



Running Hot

Last year ultra marathoner **Charlie Engle** led a team of two other runners across the Sahara Desert from Senegal to Egypt, running 4,300 miles in 111 days. The three ran through six countries, enduring blazing heat, near-freezing nights, sandstorms and the threat of minefields. *Running the Sahara*, a feature-length documentary narrated by Matt Damon to be released in August, documents the feat (and the riveting expedition squabbling that happened along the way). We rang up Engle while he was out training for his next adventure—a cross-country America run.

You return all your phone calls on runs?

I have to run between three and six hours every day and there's no alternative. People have this idea that running is a great way to relax and to detach from stresses of daily life? For me, not so much.

Running across the Sahara Desert strikes many of us as a little bit crazy. How would you respond?

I'd say I'm not crazy, just stupid. I'm too stupid to quit.

By day five in Mauritania, you were running in 140-degree heat. What's that like?

Like running in a wool suit. The heat is so engulfing. I could have been running naked in the most open place in the desert and it still would have felt claustrophobic.

How much weight did you lose on the expedition?

I went into the thing a little fat, purposefully. I started at 185 and went all the way down to just below 150. I'm not all that good-looking anyway. Take 38 pounds off me, and that is not an attractive sight.

What was the toughest moment in the whole 111 days?

Day 45 was supposed to be the halfway point of the expedition and we were 500 miles from the midpoint. I woke up at 4 a.m., same as every day, but it was the first time I lay in my sleeping bag for five minutes saying, Oh, my God. Is this realistic? Am I going to be able to do this? The answers were, No, it's not realistic, and yes, I'm going to do it.

What was the hardest country to run through?

Niger. That's the real Sahara Desert. It's like running on the beach. Go run in the deep sand on the beach for 12 hours, and you'll know what it's like.

And the most beautiful?

Libya. It's a hidden treasure, a place Westerners just really don't go.

You had some trouble getting into Libya. Did they think you were spies?

I think they thought we were there to drink till 2 a.m. and party and coerce the women. They were shocked when we were in our sleeping bags every night at ten. There was nothing exciting about us.

Were minefields along the route a real concern?

[Laughs] In Niger, I stepped over a fence that was laying on the ground and went 20 feet into this field to pee behind a tree. I heard a guard behind me going, *psst*. He only spoke Arabic. He took his hands and made a motion like a bomb exploding. He pointed to my feet and went "boom." I walked backwards in my footprints to the road. That was the last fence I stepped over.

What's harder, running across America or the Sahara?

America, because I haven't done it yet. But at least there'll be plenty of showers. A hundred and eleven days in the Sahara, and I had two showers. •



Top: Engle (foreground) mid-Sahara; **above:** the team maps the 4,300-mile route.