

BRUSSELS MARATHON October 6th 2013

I'd paid for the hotel up-front, purchased tickets for the Eurostar, (having managed to amass enough East Coast Trains Rewards Points for free connecting travel to St Pancras) All I had to do was enter the event. Then with 3 days to go I came down with the mother-and-father of a dose of something or other that no amount of paracetamol or Lem Sip was going to shift. Not going to Brussels wasn't an option but I knew I hadn't the strength to get round a marathon course! The options boiled down to either going as a non-running tourist, going and simply entering the Half or, perhaps, finding some way of completing the full distance within the very strictly imposed 5 hour time limit. I'd never before gone over 5 hours on a normal road marathon and didn't want to start now. This involves maintaining a 7 minute per km pace throughout, something which wouldn't normally have been a problem.

This time though I knew that I'd be reduced to walking at some stage. With that in mind I headed off to Amble track and timed walking a kilometre. It took 8.5 minutes. Too long! A bit more experimentation showed that if I ran the first 3 minutes of each kilometre and walked the remainder it took approx. 7 minutes. Desperate times need desperate measures! I reckoned that if I ran the first 10k at 6 min/km pace I could follow the run/walk strategy for the next 32km leaving myself with a bit to spare. That's exactly what I did and that's exactly how long it took – 4hr 44 minutes, not a time to shout about but one that saved me the indignity of being swept off the course and into the sweeper bus. The only downside, (apart from not feeling like a marathon runner), was in having to fend off the solicitous enquiries from fellow competitors, convinced that there was something wrong with me. (I caught up with many of these before the end.) This strategy of taking walking breaks before you need to certainly works. I started each new kilometre with plenty in the tank and found myself with energy to spare on the final stretch.

This was the 10th edition of the Brussels Marathon, which also incorporates a half marathon setting off one and a half hours later and following a separate route from the main event. It made a nice change not to have to run the same course twice. There were about 1,800 in the full and 8,000 in the half marathon.

Brussels didn't seem to have the same feel as the usual big city marathon. Registration on Saturday was at the out-of-town Parc du Cinquenaire in a small, uncrowded tent with a minimum of exhibitors, atmosphere or freebies. I guess most of the locals simply registered on Sunday for the half marathon. I was annoyed at having to pay out a hefty premium for a last minute entry and even more annoyed to be handed a plain white T-shirt. The race started from the same place at 9am the following morning and followed an, at times, uninspiring loop along deathly silent long, straight and closed dual carriageways. Relief from the monotony was provided by taking us through several beautiful parks with lakes. As the course profile showed, it was by no means flat and there were some pretty long uphill drags involved.

The finish in the city centre's magnificent Grand Place was spectacular though, and by far the best bit about the well-organised event. They didn't short-change us on the medal either. It was a solid, heavy affair depicting the runners coming into the Grand Place. Unlike Tallinn and Odense there was no free beer or hot food on finishing so, as my hotel was nearby, I rushed back to collect my camera to take a few photos of the back-markers crossing the line. Guess what. By the time I returned they were already dismantling the gantry. I timed it as 15 minutes after the 5 hour cut-off. These people weren't messing about - they meant what they said. Anyway, I did it, ending up feeling no worse than when I started. It's another country to add to the list. I won't be back!

Jim Manford
October 7th 2013



YORKSHIRE MARATHON 20TH OCTOBER 2013

RACE REPORT BY CRIS ATWELL

This was the first running of this race and I think the organizers did a fine job. Far too often first marathons are a disaster due to lack of foresight by the organizers but in this case they seem to have taken advice from the right people, i.e. runners, and catered for most needs. There are always going to be a few problems, most notably the extremely long queues for the baggage drop off prior to the race but all in all this was a well organized event.

The race starter was the cricketing legend Dickie Bird who is regarded with the same level of esteem by Yorkshire folk as Alan Shearer is in Newcastle. Starting at the university, the race headed for the city with large crowds lining the streets giving the race a "London" type of atmosphere, especially round the York Minster area. After a few miles the race headed out north east through less populated areas but even the smallest villages that we passed through had enthusiastic folk shouting encouragement to the runners. In one village, a vicar standing outside her church was high fiving the runners as they passed by. Not a sight I have seen too often.

Even the weather behaved itself. The forecast was for rain and wind but on the day the sun shone and what wind there was didn't cause much of a problem.

The course was advertised and fast and flat. It certainly was one of the flattest marathons I've done but unfortunately on the day I had a bad run so it wasn't as fast as it should have been. I was looking for under 3.40 but ended up with 3.54. No excuses, I just had a bad second half which took me twenty minutes longer than the first half.

The second half of the race was a little duller than the first as we didn't pass through many well populated areas and the flatness of the course meant that for long stretches all you could see were the hedgerows to the side and the backs of the runners in front. However, the last few miles, back in York, were uplifting. Large noisy crowds on both sides of the road cheering the runners home. Well done to the people of York who certainly seemed to embrace the event.

The goody bag at the finish was better than many I've had. Sports drink, crisps, chocolate bars and a lovely pink and white tee-shirt.

Was it worth the £40+ entry fee? These days, yes it was and I would certainly consider doing this race again.

Cris Atwell

ATHENS MARATHON, GREECE November 10th 2013

A few months ago I was not so politely informed by someone who'd been there, done it and was wearing the T-shirt, that I couldn't call myself a true marathon runner as I'd never run the Athens Marathon. Considering that I'd already run over 200 marathons at the time I simply laughed off his remark. He had a point though; not to run Athens during a marathon career would be inexcusable. More so than any other event, Athens with its hoary old story of Pheidippides is the one marathon to which all others should pay their dues. There'd be no Boston, no New York, no London and none of the hundreds of other marathons throughout the world without Athens and its marathon legacy. Despite Greece's current background of economic uncertainty and political chaos, five of us from the North East Marathon Club flew out from Edinburgh on the Thursday before the race. Apart from myself there were the Lonsdale sisters; Adele and Davina, veterans of such exotic events as the Las Vegas and Miami marathons; Stevie Matthews, an experienced ultra specialist still holding her own in the Vet 60 category, recently returned from New Zealand's 5 Bridges Marathon and fellow 100 Clubber Ivan Field working his way slowly to his 300th marathon.

In an attempt to avoid the crowds at Registration, Friday morning saw us up early for the number 4 tram from Syntagma Square to the Exhibition Centre on the coast at Delta Falirou. After gathering our bib numbers with attached chips plus a rather fetching dark grey and blue event T-Shirt and hand towel, we were walked through corridors of no less than 55 exhibitors' stalls selling everything from the latest go-faster lycra offerings, to nutritional and dietary supplements, science technologies, (whatever they are!), hot yoga and handmade jewellery. The old adage incorporating the words "fool" "money" "soon" and "parted" spring readily to mind. While my colleagues were busy splashing the cash I concentrated my attentions on locating the freebies on offer. There weren't many!

While at the Expo we met up with a group of friends of mine from the 100 Marathon Club: Roger Biggs, Jack Brookes, Gina Little, Les Pullen and Paul Holgate of whom only Roger had run the event previously. This year an injured Achilles meant that he was in Athens as a spectator rather than a competitor but he was able to pass on some valuable tips about the course over a cup of coffee on the beach nearby. A lot of what he said about the hilly nature of the route did nothing to inspire confidence for what lay ahead! After the cold of the UK, the weather in Athens was something of a shock to the system with temperatures throughout our stay in the mid to high 20s – perfect beach weather, (if not running weather), in fact. Both the beaches and the sea next to the Exhibition Centre were full of bronzed Athenians for whom summer was simply continuing as before. It was hard leaving them to return to the city centre for a mandatory pilgrimage to the Old Olympic Stadium

. It was to be a very early wake-up call on Sunday morning with the first buses to the Start at Marathon leaving in front of the Parliament Building facing Syntagma Square at the ungodly hour of 5.30am. I'd found myself worrying for most of Saturday evening about the fact that I hadn't brought a hat with me for what was forecast to be another very hot day. Incredibly, I spotted exactly what I wanted while passing a kiosk on my way to the bus. Where else in the world can you buy a very cheap baseball cap suitable for running in at 5.40 in the morning of a major marathon! I'm convinced that, given the 27 degrees temperature on the course, I'd have struggled to finish the race without my newly acquired head-covering. Just like the rest of the organisation for the event the arrangement for the buses was spot-on, (just as it should be after 31 years of practice). There were no crowds or queues and we arrived in comfort in Marathon some 40 minutes later to be met by a veritable army of volunteers pointing us in the right direction. The pre-race facilities in the town were excellent: loads of toilets and portaloos, changing rooms, a café for hot drinks – even a warm-up track for those so inclined. The town was also home to the only museum that I've seen dedicated to the history of marathon running. Of course, I had to pay it a visit. Sadly, on the one day of the year that the town played host to thousands of marathon runners, the museum was closed! Shortly before 9am and to a background of colourful exploding fireworks, approximately 6,000 of us were released from our time-allotted starting pens according to the race's "Wave Start System" This meant that only the elite runners actually started at 9. The second block commenced one minute later, the third block started two minutes after the second wave, with all other blocks down to the Power Walkers commencing in increments of four minutes. Sounds complicated but it worked. We were given a very generous 8 hours in which to drag ourselves over the finish line 26.2 miles away in Athens.

It is a measure of the course's difficulty that this year's Kenyan winner's time of 2hr 13:50 was over 8 minutes slower than that recorded by the winner in Amsterdam. Because of this Athens rarely attracts the cream of the marathon elite. In fact, the course profile displayed in the official programme is not for the faint-hearted; seeming to climb endlessly but steadily for a large part of the race. We knew on setting off, that once the sun rose above the surrounding hills, we were in for a testing day out!

The first 4kms leading away from Marathon are imperceptibly downhill and lead to a further 2km circular route around the area of the Marathon Tomb, (War Memorial) The course remains reasonably flat to the 10km mark and then the climbing begins in earnest until the 17th km. There follows a short, steep descent and then it's the most difficult uphill part to 20km. Passing through the district of Pikermi the course undulates until 25km. By this stage the sun was high above us and directly in our faces and I, for one, was beginning to wonder if the uphill gradient was ever going to end. The sounds of the passing ambulance sirens, picking up those who'd already succumbed to the heat did nothing to improve spirits. I'd already decided that survival was the most sensible strategy and begun the race/walk procedure that had got me safely around at Brussels during illness. The passage through the city of Pallini with its cheering crowds and Zorba the Greek dancers was again uphill for a further 3kms to the 28th km mark. The last and most difficult part started at Gerakas, finishing at Stavros Junction between 30 and 31km. This steep ascent was thankfully followed by an equally steep descent leading to the Agia Paraskevi Square. After that I'd like to say it was easy but by then exhaustion had well and truly set in and nothing seemed easy at the time. It was a great feeling to say goodbye to the hills at long last and plough on through the crowds of spectators lining the streets as we approached the inner suburbs of Athens. Eventually we passed the American Embassy, the Athens Music Hall and the Park of Liberty with the final feeder zone at 40km. Shortly after that we were able to hear the cheering from inside the Stadium. The final kilometre was sheer bliss compared to what had gone before; a long downhill stretch past the Presidential Residency and the National Gardens before turning a sharp left at the bottom to enter the Stadium and the 100 metres or so to the finish line with Queen belting out "We will Rock you" at full volume. Within minutes of crossing the line I'd met up with the three ladies from our group – we'd all finished in a 9 minute time-span from 4hours 32 to 4 hours 41 with yours truly happily bringing up the rear. Ivan had sprinted home in 4hours 02.

Without doubt, entering the historic Panathenaic Stadium in the footsteps of all those great marathon runners from 1896 onwards had to be the highlight of the whole race, (and not just because I'd finished!) I'd also enjoyed soaking up the atmosphere at Marathon before the race – those eight magical letters that have come to play such a significant part in my life and which continue to mean so much to me still. I guess it was only the bit in between that wasn't so nice. However, I'm prepared to put that down to the heat. I'm sure the hills wouldn't have appeared half as demanding on a cooler day. Hats off to the organizers; they got just about everything right, particularly the regularity and availability of seemingly limitless amounts of water when needed. There were isotonic drinks and bananas too at frequent intervals, together with the occasional gel and energy bars; so no complaints there. The heavy duty finisher's medal with its depiction of the runners on one side and a Greek legend on the other was appropriate for an event of Athens' stature and one that I'll long cherish. Post race we were supplied with Powerade, water, orange squash and energy bar to take away with us plus there were massage areas and a sponsor's village to visit if we were so inclined. I had a couple of beers demanding my attention in the hotel fridge! I'll be back as soon as they get those hills flattened.

Jim Manford

November 13th 2013

A Gaggle of happy Marathon Tourists at Registration



VALENCIA MARATHON, SPAIN November 17th 2013

I'd previously run the older, smaller and more runner-friendly version of the event that had been going for 30 years in February 2008. This was promoted as the "new, improved" edition; more in keeping with Valencia's new self-image as a major international sporting city of repute. In recent years the city has attempted to boost its international sporting profile by playing host to a series of up-market sports events: the, now discontinued, Formula 1 Race, the America's Cup Yachting Challenge, a revamped Valencia Open tennis tournament plus major golf and motorcycle races. A new major international Marathon race seemed the obvious next step in the process.

The first move made by the organizers in 2011 after finding a high-profile sponsor in the insurance company Divina Pastora, had been to change its traditional date from February to November. Two reasons were given for this: firstly, they felt that a November date was more suited to the training cycle of the elite marathon runners they needed to attract to the event and, secondly, they argued that the November weather was more conducive to the fast times needed from the new, flatter course to put the event up there among the top marathons of the world. With a new Start and Finish, a new organisation, new course and new sponsor this was, to all intents and purposes, a brand new marathon.

Sadly, the major casualty of all this, particularly the date change, was to be the demise of the lovely, low-key marathon held annually in November a few miles down the coast in Benidorm. I'd run this on a number of occasions as had many of my friends. Benidorm in November, without the summer crowds, had been to many of us an end-of-season, wind-down marathon providing a great winter break from the UK weather with a welcome emphasis on the social side of things. It's now a half-marathon only. Either the organizers felt that they were unable to compete with their new big brother up the coast, or perhaps they were advised not to. Who knows! It has, though, been the subject of some debate in marathon running circles.

I had attempted to run this new Valencia two years ago, only to be thwarted on that occasion by the Spanish Government calling a snap General Election on the same date. This caused the event to be postponed to the following weekend when I'd already entered and made travel arrangements for the San Sebastian Marathon on Spain's north coast. Valencia is one of my favourite Spanish cities and only a short train ride north from my apartment near Alicante. This year I was determined to get there and kill two birds with one stone so-to-speak by combining it with a holiday in the sun. I'd barely touched base on returning from Athens before it was back to the airport and on to the flight to Spain. It's a hard life being a marathon tourist!

For this trip we'd rebooked into the 4 star Hotel Dimar where we'd also stayed on our previous visit, (no budget accommodation allowed when Mo's a fellow tourist!) Situated on virtually the corner of the Grand Via and the Turia, this was a handy 20 minute walk along the latter for both Registration and the Start/Finish area. A nice touch by the hotel was to give each of its marathon running guests a special edition orange, dry-fit T Shirt bearing the hotel's name. We arrived for Registration in the Museum of Sciences at the worst possible time of 2pm on the Saturday afternoon – certainly not the ideal time to front up for an event whose limit of 11,500 for the marathon plus a further approx. 8,000 for the 10km had already been reached. It seemed that most of these, plus their families, had already arrived for the Paella Party timed from 1.30 to 3.30pm. The interior of the Museum was a scene of crowds, chaos and confused queues. There'd only been about 2,000 of us in 2008, albeit at a different venue, and the contrast couldn't have been more different. After having been compelled to negotiate our way through the Marathon Exhibition; or to be more precise, stalls selling all manner of merchandise, we were then obliged to stand for what seemed forever, in a line of slow-moving runners seeking their race number and chip. No event T Shirt though – that would have been too simple. These were to be given out in the Hemisphere, an entirely separate building within the complex. Here the queues, if I can dignify the free-for-all taking place with that word were even worse than before.

Actually, I'm not even sure the word "queue" figures in the Spanish vocabulary. On fighting my way to the counter I asked politely in my best Spanish for a size "L" T Shirt only to be informed that all the T Shirts were Large. Wrong! They were all Extra Large. Every single one of us; whether a 6ft 5" male or a 4ft 10" female left with a size XL T Shirt. Having paid 70euros to enter I find that totally unacceptable that most of the runners left with a "camiseta" they were never going to be able to wear.

The goody bag containing the said shirt was equally disappointing for the huge entry fee. A packet of crisps and a pile of paper did not constitute reasonable value for money. I couldn't help contrasting this with the 2008 version of the event where, for the approx 20euros entry fee we were given the most

generous package of gifts I've ever received from any marathon I've entered. I was so impressed I kept a diary record of what was handed out: a T Shirt, 2 bags, running gloves, socks, a bottle of wine and 2 books. We were then transported by bus to a suburban restaurant for an excellent 3-course meal with unlimited second helpings and free alcoholic drinks. I remember Mo and I took a 6-pack of lager back to our hotel with us. This time the Paella Party ticket was for runners only; Mo had to queue separately for a 5euro ticket for her meal before we could both join our third long queue of the afternoon for food served in a cold and windy outside area. This time the meal came in a carrier bag, pre-packaged and precisely rationed: one container of lukewarm paella, one bread roll, one bottle of water. On the way to our seats we were allowed one plastic cup of beer. Progress or greed? You decide, (I have!)

The 9am start the next morning was equally as chaotic. Both the 10k and the Marathon started simultaneously but on separate sides of the carriageway across the Moleolive Bridge over the Turia that bisected the Arts and Sciences complex. Our approach from the hotel entailed us having to negotiate our way through the throng of 10k runners before being able to reach the Marathon starting pens. I knew where I had to start, I just couldn't reach it. It seems hundreds, if not thousands were in the same situation. I thanked my lucky stars that Mo was with me and that I could leave my outer clothing with her. I doubt if I'd have managed to reach the baggage storage area across the road. Eventually I managed to squeeze into a marathon pen – it was the wrong one, next to the 3hr 15 pacemakers. I couldn't get back out though and neither could the three 10k runners standing beside me who were now effectively in the wrong race as the two events never met up en route. Mo had some horror stories when we met up post-race about some of the ways in which marooned runners had improvised their way to the start line; punches and fists were mentioned!

Seriously though, is there any fun to be had in this mayhem? While the organizers blithely boast in their programme notes about the exponential annual increase in start numbers and its beneficial effect on the Valencian economy, do they ever stop to consider the conditions of the poor runners attempting to cope with the chaos they've created by trying to fit a quart into a pint pot. I'm not sure how long it took me to bump and grind my way to the start line but I do know that it was over 2km before I felt comfortable enough to break into a normal running pattern without feeling that I was about to be tripped at any moment.

After that it was virtually plain sailing, head down and tick off the kilometers. Don't they go much quicker than miles. The pre-race course profile showed it to be as flat as a pancake. The organizers had taken care to find course conducive to fast times and were dutifully rewarded when the winning Kenyan broke the Spanish All-Comers Marathon Record in 2hr 07:14. Valencia is now officially the fastest marathon course in Spain. On a cool but sunny morning the first 3km took us eastwards to the sea via the Port Authority Building next to the America's Cup Course before heading north up the coast parallel to the Los Arenas beach. From 5 to 11km we then zig-zagged on wide boulevards around the University Campus and on to a large loop past the City of Valencia Stadium, the Royal Gardens and the Mestalla Football Stadium, (home to Valencia FC) For part of this section I ran with 100 Club colleague Brian Mills, holder of the current UK record for most marathons completed: something like 940 to date and well on the way to 1,000! Kilometre 24 saw us back again outside the City of Arts and Sciences as we began a huge loop westwards through the centre of the city and the Cathedral, Town Hall and Torres de Quart, (what remains of the old city walls) and out eventually onto long stretches of suburban dual carriageway.

After the heat and hills of Athens last week, I surprised myself at being able to maintain a 6 minute per km pace throughout, stopping only to take on provisions at the 30 and 35km feed stations. By 38km we were back in the centre of town running past the Estacion del Norte and the splendid Plaza de Torres where the crowd support was inspiring. All that remained was to run down the Calle Colon to the Sea Gate and alongside the Turia before entering the Arts and Sciences complex for the final packed kilometre. The finish straight along the specially erected, blue-carpeted platform over the water outside the Sciences building is one of the most stunning and spectacular I've encountered. It provided a truly memorable climax to, what in the end turned out to be, an excellent race. Though some 5 minutes slower than 2008 I was still happy to have finished with lots to spare in a time of 4hr 19:15. Despite my misgivings about some aspects of the event, the organizers did not disappoint where it mattered most: during the race itself. We were amply provided for on the course as the temperatures rose to 20 degrees; with drink stations every 5km with both water and Powerade, gels at 20 and 30km and lots of bananas, apricots and pastries if needed. The finisher's medal was excellent and there was a more appropriate goody bag; no paper this time just useful items to eat and drink including a bag of the famous Valencian oranges. My only complaint was that the Amstel stall had run out of beer by the time

I arrived. I'm convinced that this was due the crush of spectators evading the on-site security and helping themselves to what should have been reserved for the runners.

I don't want to be too critical of the event; there were some aspects of it that I really enjoyed. In many ways it was the complete opposite of Athens last weekend where the before and after were excellent but the course itself hard and difficult. Here it was the other way around. I have to say though that I much preferred the runner-friendly, relaxed atmosphere of the pre-2011 version of Valencia's marathon. Sometimes the words "new" and "improved" aren't necessarily synonymous. I make no apologies for pointing out that, once money changes hands, especially sums of up to 70euros, organizers have a moral if not contractual obligation to ensure that they provide a service where the customer comes first. On too many occasions organizers give the impression that they're doing the runner a favour by allowing us to take part in their event when, in fact, the opposite is true; we're doing them a favour by paying hard-earned money to enter. This comes with the expectation that we deserve to get what we paid for; not what corners the organizers can cut to make themselves the biggest profit at the runner's expense. I do hope I'm wrong here but I came away from Valencia with the overriding impression of an event conceived by government officials, driven by economics, overseen by insurance men and accountants and promoted by clever marketing men. I have a vision of men in suits sitting around tables talking in terms of cost benefit ratios, percentage increases in entry fees, improved tourism revenue and per capita expenditure on those taking part. As I say; I do hope I'm mistaken.
Jim Manford November 25th 2013

Finished! With the City of Arts in the background



DUBLIN MARATHON 2013 by Wendy Nail

We had a good couple of days before the race seeing the sights, but the weather was awful so I have almost no pictures. It rained, the wind blew, and it was COLD! I was seriously worried about this race. There was a storm brewing that had the news channels all warning everyone to batten down the hatches, they were saying it would be the worst storm since 1987. I had not packed particularly warm running gear and thought perhaps I would have to drop out with hypothermia. I bought a pack of disposable rain ponchos and headed for the start line.

Despite the dire warnings, the morning dawned brisk, but beautiful with the promise of a great race. My husband stayed with me at the start until the last minute so I could keep a coat on as long as possible and then waved me off to join the throng of the third and final wave. I was a little sad that I had missed the group picture for the Marathon Maniacs, but I spotted Anders in his red shirt, standing up on an island, surrounded by a sea of people. Even though he had a bib for the first wave, he had waited to look for other Maniacs (have I mentioned what awesome people Marathon Maniacs are?) Anders had run Frankfurt the day before so he was ready to take it easy and hang with the slow pokes at the back. Dublin was his 112th marathon and also rounded out 12 marathons in 12 countries in 12 weeks. (At the writing of this blog, he just finished the New York Marathon so that all bumps to 13!)

A short time later, we heard a shout and found Danielle “T-Rex” Hastings catching us up. Wow, another legend in the Maniac community! This was shaping up to be an amazing day! Not for my running though, I seemed to be struggling from the get go. Thanks to two days of speed walking though rain and wind to get from one tourist attraction to the next, my legs were far from fresh and I was totally exhausted. Anders and Danielle, on the other hand, were fresh and daisies and chatted along like they were out for a walk in the park, LOL. It was so awesome to just be able to listen to them. They stuck with my through my Galloway style run/walk with 3 minutes of running to 1 minute of walking even though they could have gone much faster.

I also met Lichu Sloan. She has run over 150 marathons all over the world, including the amazing feat of 7 marathons on 7 continents in 7 weeks (I’m seeing a trend here, LOL)! I can’t

wait to see her again in Florida when we run the Jacksonville Marathon!

There were so many Maniacs on the course it was fantastic, I met another when I was looking for my start coral, and ran a bit with James Daly who was having a blast taking in the sights.

I really do love finding Maniacs at races, they are always so friendly and upbeat!

At about 18.5 miles I really started to struggle. Since the wicked bouts of bronchitis in Korea, my lungs have not been the same. I was hoping moving to the clean air of Yorkshire would help, but it looks like the problem will be with me longer term. I have had great results with taking Singular, but of course, in the race morning excitement I forgot to take it. I do carry a dose of Sudafed to deal with allergies en route so I took that, along with a good dose of salt and pushed forward. It made a huge difference and by mile 20 I was ready to get it done!

Anders and I caught up to the 5:00 pace group and then started moving ahead, still maintaining that 3/1 run walk. When I stopped to take my salt and Sudafed we fell behind the 5 hour pace group so Danielle decided to go on ahead. Her boyfriend was expecting her to finish in 5 hours and she did not want to miss him. It was so awesome of her to stick with me for so long! She is such an amazing young woman, very accomplished in her work life, not to mention running 43 marathons in her young 27 years! Danielle's is a great writer and blogs here, (finding her boyfriend did not end up going so well):

Crossing the finish line I gave Anders a huge hug for all his help and motivation and we ambled through the gauntlet collecting our medal, shirt, and goody bag. I had not spotted my family yet, but the crowds were thick and it was getting colder by the minute so I went straight for my check bag where I had smartly stowed sweats that I could throw on over everything. Eventually, my husband and daughter found me and we headed back to the hotel for a hot shower and a cold Guinness, YUM! Guinness is totally different in Ireland; it is fresh and has no preservatives so it is smooth as silk with a light sweetness and no bitterness.

Even though the running did not go as well as I hoped, the weather was better and the company was extraordinary! I had such a good time making new friends and seeing Dublin in the way that only marathoners do.

Sláinte!

PISA MARATHON, ITALY December 15th 2013

A group of over 20 of us from the 100 Marathon Club flew to Pisa to help colleague Danny Kay celebrate his 500th marathon on the occasion of his 72nd birthday. The ever-popular Danny has, for many years, been something of a legend in marathon running circles, having overcome a serious road accident that at one stage confined him to a wheelchair, to return and continue running sub 4 hour marathons at an advanced age. Last year, for example, he won the Over-70 category in both the Sydney and Melbourne marathons in the remarkable time of 3 hours 47 minutes.

Flying into Pisa airport made the registration process easy for foreign runners as the combined Registration and Expo were held this year in the airport terminal. Having collected our numbers, chips and T Shirts, (a nice orange/white affair), it was then an easy 20 minute walk, (yes, walk!) directly into our hotel in the centre of town.

We were extremely fortunate with the weather as all 3 days of our stay resulted in gorgeous cloudless skies and crisp winter sunshine. In those conditions marathon tourism, as well as marathon running, is an absolute pleasure.

Both the Start and Finish of the race took place in one of the most beautiful settings imaginable in front of the famous Leaning Tower. It would be wrong to think, though, that this was all that Pisa has to offer; the Tower is only one of an ensemble of four iconic, architectural gems: the Duomo, Baptistry and Camposanto are the other three. These together, in an area known as the "Field of Miracles" are said to constitute the world's best-preserved examples of medieval architecture. In fact, the whole of Pisa seemed to be set in some sort of architectural time-warp with little in the way of high-rise office buildings or tower blocks to suggest that it had joined the 21st century.

This was a delightful mid-size marathon with none of Valencia's organisational mayhem or Athens' heat and hills, attracting a mere 2,600 entrants in its 3 main events: approx. 1,000 in the marathon, a greater number in the half and perhaps a couple of hundred in a strange 14k race. The organisers claimed to have attracted over 400 overseas runners, mainly from Russia, the UK and the Czech Republic. All three events set off together at 9am to run along both sides of the river and out towards the suburbs. Buildings were left behind entirely after about 5 miles when the course took us through some rich Tuscany farmland heading towards the coast. At 8 miles the half marathon runners turned back towards the city giving us another 5 miles of quiet, flat roads until the turn at Tirrenia. It was here, just before the half way mark that Danny breezed past me, running like the proverbial train; destined for yet another sub 4.

Then came the best bit of the course parallel to the Tyrrhenian Sea for a further 3 miles to Marina di Pisa, the city's ancient port during its golden age as the most important maritime power on the whole Mediterranean Coast. All we needed to do from here was to run into the stiffening breeze, following the river back to the city centre and the spectacular finish in front of the Tower.

I enjoyed the run immensely, even managing to keep pace with the sub 4 hour pacemakers until 18 miles when fatigue set in. At 21 miles I caught up with Paul Richards who'd overdone things in his quest for a 3hr 30 PB and, from thereon in, simply kept Paul company to finish together in 4 hours 13. The medal we received at the end, described by the organisers as "a world first for a marathon, a technology implementation that involves printing on coloured brass medal in relief". Whatever that means it was certainly unique and generally accepted as one of the nicest we'd received. Post-race showers were available at the Sports Field nearby.

All that remained were the celebrations. I'd like to think that they did Danny justice! I'd definitely recommend this event to anyone looking to avoid the British winter and post a decent time on a flat, scenic course.

Jim Manford
December 17th 2013

With Danny, Martin, Warren and Paul at the Tower



Next to the Cathedral and Tower



