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Trio cross Sahara after two marathons a day for three months

By Hugh Miles in Cairo and Mike Pflanz Africa Correspondent

THEY started with a dip in the cold surf of the Atlantic on a white sand beach in Africa's far west. A little over three months later, this week they were swimming above coral reefs in the Red Sea.

In between lay 4,580 miles of heat-blasted and empty Sahara, which, unlike anyone before them, Ray Zahab, 38, Kevin Lin, 30, and Charlie Engle, 44, ran across.

On average, the Canadian, Taiwanese and American ran two marathons a day for 110 days, in temperatures of up to 104F, ripping through a pair of trainers in 48 hours.

Crossing six countries, Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Libya and finally Egypt, they faced water shortages, unmarked minefields, rebel armies and blinding sandstorms.

"It is a great achievement but we are still caught up in the moment of finishing and it really hasn't sunk in yet," an exhilarated Mr Zahab told The Daily Telegraph in Cairo last night, before setting off on a celebration cruise down the Nile with his team mates.

"The hardest thing was knowing every day you have to do the miles, even if you are sick and weak."

The three, all dedicated marathon athletes, met during a race through the Amazon jungle in 2004 and came up with the "crazy" idea of running through the Sahara from west to east.

Along the way they would work with a non-profit organisation, H2O Africa, to highlight the sparse access to clean water faced by the desert's nomadic tribesmen. The actor Matt Damon became a keen supporter and is producing a film on the trio's epic feat with

Oscar-winning director, James Moll, who followed the team in a convoy of support vehicles.

"The most daunting time was actually on the plane over from Canada, thinking through what we were about to try to do," said Mr Zahab, who lives with his wife Cathy near Ottawa.

"But once we were there, it was as incredible as I could have expected it to be. The most amazing thing was seeing how people survive, how you would run for miles without seeing any water, and then you find a puddle and it's dirty."

The three began each day before dawn, setting off at 5am after a light breakfast, running

as the heat warmed the sands beneath them until they stopped four or five hours later for a lunch of pasta, tuna and vegetables.

After a three-hour siesta, they would start again, adding another 20 to 30 miles before stopping after dark. Mr Zahab lost three quarters of a stone during the three months. Even when sick, they ran at least 25 miles, he said.

They slept on thin mattresses in lightweight tents, a team of doctors, physiotherapists, nutritionists and logisticians following in the chase convoy.

One night, struggling to sleep through a bout of severe diarrhoea and high fever, Mr Zahab tried to calculate the volume of water and sports drinks they were consuming. "It worked out at something crazy like 900 litres each a month," he said. As well as modern GPS navigation handsets, the team hired a local Tuareg guide to plot the best path, who Mr Zahab described as "an inspiration every day".

There is no record of anyone crossing the wastes of the world's second largest desert in such a short time.

"The next challenge? Returning to the Canadian winter." Mr Zahab said last night. "Then maybe back for another race in the Sahara."

Mr Engle, an American television producer who is married with two children, and Mr Lin, a Taiwanese sports psychology masters student, will also return home later this week.

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