

VARIETY

Film Review: 'Desert Runners'



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'The Amazing Race' seems like a walk in the park compared with the intrepid desert treks in this engrossing adventure documentary.

Dennis Harvey

The engrossing “Desert Runners” follows several participants in the [4 Deserts](#) Series, a globe-spanning annual lineup of ultramarathon races noted for their extreme conditions and length. While undertaking even one of these brutal endurance tests might seem nuts to the average citizen, Jennifer Steinman’s docu finds vivid human interest in a quartet of diverse protagonists with their sights set on the “Grand Slam” — completing all the races over the course of one year. Pic opened limited U.S. theatrical engagements Nov. 29, and should find plenty of enthusiasts via home-format and TV sales.

Already notorious as the world’s toughest such competition, despite its full program dating back only as far as 2006, the 4 Deserts attracts a small number of professional runners. But the majority of the enrollees are simply there to challenge themselves. It’s hardly a challenge taken lightly (or presumably an expense taken lightly, though the docu doesn’t address issues of personal financial cost or sponsorship), as each race is a week long, with more or less all survival supplies carried on the runner’s back.

Conditions span a climatic gamut: Chile’s [Atacama Desert](#) is the world’s driest, with no rainfall recorded in 400 years; [China](#)’s Gobi the windiest, with wild temperature fluctuations; [Egypt](#)’s Sahara the hottest (up to 122 degrees Fahrenheit). Then there’s the world’s coldest in Antarctica, an invitation-only finale for veterans of prior events that can involve blizzards and below-zero temperatures.

The docu’s focus is primarily on four participants. There’s 56-year-old David O’Brien, a genial Irish marketing director, and 33-year-old Ricky Paugh, a former pro American baseball player

turned London-based consultant. At 25, Aussie actress Samantha Gash becomes the youngest runner to complete the Slam, while 40-year-old English ex-military security specialist Tremaine Kent is a single father who's taken on the races as "part of my grieving process," his wife having died of cancer within the last year.

They're an engaging lot, particularly Paugh, who's almost unfailingly good-humored even when ceaseless vomiting forces him to realize it's simply "irresponsible" to go on. For safety and companionship, he partners with O'Brien during one 62-mile Gobi day, the most grueling of the calendar. Samantha teams up with pro champ Lisa Tamati, the duo at one poignant juncture holding hands to keep each other hobbling along.

There's no lack of drama: Both Paugh and Kent drop out (during one bleak stretch, Kent finds himself wondering why he isn't spending this time with his children instead), only to rejoin the quest at a later race. Running solo for a while in Egypt, Gash narrowly escapes sexual assault by a local. And in China, 31-year-old American Nick Kruse collapses on the trail and subsequently dies.

Yet, despite the sometimes excruciating, arguably foolhardy nature of these races — which rather few participants even think about "winning," as reaching the finish line is goal enough — there's an upbeat tenor to "Desert Runners" that develops real rooting value for the protags. The frequently spectacular surroundings don't hurt, of course, and the pic is nicely turned in all tech departments.

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Reviewed online, San Francisco, Dec. 2, 2013. Running time: **95 MIN.**

Production

(Documentary) A Brainstorm Media/Something to Talk About release of a Smush Media presentation in association with Salty Features and Spoken Media. Produced by Jennifer Steinman, Diana Iles Parker, Yael Melamede.

Crew

Directed by Jennifer Steinman. Camera (color, HD), Sevan Matossian; editor, Jessica Congdon; music, Eric Holland; animation, Andy Cooper, Heidi Duff; sound, Tom Paul.

With

Samantha Gash, Tremaine Kent, David O'Brien, Ricky Paugh, Lisa Tamati.