. But warmer. I carried four of those little bags and trashed them along the way, one every two nights. I often woke at 2-3 a.m., drenched in my own sweat. When I went outside to use the bathroom, I returned to a wet and cold sleeping bag. Not fun. Fortunately, I also carried an old waterproof bivy cover that was light and packable. By night two, I successfully reversed their usages: the bivy cover became my sleeping bag, and the emergency sleeping bag was my outer protection. My sweat remained between the two layers (the bivy being waterproof).

Pros: Warm enough to sustain 50 degrees Saharan nights. \$8.99 on Amazon.

Cons: Quite uncomfortable

My advice: If you can take discomfort at night for a week, this is not a stupid idea.

[Apple AirPods Pro](#)

I doubted them because I had already ruined two pairs during an ultra in Hawaii. But they didn't fail me in the desert. The dry heat and the sand weren't a problem. They're light, they're small, their battery lasts well enough. The only issue with them is the cost.

Pros: Stay well in place. Not that fragile, after all.

Cons: Expensive: \$249

My advice: Wireless only works if you carry a solar charger. Get a silicone cord that attaches the AirPods together so you never lose them.

Garmin Enduro

This watch has the most resistant battery of all the GPS watches available anywhere. Garmin is the Apple of sports watches: it's highly ergonomic. I started recording my position at the beginning of Stage 1 and left it on for seven days. I never stopped it and documented everything.

Pros: Robust and lasts forever

Cons: Expensive

My advice: A GPS watch is a must. You want to know where you are at regarding the distance left at all times.

HOKA Bondi 7

Why a road shoe? Because the MDS ground is not that abrasive for our soles. The Bondi is one of the most cushioned shoes on the market and comes in three different widths. That's great for inflamed feet full of blisters. Many runners wear HOKA in the race, and it just makes the most sense because of their oversized midsoles.

Pros: 10.70oz. That's really light for the amount of protection it offers.

Cons: If you've never run in HOKA, getting used to being so high from the ground may take some time.

My advice: HOKA or Altra are the brands to go for me. Big soles and wide upper are a must out there.

Patagonia Fly Fishing long-sleeve

My Sol Patrol shirt from Patagonia is not designed for running. But I found the button-up design helps keep me cooler and looser when stomach issues occur. And they always do.

Pros: Great look and lots of front pockets

Cons: Not super breathable and expensive (\$89)

My advice: Shirts are a great way to carry small gear and look fabulous. I'm still conflicted on this, to be honest.

Ultimate Direction 17L Backpack

A 24L backpack is sufficient for this event but going under 20L was suicidal. I've used a pack from Ultimate Direction: a 17L, 269g

(0.59lb). I had managed to drop the weight of my bags to 14.33lb before (6.5 kg). That's the minimum weight the race directors authorize you to start with. That was never easy to achieve.

Pros: Really light (269g / 0.59 lb.) and quite resistant to tear

Cons: A bit small

My advice: Aim to reach a 14.33lb backpack (6.5 kg). Heavy packs will change your gait, give you blisters and hurt your back.

[BDS Tactical Gear Pouches & Fanny Pack](#)

I accidentally found this small, veteran-owned company in Oceanside, CA, by *Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton* in San Diego County. I used five pouches: three on the back and two on the front. The two front ones were heavy and bothersome. But it was overall a relatively new and exciting idea.

Pros: Having weight on your hips relieves your back

Cons: Possible chafing

My advice: Dividing the overall weight of our gear is always a good call. Many running brands carry large belts and hip pouches nowadays.

Food

It's tough to get your food dialed in for MDS. The quest for lowering the weight you carry is a necessary battle. For my experiment, I passed on my favorite dehydrated food company (it's from the UK: expeditionfoods.com). That was a mistake. I went to REI and bought 4-5 meals from the different brands without trying any of them out. I've used them for dinners, mainly, and carried a few protein bars from Trader Joe's, peanut butter and jelly coconut balls, beef and turkey jerky and Thai lime and chili cashews. I also ditched the race's salt tablets entirely. I used Saltstick fastchews instead.

Pros: All this interesting mix helped me never be bored and always find pleasure in what I ate. I believe it also allowed to push harder and resist the idea of quitting at times.

Cons: Weight. I had way too much weight this year.

My advice: There's no way around dehydrated food for your base. Always try it out in training. Add unique and secrets ingredients that you know will make you happy.

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Born in France and raised in Mexico, Gaël Couturier has been an endurance sports journalist for over 20 years, traveling extensively in North America, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. He lived in Venezia, Italy, for 4-years but also in India, Delhi, and Ahmedabad for 3-years, where he worked as an editor for an adventure magazine and then directed an ultra by the Pakistan border, making friends with paramilitary and 6-foot cobras. A 4-time UTMB, 8-time Marathon Des Sables, and 17-time Ironman triathlon finisher, he now lives in Southern California with his lazy English bulldog Key Lime Pie and fearless Chihuahua Vasquez Josephine Kiwi.