

# Desert Sandes has time on his side

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THE times of Sandes have taken the ultra-marathon world by storm.

When Capetonian Ryan Sandes, just 26, entered his first multi-stage trail run — the seven-day Gobi March through China in June — he won the event by nearly half-an-hour on his closest rival. Some two hours back, in fourth place, was US endurance legend Dean Karnazes, who has run 50 marathons in 50 days.

"It was good being the dark horse," says Sandes, who started running only two-and-a-half years ago, when he decided to accompany a friend in the Kraysna marathon.

He took to the sights and sounds of the trail routes, and has stayed off-road since then.

Sandes returns to the desert next month for the Sahara Race in Egypt, the third event of the Four Deserts series. "To get a top three or top five there, I'll be happy. But deep down inside, I'd like to win. I suppose in the Gobi I never held back. Each day I'd live it as if it was my last day."

Desert racing is not simply about coping with the conditions between the start and finish lines, but about surviving the elements 24 hours a day.

Each runner carries their own supplies for the week in a backpack. Without water, Sandes's weighed 8.5kg. Runners get 1.5 litres of water per 12km, and another 3l at the end of the stage, which must last them overnight.

Sandes, a quantity surveyor, won all six stages in China, which ranged from 20km to the 80km leg on the fifth day, known as the Long March.

"My hardest moment was the heat on that long stage. I thought I was going to pass out. The temperature averaged around 35° to 40°, and on the one day it went up to 45°."

About 20 of 180 entrants dropped out in the first two days, mostly from dehydration, while a couple were forced to quit near the end because of blisters.

For the Sahara Race, which starts on October 26, he has done some training at the Sports Science Institute in Cape Town, running on a treadmill in an environment chamber where



**TRUE CRIT:** Ryan Sandes in the Gobi March ultra-marathon

Picture: RACING THE PLANET/WOUTER KINGMA

hot conditions are replicated. "The Sahara is supposed to be a bit hotter than the Gobi," says Sandes, who now enjoys a full sponsorship from Cape Kingdom. The entry fee is \$2,900 and the cost of his Gobi jaunt was about R60,000.

The extreme bug has bitten Sandes and already he has compiled a lengthy list of crazy feats he'd like to do. There are the other two races in the Desert series, the Atacama Crossing in Chile and the Last Desert in Antarctica, which he plans to complete by 2010.

That's probably chicken feed compared to Karnazes and Aus-

tralia-based South African, Paul Liebenberg, who engaged in a bid to become the first man to do the four Desert races in a calendar year.

Sandes's other plans include doing the 333km non-stop marathon through the Sahara and the Badwater marathon through Death Valley in the US.

"That's supposed to be the toughest ultra-marathon in the world. The route is along a road, and apparently your shoes start melting if you don't run on the white lines."

Racing can be treacherous, but training can get dangerous

too. A resident at Hout Bay, Sandes runs over Chapman's Peak to Noordhoek beach, and along the sand to the light-house.

But the recent storms that hammered the Cape caught him unawares on the beach two weeks ago; he was about 10m from the water line when a freak wave hit the shore. "Suddenly the water was up to my chest."

He also has to negotiate the notorious quicksand in the river that runs into the ocean there, where he has sunk to his knees in a flash.

It seems there's no stopping quick Sandes.

