

STAVANGER MARATHON, NORWAY August 30th 2014

As our son Ross had flown all the way over from Australia for a friend's wedding in Sweden, we decided to stay in the area after Helsinki and spend some time with him before following him back to Oz. Though the wedding delayed our departure it, nonetheless, afforded the opportunity of taking in the Stavanger event before flying out. I had a particular, personal reason for including this one as part of my marathon tourism itinerary. Stavanger was a city I'd visited twice previously by boat without ever setting foot in the place. On both occasions it had looked an interesting and appealing city – time to find out if that was true. NEMC colleagues Ian Richardson and Stevie Matthews had similar ideas.

Pre-race registration was held the day before the event in an assortment of tents erected at the rear of the Cathedral where the race was to finish the next day. I'm told that registration was a simple affair with no exhibition or displays of Merchandise. Those of us who'd arrived later in the day were required to collect our numbers on the morning of the race at the Stavanger Stadium start, some 2 kilometres out of town. This proved a very basic affair with numbers and chips being handed out in the open air. We were also given a pair of socks plastered all over with the sponsor's logo, plus T-shirts to those who'd pre-paid for them. I hadn't. I needed yet another T-shirt like I needed a hole in the head. The stadium, built in 1917 and originally the home of Viking FC, was closed in 2004 and re-opened shortly afterwards to host track and field events following Viking's re-location to a new home ground. Over the years the venue has hosted the Norwegian Athletics Championships on several occasions as well as a number of international football matches at Under 21 level.

Without undue formality the 13th edition of the marathon got underway at 8.30am on a bright sunny morning with what looked to be about 140 of us running two laps of the athletics track. I'm told that the race had a limit of 200 entrants and I knew that there were at least 168 pre-entered so there were obviously a few no-shows. Some of these may have taken advantage of the organizer's offer of making a last-minute change to the much bigger half marathon starting in the city centre two hours later. There was also 10k and 5.5k races on offer later in the day.

After leaving the stadium we ran 2 more laps on the streets around its perimeter before, at 5km, heading to the trails around the first of the lakes on the course. Guess how many laps we ran around the lake? That's right, after 2 more laps we left the lake at 11km for what appeared to be a cycle path alongside a busy road. After a few twists and turns we eventually arrived at about 15km to another trail around a much bigger lake. Fortunately there was to be only a single lap of this one, particularly as the path had some nasty little up and down sections in its latter stages.

Just after the half-way mark we finally got to the bit I was most looking forward to when the route emerged at the fjord on Stavanger's west coast. Though it was great to be out in the open and facing the sea breezes, this section petered out after about 3 kilometres and we found ourselves once more running alongside a busy road. Turning into what seemed like a business park after 25km, things suddenly went terribly wrong. Full concentration was required at this stage to follow the white, painted arrows on the ground marking the course. My running partner and I, busily chatting about his hometown Chicago Marathon, missed one of these arrows and ended up in a fenced-off, dead-end from which we had to retrace our steps to get back onto the correct route. I reckon it cost us an extra 10 minutes or so and it was galling to see a bunch of four runners, who had been well behind us throughout, disappearing in front of us over a bridge that we were frantically trying to reach. Still, it was nobody's fault but our own.

The next 5 kilometres weren't particularly appealing as we made our way through a congested area across the neck of land towards the fjord on the city's east coast. By this stage the heavens had opened and the forecasted heavy rain and strong wind blowing into our faces made for difficult running conditions. Before reaching the coast the route zig-zagged past the new Viking Stadium, through both parkland and wasteland, with paths heading off in several directions. This section offered the potential to go astray yet again until a narrow path squeezed between the railway line and the sea made for an easy 3 kilometre run-in towards the city centre. From 40km the final stretch took us through the streets to the finish in Cathedral Square where we were presented with a rather nice medal and goody bag.

My Garmin showed that I'd run almost 44 kilometres. Even allowing for getting lost on route, my time of 4hr 46 was still a big improvement on what I'd run in Helsinki two weeks earlier. It's not good enough though for the standards I set myself and has me seriously considering whether to continue with this marathon lark heading into my 70th year. Still, by virtue of being the only entrant in my age category, I at least came away with an age-group prize – yet another T-shirt! You couldn't make it up. Ian finished in 3hr 56 and Stevie, who also managed to get lost, in 4hr 58.

For anyone considering running in Norway, this is a pleasant low-cost, low-key event in a gem of a small city. It was certainly vastly different, (make that preferable), in atmosphere to some of the larger, big city marathons I've run recently. I chatted to some of the organizers at the finish and they seemed genuinely delighted that I'd bothered to make the journey from the UK, especially as they're keen to broaden the event's appeal to overseas entrants. Apart from Ian, Stevie, me and the occasional Swede, most of the other international entrants appeared to have some connection with Stavanger via their positions in the oil industry.

Jim Manford

September 2014



At a very wet Finish line in Stavanger city centre

