

READING CHALLENGE

The Man Who Ran Across the Sahara

Three runners, 111 days, and 7,500 kilometres of burning sand

Level	A2 (Elementary)
Age Group	Teens (11-16)
Topic	Sport & Adventure
Duration	~15 minutes
Skill	Reading

Imagine running a **marathon** every single day. Now imagine doing that for 111 days in a row. And now imagine doing it in the hottest place on Earth — the Sahara **desert**, where temperatures can reach 50 degrees Celsius. That is exactly what three men did in 2007. Their names were Charlie Engle, Ray Zahab, and Kevin Lin. They ran across the entire Sahara **Desert**, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. It was one of the most **incredible** journeys in the history of sport.

The Three Runners

The three men came from very different backgrounds. Charlie Engle was an American ultramarathon runner. An ultramarathon is any race longer than a normal **marathon**. Charlie had already run across deserts before, but nothing as big as the Sahara. He was the one who came up with the idea to cross it on foot. Charlie was tough, experienced, and never afraid of a challenge.

Ray Zahab was a Canadian runner. Just a few years before the Sahara expedition, Ray had been a heavy smoker who did not exercise at all. Then he decided to change his life completely. He quit smoking, started running, and within a few years he was running ultramarathons. His story showed that ordinary people can do extraordinary things if they have enough **determination**.

Kevin Lin was from Taiwan. He was the youngest of the three and an experienced adventure runner. Kevin was quiet and focused. He did not talk much during the run, but he never complained. The other runners admired his mental strength and calm attitude.

The Sahara Desert

Before we follow the runners on their journey, let us understand just how big the Sahara is. The Sahara is the largest hot **desert** in the world. It covers about 9.2 million square kilometres — almost the same size as the entire United States of America, or the whole of China. It stretches across eleven countries in North Africa. Most of it is covered in rocks, gravel, and sand. Some sand dunes are more than 180 metres tall — that is as high as a 50-storey building.

The Sahara is one of the most extreme environments on Earth. During the day, temperatures can reach 50 degrees Celsius or more. At night, in some areas, the **temperature** can drop below freezing. Rain almost never falls. Some parts of the Sahara have not had rain for years. Very few plants or animals can survive here. It is a place of burning heat, endless sand, and almost no water. And the three runners wanted to cross all of it on foot.

The Route

The expedition started on 2 November 2006 in Senegal, on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean in West Africa. The runners planned to run east across the entire width of Africa, finishing at the

Red Sea in Egypt. The total **distance** was about 7,500 kilometres. They would pass through six countries: Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Libya, and Egypt. They had to cross some of the most remote and dangerous **terrain** on the planet. Each **border** crossing brought new challenges — different languages, different governments, and different landscapes.

A support **crew** followed the runners in trucks. The **crew** carried water, food, medical supplies, and camping equipment. Without them, the run would have been impossible. The runners needed about 10 litres of water each per day just to survive in the heat. **Hydration** was the most important thing — if they did not drink enough, they could die.

A Typical Day

Every day was the same routine. The runners woke up before sunrise, usually around 5:00 in the morning. They ate a large breakfast — porridge, eggs, bread, and energy bars. They needed thousands of calories because running in the **desert** burns enormous amounts of energy. Then they started running.

They ran about 60 to 80 kilometres every day. That is almost two marathons per day. They ran in the morning when it was cooler, rested during the hottest part of the afternoon, and then ran again in the evening. The sand was soft and deep in many places, which made every step much harder than running on a normal road. Their feet sank into the sand. Their legs ached. The sun beat down on them without mercy.

At the end of each day, they stopped at the support trucks. The **crew** set up tents, cooked dinner, and the runners checked their feet for blisters. Blisters were a constant problem. The sand got into their shoes and socks and rubbed against their skin for hours. Some of their blisters were so big and painful that a doctor had to treat them every night. Then, after eating and having their injuries treated, they tried to sleep for a few hours before doing it all again the next day.

The Dangers

The heat was the biggest enemy. When temperatures reached 50 degrees Celsius, the runners could feel the heat coming up from the sand through their shoes. The air was so hot that breathing felt like standing in front of an open oven. They had to drink water constantly. If they stopped drinking for even a short time, they felt dizzy and sick. Dehydration — not having enough water in your body — can kill a person in the **desert** within hours.

Sandstorms were another serious danger. Sometimes, without warning, the wind picked up and the sky turned orange. Millions of tiny sand particles filled the air. The runners could not see more than a few metres in front of them. Sand got into their eyes, mouths, and lungs. During the worst sandstorms, they had to stop running, cover their faces, and wait — sometimes for hours — until the storm passed.

There were also political dangers. Some of the countries they crossed were not safe. In parts of Niger and Libya, there were armed groups and bandits. The team needed special permission from governments and sometimes had military escorts to keep them safe. At one point, they had to change their route because of security warnings.

The Hardest Moments

After about two months of running, **exhaustion** started to take over. The runners had lost a lot of weight. Their bodies were breaking down. Charlie had serious knee problems. Ray had stomach infections. Kevin struggled with pain in his legs. Every morning, just getting out of the tent and starting to run again required enormous willpower.

One of the worst moments came in Libya. The runners had to cross a section of the Sahara called the Libyan Sand Sea. This is one of the most remote and empty places on Earth. There are no roads, no villages, no people — just sand dunes stretching to the horizon in every direction. The dunes were huge and steep. Running up them was like running up hills of loose powder. For every three steps forward, they slid two steps back. It took days to cross this section, and the runners were close to giving up.

But they did not give up. They kept going. Step by step, kilometre by kilometre, day by day. They encouraged each other. When one runner felt weak, the other two helped him. Their friendship and teamwork kept them alive.

Why They Did It

The three runners did not cross the Sahara just for the adventure. They had a much bigger purpose. They wanted to raise awareness about the global water crisis. In many parts of Africa, millions of people do not have access to clean drinking water. Women and children walk for hours every day just to find water — and often the water they find is dirty and dangerous to drink.

The runners set up a **charity** called H2O Africa (which later became part of a larger organisation called Water.org). They raised money to build wells and clean water systems in African communities. By running through the driest place on Earth, they wanted to show the world how important water is — and how many people do not have enough of it.

The Finish Line

On 20 February 2007, after 111 days of running, Charlie Engle, Ray Zahab, and Kevin Lin reached the Red Sea near the city of Cairo in Egypt. They had done it. They had run across the entire Sahara **Desert** — 7,500 kilometres from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. They ran into the water of the Red Sea together, laughing and crying at the same time.

In total, they had run the equivalent of about 178 marathons. They had crossed six countries. They had survived sandstorms, extreme heat, illness, and **exhaustion**. And they had shown the world that the human body and mind can do things that seem completely impossible.

The Documentary

The entire journey was filmed for a **documentary** called “Running the Sahara.” The film was produced by the actor Matt Damon, who was deeply moved by the runners’ story and their mission to help with the water crisis. The **documentary** showed audiences around the world what the runners went through — the pain, the beauty of the **desert**, and the importance of clean water. It helped raise millions of dollars for water projects in Africa.

What Can We Learn?

The story of Charlie, Ray, and Kevin teaches us several things. First, it shows us that humans can do amazing things when they have a purpose. These three men did not run for money or fame. They ran to help other people. Second, it shows us the power of teamwork. None of them could have done it alone. They needed each other. When one felt weak, the others were strong.

And finally, their story reminds us how lucky many of us are. We turn on a tap and clean water comes out. We do not think about it. But for hundreds of millions of people around the world, finding clean water is a daily struggle. Three men ran 7,500 kilometres through the hottest **desert** on Earth to make sure we do not forget that. Their run is over, but their message is still important today.

Vocabulary

Term	Definition
desert	a very large, dry area of land with very little rain, often covered in sand
distance	the amount of space between two places
exhaustion	the feeling of being extremely tired, with no energy left
marathon	a long running race of about 42 kilometres
temperature	how hot or cold something is, measured in degrees
sandstorm	a strong wind that carries large amounts of sand through the air
hydration	drinking enough water to keep your body working properly
determination	a strong feeling of wanting to do something and not giving up
blister	a painful bubble on the skin filled with liquid, often caused by rubbing
terrain	the type of land in an area, such as flat, hilly, rocky, or sandy
border	the line that separates one country from another
documentary	a film or programme that shows real events and tells a true story
charity	an organisation that helps people who are in need
incredible	very hard to believe, amazing
crew	a group of people who work together on a project or journey

Comprehension Quiz

1. How far did the three runners cross the Sahara Desert?

- A) About 2,500 kilometres
- B) About 5,000 kilometres
- C) About 7,500 kilometres
- D) About 10,000 kilometres

2. How many countries did the runners pass through?

- A) Three countries
- B) Four countries
- C) Five countries
- D) Six countries

3. What was one of the biggest dangers the runners faced?

- A) Attacks from wild lions
- B) Dehydration and extreme heat up to 50 degrees Celsius
- C) Getting lost because they had no maps
- D) Falling into deep rivers

4. Why did the runners cross the Sahara?

- A) To win a large cash prize
- B) To raise awareness about the global water crisis
- C) Because the government asked them to
- D) To train for the Olympic Games

5. What was the name of the documentary about their journey?

- A) Desert Dream
- B) Sand and Sweat
- C) Running the Sahara
- D) Across the Sand

Answer Key

#	Answer	Question
1	C	1. How far did the three runners cross the Sahara Desert?
2	D	2. How many countries did the runners pass through?
3	B	3. What was one of the biggest dangers the runners faced?
4	B	4. Why did the runners cross the Sahara?
5	C	5. What was the name of the documentary about their journey?