

RUNNER'S WORLD

Sahara, Gobi, Atacama. South African Ryan Sandes is the first person to have won three of the races in the 4 Deserts Challenge. Now he has his eye on Antarctica

Travel is definitely one of the reasons I do this. I get to see some really awesome places that not a lot of people see – running in the Amazon jungle, across the Atacama or Gobi deserts, along the Skeleton Coast in Namibia ... they had to get special permission to run there. I think the other reason is just to see how far I can push myself, mentally and physically.

Trying to get big tubs of white powder through Pakistani customs makes things quite interesting.

I run with a nutritional powder you mix with water, and if you had to put just a little bit in your mouth it will go into like a rock-hard ball. It really needs a lot of water. One of the customs guys took a bit and it just went like a paste in his mouth and all his friends started laughing. They let me through quite quickly after that!

The Amazon run is one I'll tick off my to-do list. The first two or three days were fun, when you get your adrenaline going and endorphins. But after three days I was ready to get out the jungle in a big hurry. There was a male stripper who did the jungle marathon. He pulled out after the 100km stage 'cause he started chafing you-know-where and he had to do a show in London the next week. He said his job was sort of more important than his passion. So you get all sorts of weird and wonderful people doing these races.

There's not much that is your friend in the jungle. Even the trees and plants can kill you. You get bitten by a bushmaster snake and you've got two hours to live

– it will take about 16 hours to get to the nearest hospital. You're swimming through swamps with caymans and piranhas, and there are jaguars and these rodents called capybaras the size of labradors. These things have big teeth. They look like seals with legs. So that was quite freaky.

Scenery-wise the Atacama race was really awesome. It was such a mixture of terrain – it's the driest desert in the world, and then you get the Andes mountains capped with snow, and the snow-melt runs down so you're running in the heat and you'll cross a little river of freezing-cold water. And they've got these salt flats there and it's just white, it looks like coral but it's just hard salt. And then you come across these pools of blue, blue water and you want to jump in but they're full of salt.

Running with Dean Karnazes was awesome. He was one of *Time* magazine's most influential people in the world. He ran the 50 marathons in 50 days. Just to spend time with him and learn from him and just hear what he's done in his life was awesome. It was quite strange, in a way, to beat him [in the 2009 Gobi Desert Race].

For the deserts I trained at the Sports Science Institute in their environmental chamber. It's like a single garage with a treadmill inside and they can control the heat and humidity. For Antarctica I'm going to train at Cape Union Mart; they've got a freeze chamber.

For a lot of these races I go up a week or 10 days in advance to acclimatise, but also to stash up a bit of a holiday and see the area. Running through

the cities where I'm acclimatising, I get to experience a lot more – you get to meet people first-hand.

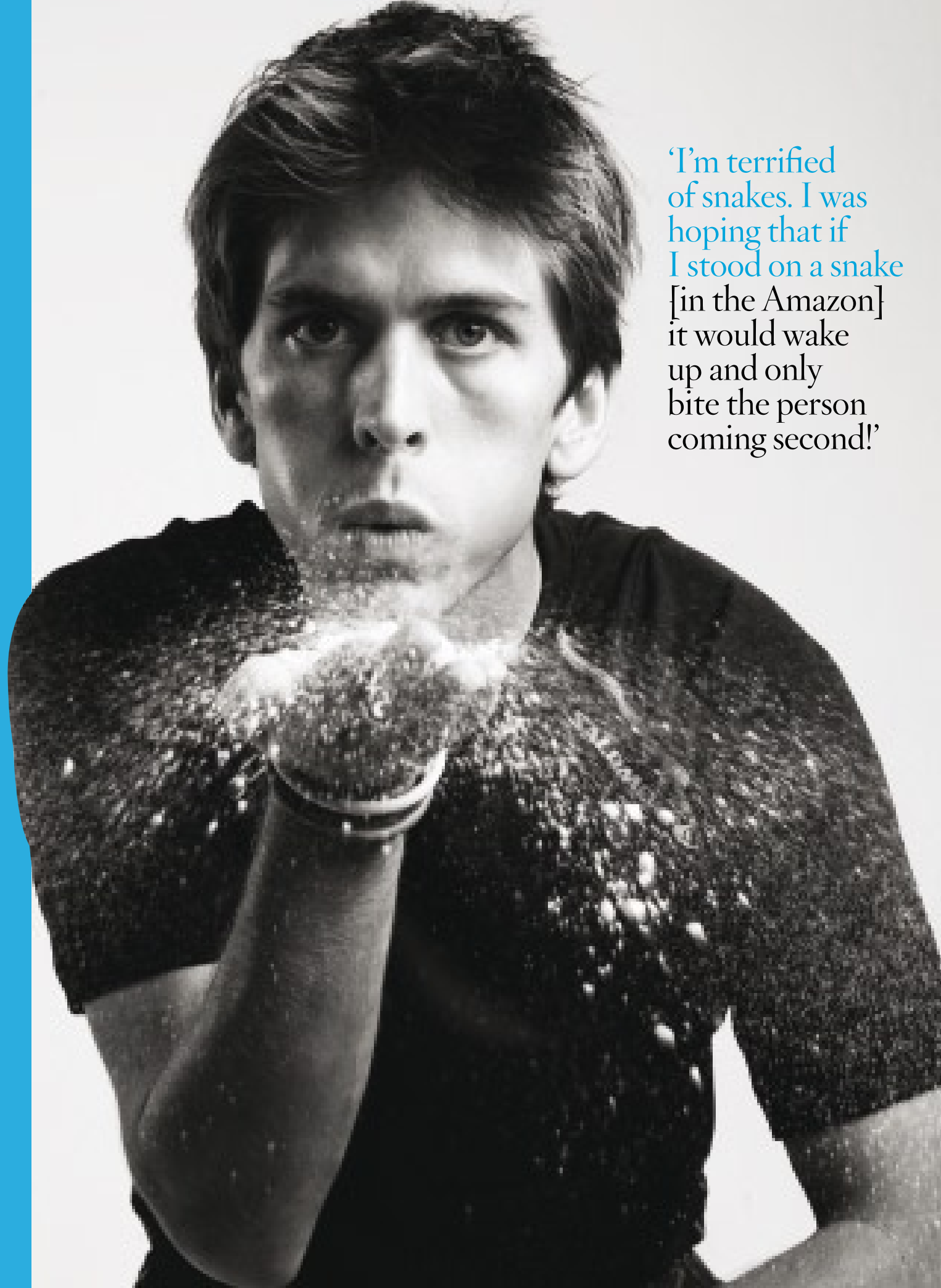
Those ancient Chinese markets are quite an eye-opener, like how people are still living. You can buy anything there, from seahorses to scorpions and hedgehogs ... it was a bit disturbing.

I went to this pizza place in Kashkar [Kyrgyzstan] but I couldn't understand the writing. The pizza I ordered had about 10 different colours of meat on it. I took one or two bites and had to leave it. The meat was, like, purple, green ... I don't know what was on there!

The pizzas in San Pedro in Chile are really good. It stands out as one of the best places I've ever been – I'd really like to go back there. It's a little town in the middle of the Atacama Desert. The hotel we stayed in was like a kind of game lodge. It felt like I was back in South Africa or Botswana or somewhere, except you're surrounded by the Andes.

Running in the Drakensberg is really special 'cause there's just no one around. There's a race called the Salomon Sky Run and a lot of people freak out 'cause it's 100km and the route isn't marked – you're just running from peak to peak. It's like the opposite of claustrophobia ... the space is just too much.

For a race you've got to be completely self-sufficient. All my stuff weighs about 8kg. I normally don't take a toothbrush. It's too much weight. I think teeth start to brush themselves after about three days! ●



'I'm terrified of snakes. I was hoping that if I stood on a snake [in the Amazon] it would wake up and only bite the person coming second!'