Petra Desert Marathon – 12 September 2015.

Having reached my 60th birthday the previous week, this seemed like a good way to mark the event.

Stevie had booked it some months earlier, but it took me a bit of time to decide on it.

We flew into the capital of Jordan, Amman, on a Wednesday night to the tail end of a sandstorm that had hospitalised over 200 people.

It was also much hotter than usual, maybe in part due to the sandstorm.

Stevie’s bag had decided to stay in Heathrow, so it was a bit worrying, waiting for it to turn up, which it did, less than three hours before we got on the coach to Petra.

Our two coachloads stopped off at the Dead sea on the way,, so that we could experience the novelty of almost floating on the water, rather than in it. Very odd.

Then it was onto our very nice hotel about 100 yards from the visitor entrance to the Petra site. An ideal location.

After picking up our numbers and T shirts, we then had a very comprehensive briefing. This took in the terrain, the medical support, the drinks stations, natural hazards such as dogs, and a host of other things.

It was encouraging that these things had all been considered, if a little disconcerting that some of them needed to be.

Due to the heat, we had a very early start and the hotel had laid on breakfast from 4a.m..

At 5:45 we met in the lobby and were walked across the road to the entrance of the site. It was already 25C and the sun was not up.

The site opens to visitors at 10am, so we had the place to ourselves as we walked the 2km to the Treasury, probably the most famous building in the Unesco world heritage site. Despite thousands of years of history, it is still best known for its appearance in an Indiana Jones film.

We then had a group photo and walked another 300m to the start line. Happily, there were toilets there for runners of a nervous disposition.

The half and full runners all lined up together, about 60 in all and we set off at 06:30. As we were still on the site, we had to run behind Lars, one of the organisers for maybe five minutes, until we left the main site by a side entrance.

We were on sandy and rocky terrain for the first 3k or so before reaching tarmac. This was a very hilly section, but at least meant that you could lift your head and admire the wonderful natural scenery.

The half and full then split for a few k with the full being back on sandy and rocky ground, which needed a fair degree of care.

After maybe 8k we were back on tarmac, which lasted until 34k.

A drinks station at 11k saw the half runners who we had rejoined, once again go their own way, which would also be our route after we had completed an out and back of some 9k.

There were drinks stations about every 3k with 330ml bottles of water. Some also had energy drinks in cups. The water got hotter and hotter as the morning wore on and became really unpleasant to drink.

I was enjoying the 9k out section, despite its serious undulations and was amazed at the pace and condition of the lead runners on the back section.

Shortly after the half way point, we had a serious descent to the turnaround point at about 22k, which meant a hideous climb back up it.

It was soon after this that I felt that things were not going my way. Despite consuming a full bottle at each drinks station, as well as the energy drinks and my own gels, I was really starting to struggle and it was a run/walk back to the end of the out and back at around 34k.

One of the doctors there asked if I was alright to continue. I wasn’t feeling at all well but felt that the worst was now over.

Wrong again.

The next 3k was a relentless and at time quite steep, uphill.

It was mostly a walk and I was feeling increasingly light headed and weak and was having difficulty getting any more fluid into me.

I was very happy when I saw the drinks station at 34k and collapsed into the plastic chair.

From this point, it was to be rough trail for most of the way to the end, some of it quite steep.

The doctor suggested that I should stop at this point and I had no strength for any real conversation. I couldn’t drink anything and felt awful.

Stevie reached this point soon after and didn’t event realise it was me slumped in the chair. So much for the NEMC Buff!

She tried to get me to walk in with her, but when I stood up I was swaying all over the place, dizzy and light headed, so I sat down again.

This time the doctor was rather more forceful in her suggestion that I go no further. I was in no state to argue and my race was over whilst Stevie continued strongly to the end.

I had a lift back to the end and was put in the medical tent with the other drop outs, some who had been there for more than two hours.

I was quite keen to get back to my air conditioned room, but was not allowed to leave until I could walk across the tent without looking like I was going to collapse. I was there a while!

Eventually I got back to the hotel, which was only about 200m away. There was a set of scales in the bathroom and I had weighed myself before I went out. During the run I had consumed 2.5 to 3 Litres of water and I was still more than 4Kg lighter when I got back. Not that surprising that I felt as I did.

The temperature reached 40C and was far and away the highest in the five years that they have run this event. It is usually 28-29C.

Despite all of my trials and tribulations, it was a great trip, followed on the Sunday by a proper guided walk in Petra and a marvellous celebration dinner in the desert that evening.

The marathon was extremely well organised with 10 vehicles out on the course, and medics provided by the organisers from their home country of Denmark as well as local doctors. The police were also involved in traffic management, which was very minimal, fortunately.

I may only have a half marathon medal and have suffered in a way that I have never done before, but I would not have missed this trip even if I had known what was going to happen.

It was that good.

I am not expecting Cleethorpes to be as hot.

As an addendum, all profits from the event were going to provide food and clothing and medical supplies to a Syrian refugee camp in Jordan.

Ian Richardson

16 September 2015.