

RACE REPORTS 2011: OVERSEAS MARATHONS

BRATISLAVA MARATHON 27/3/2011

Ryanair's fares from Edinburgh make this a relatively cheap weekend away in a city that's well worth visiting, but one which you wouldn't normally associate with marathon running. Prices there are also still remarkably inexpensive with good strong beer at 1 euro a litre and local food dishes of equally good value. The goulash and spicy cabbage soup were particularly well received. In addition, Committee member Richard Jones and I paid a paltry £42 each for 3 night's accommodation in the quirky Hotel Kyjev, (an ex-police Trabant on display in the lobby,) where they even served the aforementioned dishes as part of their huge buffet breakfasts!

The marathon itself turned out to be the usual urban affair – 2 laps of part of the city before heading out into the suburbs, crossing and re-crossing the River Danube on both laps. The flat, straight course makes it ideal for anyone seeking a fast time. Richard had pulled up with an injury at Kielder the week before so we ran together with a strategy that, even if the injury re-occurred, we would still be able to finish within the 5 hour time limit. Such was the nature of the course we were able to churn out even paced miles for almost the entire race. If we hadn't deliberately been so conservative I'm sure we could have broken the 4 hour barrier on the day. As it was, we reached what was marked as the Finish line at 26.2 miles in 4 hour 7 only to be told we had to carry on up a ramp for a few hundred metres so that we could finish in front of the Hotel belonging to the official sponsor.

Our one regret was that it was too early in the season for us to take a river cruise on one of the boats that sail the Danube between Bratislava and Vienna. The plan for next year is to use the same hotel as a base and sail to the Vienna Marathon in mid April, when hopefully the boats will be back in action.

Jim Manford
March 2011

JERSEY MARATHON October 2nd 2011

This has got to be one of the best marathons I've taken part in. By whatever criteria you wish to choose to judge marathons by Jersey comes out at, or near, the top:-

- Location: Jersey is a beautiful island and a great place to visit.
- Venue: The Start/Finish area in the centre of St. Helier with its own tented marathon village proved to be an ideal spot for both runners and spectators.
- Organisation: Faultless. Very well organised with loads of marshals and 11 drink stations. They'd even managed to email me the results before I got home.
- Course: A varied and interesting course of tree-lined country roads and cyclepaths passing through small villages, woodland and along the magnificent St Aubin's Bay. It managed to show us most of the West of the island through the parishes of St Helier, St Lawrence, St Mary, St Ouen, St Peter, St Brelade & St Aubin.
- Support: The islanders seem to take pride in having a marathon on their doorstep and came out in droves to provide genuine encouragement.
- Cost: Excellent value for £28 with an individually struck medal and technical t-shirt. I've no argument with paying for a marathon where all money raised stays in the island to provide help for cancer patients and their families. Contrast this with where some of our entry fees go!
- Atmosphere: The whole ambience was spot on, with crowds lining the streets and cheering from their pubs and balconies next to Liberation Square, making it a finish to remember.

Having paid the event these compliments, don't be fooled into thinking that this is an easy marathon. It's by no means flat, climbing steadily, and occasionally steeply, for the first 6 miles out of St Helier towards the northern coastline. It then undulates gently westwards on narrow tree-lined roads which on the day provided sufficient shade to counteract the rapidly rising temperatures. It reached 28 degrees at one stage and, although I normally don't run well in heat, the shade combined with the copious amounts of isotonic drink on offer, kept my mind off the temperatures and I managed to run strongly throughout, finishing with a bit to spare for a change! After passing the airport on a well-surfaced track the route continued off-road on cycletracks through wooded areas for several more miles with glimpses of the west coast on offer. The best bit of the lot was the enclosed downhill stretch through woods between 20 and 22 miles where the cooling effect of the shade seemed to set us up nicely for the long,

open, final 4 miles around the beautiful St Aubin's Bay. It was tempting here to simply slip onto the beach and join the crowds for a dip in the sea. The thought that I was getting nearer, each footstep, to a well-deserved pint kept me focused to the finish!

I'd gone here, (flying from Manchester to take advantage of the low fares,) to meet up with another 15 or so members of the 100 Club and support a friend, Paul Richards, in reaching his 100th marathon. Paul's done this event several times so it was no mere co-incidence that he picked such an ideal venue for his celebrations, (the perfect weather was simply an added bonus!) Most of the weekend seemed to be spent sitting in the beautiful sunshine outside the Ha'penny Bridge pub adjacent to the Finish area, (perhaps that was one of the reasons why the atmosphere seemed so good.) The Jersey Brewery will certainly have to stock up on the supplies of their lovely Mary Ann ale after our Presentation do!

This is definitely one of those marathons you come away from making plans to return. When do the flights come out for next year, I wonder? It's just nice to go somewhere British where the people are so friendly, there's no graffiti, no litter, where the phone boxes are clean, the telephones work and even the phone directories remain intact.

Next up is the marathon that boasts itself to be the most beautiful course in the UK. These things are always subjective of course and, while I love running around Kielder Water, I'm not sure if it's really any more scenic than the Jersey course. We'll see. I'll also be interested to see how it compares using the above criteria, particularly the Cost/Benefit option.

Jim Manford October 4th 2011

MADRID MARATHON 17th April 2011

Though I'd run 14 previous marathons in Spain this was the first time I'd had the opportunity to run the "big one" in Madrid. Have to say it's now one of my favourites being extremely well-organised on an interesting, non-repeating route through a beautiful city. The fact that it's usually run in hot conditions was compensated for by taking long sections of the course through shaded streets and the 2 large parks on both the western, (Casa de Campo,) and eastern, (Retiro,) perimeters of the city.

I arrived in Madrid by bus from the coast on the Saturday afternoon making straight for Registration at the Casa de Campo. Unfortunately I was too late for the Pasta Party there but the park itself was well worth the trip. The Metro back into our city centre hotel puts our own system to shame at only 1 euro no matter how long the journey. That evening the city was abuzz with the first of the epic Real Madrid v Barcelona matches taking place at the nearby Bernebeu Stadium. As kick off approached the streets began to empty as people headed into already overcrowded bars to watch the game on TV. Like them, I settled into a nearby Irish pub for a few pre-race Guinnesses. The Start next morning with all the noise, music, fireworks etc so typical of Spanish events was only a short walk away but, with a Metro station nearby, would have been easy to get to from any part of the city.

The race itself was held simultaneously with a huge 10k event which meant almost 20,000 of us setting off at the same time on either side of the wide Paseo de Castellana. Following a 12k loop around the northern suburbs we returned to the city centre, passing some of its most historic buildings before entering the first of the large parks. Feeling the effects from the previous weekend, plodding for hours on the Pennine hills during the Calderdale ultra, my legs felt unnaturally heavy for the first few kilometres. Once this wore off, however, I was able to maintain a steady 9 min mile pace until the last 3 k's when the route climbed steeply from the river to the finish in the giant Retiro Park where we were welcomed by thousands of cheering spectators. It was nice afterwards to be able to sit next to the fountains and sunbathe for a few hours before catching the bus back to our apartment on the coast.

I'd thoroughly recommend this marathon to anyone considering where to run a marathon abroad. The atmosphere, the organisation, the city, the course all combine to make Madrid a unique experience – with a quality medal and T Shirt thrown in for good measure.

Jim Manford

April 2011

Nearly There!



MALTA MARATHON 27TH February 2011

Although I'd ran this the previous year it took little persuading by Club Chairman George Routledge, anxious to test his new slim-line physique over the marathon distance, for me to make the return trip. We arrived in Malta with Phil Owen & Anna Seeley to thunderstorms on the night before the race. Race day itself started cold and windy with a 6am bus up to the ancient capital of M'dina – the marathon start. From there we followed a circuitous route through Rabat, Mosta, Ta'Quali and other unpronounceable names before finally hitting the main by-pass which took us, what seemed like downhill, to the finish at Sliema harbour.

Fortunately we had none of the problems of last year where the lead car took the wrong turning, forcing the two front runners to abandon the race. What we did have, however, was something akin to an obstacle course where a particular section of the route had been flooded by the previous day's rain. This led to the unsightly spectacle of runners climbing on to and inching their way along a high wall to avoid wading through a very deep puddle. We had to do this bit twice and on the second occasion I suffered the indignity of a very rude German runner pushing past me while on top of the wall. What fun, and how typical!

By midday the sun had come out bringing with it crowds of spectators on the last few kilometres along the harbour shoreline. It was great to finish with a beer in such a beautiful setting. In the evening there was the added bonus of catching up with friends from the 100 Club to help Naomi Prasad celebrate her 100th marathon and the two Daves, (King & Ross) celebrate their 200th. The communal free bar went down a treat.

For anyone wanting to do this event, Easyjet flies from Newcastle in February – though their fares were more than double this year! The big attraction though is the ridiculously cheap price of accommodation in Malta. George and I paid the grand total of 29 euros each for 3 nights in a one bedroom apartment near the Bayview complex within walking distance of registration, the finish and the beautiful harbour.

Jim Manford

Feb 2011

George & I sightseeing after the Malta Marathon



PALMA, MAJORCA MARATHON October 16th 2011

Another Sunday, another marathon, another of my friends finally reaching the magic 100th. This time it was Dave Goodwin from Sandwell Valley Harriers and Dave had picked the holiday isle of Majorca for his celebrations. Four of us from the NEMC;- Richard, George, Michele & myself, plus Michele's friend Janette set out bleary-eyed on the early morning Saturday flight from Newcastle. Registration in the park next to Palma's Cathedral was easily achieved en route to our hotel at Magaluf, where the party atmosphere was already getting under way.

The 9am start next day meant another early morning trip on the 7am bus into Palma. The forecast was for a hot day with temperatures in the high 20's and it was already warm before the race got under way. Unfortunately, it was one of those events where the organisers try to pack as many people onto the course as possible, so we lined up alongside thousands of 10k runners and ½ marathoners all trying to plant their feet on the same piece of ground. Congested and chaotic is the best way to describe conditions, (I almost got knocked over by a guy weaving around with a child in a buggy at one stage!) Things stayed like this on the out-and-back 6 miles around the marina until the 10k crowd disappeared. Then it was just us and the ½ marathoners jostling for space through the narrow, winding streets of the old town. At least the buildings provided welcome shade at this point.

After 12 miles the ½ marathoners headed back to the finish and we were left on our own at last. What a contrast! The next 7 miles proved a soulless, uninspiring slog through industrial areas either side of the airport. This was all directly into the strong sun which by now, according to one of the digital temperature indicators, had already reached 29 degrees. At 19 miles we were finally directed back on to the seafront at Arenal where we continued on a traffic free promenade and cycle path, cheered on by crowds of noisy German tourists, all the way back to the finish in front of the Cathedral.

What a disappointment that was! Richard and I had run together all the way, (he was saving himself for Venice next week,) with the idea of arriving in 4¼ hours for our share of some of the free German beer promised by the organisers. Passing the finish gantry at 26.2 miles on our Garmins , we were then forced to plod on for what seemed an eternity, until a completely artificial and seemingly unnecessary turning point finally got us back to where we'd just been some ½ a mile earlier. To add insult to injury the shorter distance runners had finished off all the free beer when we got there!

Distance and shortage of alcohol aside, the other disappointment about the event was its lack of value for money. For 70+ euros all we got was a finisher's medal. You had to buy the race t-shirt if you wanted one and there were no age group category prizes whatsoever. Not good enough! Still it was good that a crowd of us all finished around the same time as Dave for his 100th marathon and were there to help him celebrate at the end.

Jim Manford 18th October 2011

Finishing in our NEMC Tee-shirts



PORTO MARATHON, PORTUGAL 06/11/2011

Richard Jones and I went to this one via Stansted. Not a good place to travel to on a Friday when the motorways of England seem increasingly incapable of coping with the volume of weekend traffic. Arriving in Porto late on a rainy evening, the place appeared to be both closed and deserted – a bad start to the weekend. From there things picked up considerably. Saturday started sunny & bright making sightseeing easy and presenting what turned out to be a beautiful city in an altogether more

favourable light with its narrow, medieval streets leading down to the River Douro, its numerous public squares, magnificent churches and impressive public architecture.

Registration in the old Customs House by the river was easy to find and the pre-race goodies among the most generous ever: t-shirt, quality rucksack, cap and, best of all, a specially commissioned, commemorative "Porto Marathon" 750ml bottle of port. Sadly, because it wasn't possible to bring this back to the UK it had to either be consumed or given away, (no prizes for guessing which option was taken by most of us.) Later that afternoon we returned to the Custom's House for unlimited spaghetti bolognese, jellies and as much as you wanted of the local Super Bok lager.

Race day was beautiful; clear blue skies with steadily rising temperatures as approx 2,500 of us, plus at least twice as many again in the 14km run, headed off on a long, straight, decline towards the coast. We lost the shorter distance runners after 10km and after that the course was largely flat, fast and scenic as it headed out and back along both sides of the river past the port distilleries and over the iconic suspension bridge that's used as the race's logo. For a well prepared runner there is a definite potential here for a personal best time.

The finish too provided yet more goodies for the luggage home – a specially minted medal, another canvas bag, another t-shirt, sports drink and yet another help-yourself Super Bok bar. There were also free buses laid on to take us back to Town. All excellent value for money.

There were negatives, but this was such a great marathon event it seems churlish to dwell on them. For example the queues at Registration were unnecessary and could easily have been avoided with a little more thought. There was also confusion over the buses at the Finish that a couple of simple, well-placed signs would have prevented. Also 3/4 miles of the route through the old town went over cobbles causing many runners to chance their luck with the pedestrians on nearby footpaths. None of this would stop me from doing the race again, however. Unfortunately, next year it has moved itself forward a week to clash with the Town Moor. Drat! But I'll definitely be back.

Jim Manford 8th November 2011



Struggling at the 17 mile mark after Luis 1st Bridge, Porto

SAN SEBASTIAN MARATHON SPAIN 27TH November 2011

The original idea was to take a 3 week winter break in sunny Spain, see a bit of the country and run the Valencia, San Sebastian and Malaga Marathons on consecutive weekends. Having made all the necessary arrangements, things as they do, started to go pear-shaped. First Valencia was forced to change its date when the Government called a General Election for the 20th November. Next, Malaga hit financial difficulties and the event was initially cancelled, only to be reinstated some weeks later – by which time I'd already changed flights to come home from Bilbao – about as far away from Malaga as you can get in Spain. That left only San Sebastian and an interesting 12 hour coach journey there through the heart of the country from my place near Alicante.

Everything I'd heard about San Sebastian as a place to visit had been positive and it certainly didn't disappoint. It boasts one of the most beautiful Bays in Europe, a surfing mecca, right in the heart of the city where you can sunbathe and swim next to major historical buildings and churches. It must be one of the few places in the world where man has enhanced and complemented the natural beauty of the

location instead of destroying it. I was looking forward in anticipation to the marathon route taking in huge sweeps of the Bay as promised in the pre race literature.

Registration on the Saturday was an easy affair in the modern Anoeta Stadium, home to La Liga football club Real Sociedad. There was surprisingly no Pasta Party but we did get a quality bottle of wine, (and some gloves,) in our pre race goody bag. This was the 34th running of the race which always reaches its 3000 limit very quickly. The time limit is set at 5 hours so there were very few fun runners on the start line. (Or English accents come to that) According to the literature, over 60% of the field finish in sub 3hour 30. If only!

Race day gave us almost perfect marathon weather as we lined outside the stadium on the Avenida de Madrid ahead of another few thousand entrants in a 10k event that, fortunately, started 15 minutes after us. There were crisp, clear blue skies and no wind with temperatures from 5 to 14 degrees during the race and the views in places were exhilarating. We ran 3 laps around the city and the iconic Bay with one small lap of approx. 4 miles and 2 larger laps of 11 miles each. A nice touch was the way they took us through the stadium on its athletics track, (in one door and out the other), each lap so spectators could sit and watch in comfort. The finish was in front of the main grandstand and the course itself as flat as a pancake apart from one gradual incline away from the coast. Crowd support was energetic throughout and the organisation faultless with regular, unlimited isotonic drinks en route. One small disappointment was the cotton t-shirt at the finish – the Spanish are usually so generous in giving out quality running gear at their races.

This was the 10th Spanish city in which I've run a marathon and certainly the most picturesque. Mind you, it's also the most expensive to visit – more expensive even than Madrid. San Sebastian oozes class and quality and that comes with attendant costs. You virtually have to think about taking out a bank loan to eat in most restaurants. However, the "Dia" supermarket offers a lifeline to the impecunious with tasty, hot baguettes for 39 cents, litres of a decent red wine for less than a euro and some lovely 8% malt beer at 33 cents a can. Not ideal carbohydrate loading I know, but it got me round. Would I do it again? You bet! I'm already saving up.

Jim Manford November 2011



Some old guy finishing in the Anoeta Stadium, San Sebastian

Swiss Alpine - C42 report

This was my 14th consecutive visit to this set of events, so as you will gather, it is a favourite of mine.

It takes place on the last Saturday of July in the town of Davos, probably best known as the home of the annual World Economic Forum.

This year was the 26th Swissalpine and it has changed and developed a lot over the years, both in the number of events and also regular course changes as they seek to make it better on a year by year basis.

This year the events were (the number tells you how long they are in kilometres), K10, K21, K30, C42, K42 and the big one, the K78.

In my terminology, the C42 is a trail run and the K42 is more of a fell run. As I like to run marathons, rather than trudge up steep hills and as I have an unerring ability to put my foot on any loose bit of rock or tree root, the C42 is the one for me.

This year the K30, C42 and K78 all started together in the stadium in Davos at 7am. After mixed weather during the week, on the day it was near perfect for the shorter two of these events, although it did get very wet after about 1pm, which made the K78 and the other events a bit less pleasurable, apparently.

It was the usual start for the 2,000 or so of us, with stirring music and helicopters with cameras. These helicopters did dual service later on in the day by ferrying runners in the K42 and K78 back to Davos after falls, hypothermia and marmot attacks (one of these three is not true). For those of us running at the lower level, it couldn't have been better.

Well, it could have been better had I not been suffering from what is often euphemistically termed gastric distress. However local knowledge being what it is, I could remember a public toilet in town which came to my rescue after I ran through the spectators to get to it. It may have been a 7am start, but people turn out in big numbers on the streets to watch and cheer you on.

After the first few miles in Davos, it was out into the countryside, hitting the first hill at about 5 miles, down the other side and up a much bigger hill into the hamlet of Spina. I'm not sure they see many people there, as they go bonkers when the Swissalpine is on. They hang a banner over the road, "Spina Gruesst Euch" I think it says, and they ring the most enormous cow bells. After that it was onto the trails to Monstein, home of Europe's highest brewery. Nice stuff too, although fiercely expensive, like most things in Switzerland.

From there, it was a long long descent to the station and then another gravelled road in a gorge, to Wiesen station. It is a lovely bit to run, and gears you up for the mighty hill after Wiesen station. Before this there is the crossing of the Wiesen viaduct, where a metal bridge has been bolted onto the side of the railway viaduct itself. Not being a big fan of heights and exposure, I focus entirely on the back of the runner in front, keeping a bit of distance as there is a photographer at the end of the bridge. See picture below.

Right then, off up the big hill on a twisty, windy tree root strewn path. I only managed to fall once on this, and that was on a flat bit, so only my pride was dented.

At the top it is another long descent to Filisur village. This is after 31k and where the K30 finishes and the C42 and K78 split into their separate routes.

As this was my first marathon since the C42 last year, owing to injury, I had decided to run rather than race, but I was still two minutes faster to this point, so I thought I would push on a bit for the last 11 or so kilometres. These are largely flat, except for about 2k of more twisty windy tree strewn bits near the end, and no one overtook me during it and I passed a dozen or so.

The race ends on a school playing field, where the entirety of the crowd consists of runners already finished, officials, a few supporters and the bloke that barbecues the sausages to go with the organic lager that he also sells. Whilst quiet, it is a lovely setting with mountains on either side. There is first aid, massage, showers and food and rink at the end.

The nice lady on the PA gives you a good shout on the way in. Mine was along the lines of "Number 4176, Ian Richardson from Great Britain, and he is smiling ! Hi Ian, and welcome to Tiefencastel", which was a nice touch.

This is a wonderful event, with distances to suit all runners. It may not be cheap, but it is one that you will remember for a long time.

I'll be back again next year.

Ian Richardson

August 2011

