

A perfect storm

100km del Sahara stage race, Tunisia. 10-13 March 2006

By Fulvio Massini (transl. Silvia Stagni)

Our story begins at gate C24 of Rome's Fiumicino International Airport, a couple of days before the race was due to start. This was where the cast assembled in preparation for the eighth edition of this adventure race organised by the Italian travel companies Terramia and Zitoway Travel. The journey took them from a cosmopolitan European capital of several million people out into the wide expanses of the Sahara Desert where apart from each other there was rarely any other human presence within a day's journey.

Like the race, the journey to it happened in stages. After a short flight from Rome, and maybe a slightly longer one from other jumping-off points within Europe, all 120 participants arrived on the Tunisian holiday island of Djerba.

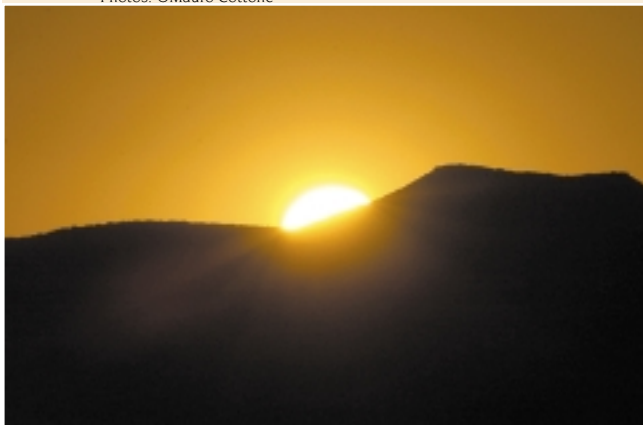
The 100 km del Sahara is much more than just a running competition.

Adriano Zito, who conceived and promoted this event together with Terramia, was waiting to greet them. The group transferred to the Homere Hotel for an overnight stay, and began get to know each other. It is a mainly Italian venture, but there is always international participation. This year six Californians came, along with six Uruguayans, five Brits, two Germans and lone representatives of Ireland, Switzerland and Spain.

On the second day the group boarded buses bound for the



Photos: ©Mauro Cottone



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settlement of Chinini, on the edge of the desert and within a World Heritage site. Here a technical briefing familiarised runners with the demands of the desert environment and the prospect of racing over long distances in often difficult conditions. The race route generally heads southward along desert tracks which get more sandy as they approach the dunes of the Great Eastern Erg. In this period of waiting the tension was mounting; you could see it in every face and hear it in every word.

On the third day of the trip, 10 March, the first stage, of 24km length, started at 10.30. A group of 10 runners climbed up the steep track past the mosque and stayed together almost to the end. Only 11 minutes separated the first 10 finishers.

A sandstorm blew in overnight but subsided in time for the second stage at 09.30 on 11 March. It ran for 19km over ever more demanding terrain consisting of sandy tracks. A group of eight stayed together until the final 2km, when three of them pulled

away. Alessandro Lambruschini finished first in 1:23:26.

Effort is tempered by the knowledge of the looming third stage, which was to take place on the same day at 20.00. Before then the group spent a trying afternoon fighting a sandstorm in which some of the tents blew away. The night stage, 10km long, enabled runners to experience the brilliance of the moon and stars in the Saharan night sky. To enhance that experience, pairs of runners were set off at minute intervals.

The longest stage – of full marathon length – took place on 12 March. The group divided into three for staggered starts at 08.30, 09.30 and 10.30. Each group progressed across the dunes of the Great Eastern Erg to the oasis of Ksar Ghilane, but it was very hard going. The stage started into a strong headwind that whipped the sand up into runners' faces. Although everyone was affected the earlier finishers were less badly hit by the rising storm than those finishing later in practically zero visibility. Despite the tough

conditions all participants succeed in crossing the finish line. Lambruschini again went away in the final few kilometres to win this stage.

The final stage was on 13 March, and half of the 24km route was over sandy dunes. Many runners opted to tackle it barefoot. Lambruschini maintained his lead to win the overall race for the second year. Last year's female winner, Patrizia Guarnieri, was beaten by a series of strong performances from the Croat Mirjana Kmacic.

The finish line in the oasis of Ksar Ghilane was the scene of joyous hugs and congratulations as each runner completed. It was a blaze of happiness. In this hardest race of all those yet held everyone was a winner, no matter if they preferred walking to running.

Our 120 slightly nervous souls who embarked on this adventure had become 120 heroes, and firm friends as well. Testifying to the binding friendships formed on the trip, Fiumicino International

MEN:			
1	Alessandro LAMBRUSCHINI	ITA	9:00:46
2	Adel CHAYEB	TUN	9:05:51
3	Fabrizio FERRARESE	ITA	9:26:32
4	Tommaso VIOLANO	ITA	9:32:53
5	Alessandro FIORINI	ITA	9:42:54
6	Alessandro PLAINO	ITA	9:49:59
7	Andrea BERNABUCCI	ITA	9:55:30
8	Gianni MOGGIA	ITA	10:03:43
9	Toufik KAHLOUI	TUN	10:23:51
10	Mario CIMATTI	ITA	10:39:10
WOMEN:			
1	Mirjana KMACIC	CRO	11:24:30
2	Patrizia GUARNIERI	ITA	11:43:05
3	Alessandra BERNARDINI	ITA	12:09:29
4	Chiara TIEGHI	ITA	12:39:09
5	Laura CORTI	ITA	13:00:02
6	Sharon KOVAR	USA	13:18:38
7	Claudia GERLING	GER	13:52:56
8	Silvana LATTANZIO	ITA	15:09:00
9	Ma Luisa MALVESTITI	ITA	16:12:57
10	Ida LENART	CAN	17:12:59

The arrival in Ksar Ghilane Oasis is welcomed by hugs and applause. It's a blaze of gladness. Everyone's a winner, even those who preferred to walk instead of running.

Airport on the return journey became the scene of hugs and kisses, and not a few tears of regret at how soon it was all over. The 100km del Sahara is much more than a running competition, as you can discover for yourself in March 2007.

