

Under the rainbow

Marathon de l'Île Maurice, Mauritius. 20 June 2004

Grey clouds banked up over the Mauritian capital, Port Louis. A steady rain broke over the crowds patiently assembling at the Caudan waterfront for the start of the marathon, half marathon and 10km races.

The range of hills closely surrounding the city could barely be made out, but the sharply upturned peak of Le Pouce (The Thumb) peeped through, giving a vague thumbs-up to the proceedings. Then the sun broke through. It projected a rainbow against the dark cloud, almost reproducing the design of the national flag of this rainbow nation.

Located on the African side of the Indian Ocean, Mauritius is home to over a million people. The language, Créole, derives from the African population and French colonial settlers. They both predated the influx of indentured labourers from India which took place after the abolition of slavery in 1835, and which now forms the major ethnic strand in the country. Great Britain took over as the colonial power for the last 150 years before independence was attained in 1968 but, even after such an interlude, French heritage remains more evident today. During slavery, and through to the end of the colonial era, the economy was based on sugar. It is still a mainstay, but since independence textiles and



tourism have become increasingly important. Which is where the marathon comes in.

The marathon has the full support of the Mauritius Tourism Board, and in this year's very first edition 19 countries were represented among the runners. Most foreign runners came from the traditional Mauritian markets of South Africa and France. They mixed easily among the large local crowd at the Caudan, awaiting the signal that would send all three races on their way. Much later in the morning a 5km fun run and a 2km children's run were set off from this same place, a marina and hotel and entertainment complex at one corner of the port.

The 10km race was run up the

main road north from the capital along the normally busy highway to the tourist resort of Grand Baie. The stage for race day had been cleared of traffic, testimony enough to the importance of this event. The 10km runners, mainly locals, turned back towards town after 5km using the opposite side of the highway. The marathon and half marathon runners also turned, but sideways, onto smaller roads.

Somehow, the pre-race favourite in the Marathon, Paul Rugut, took the turnaround back to town before realising his mistake. He turned again and was left chasing local 10km runner Menon Ramsamy, making his marathon debut, with a deficit of several minutes to make up. The marathon and half marathon, the events favoured by the foreign runners, were now off the racetrack highway and winding their way onto those smaller roads. Instead of the plain grass verges of the highway, local life spilled out on both sides of the road. Fresh fruit was handed out for free at the refreshment stops, but in between times roadside vendors offered their wares.

As the course became increasingly rural, the road passed through a secluded lake on a causeway, which gave runners the idea that they are walking, or running, on water. This early on in the race, they may have felt as if they were. Menon Ramsamy seemed to, as he now contested the overall lead with the eventual winner of the half marathon, Judex Durhone.

After 11km, at a place evocatively named 'Solitude', the course turned onto back roads. The next few kilometres were through canefields, towards the coast at Pointe aux Piments, "Pepper Point". Rugut pressed on, in his own kind of solitude among the sugar cane, and gradually closed the gap. Turning along the coast, with black volcanic rocks and palm trees screening the road to seaward, he had made up the deficit. The half marathon course finished a few kilometres further up the coast, among the resort hotels of Trou aux Biches. Ramsamy pressed on past here, but after 24km he slowed dramatically, and dropped out at 28km.

Behind, a similar change of lead took place in the women's race. Rwanda's Epiphane Nyirabarame had galloped ahead in the early stages, while the experienced Gitte Karlshoj held back. The Rwandan did not yield her lead easily, but her effort gradually faded after 25km. She later complained of the strong winds.

The course skirts the broad sweep of the bay at Mon Choisy, with Casuarina trees veiling sun and sea alike. The next bay is Grand Baie, and the main resort town of Mauritius stretches along the next 4km of the road. The 28km point is within a few hundred metres of the finish line, but to get there the course first loops away inland. This is the toughest part, with a straight but switchback road cutting through the canefields without a hint of shade on offer. The scudding clouds brought some relief, and at one point they pelted rain down upon the runners.

The road drops back down to the coast at Cap Malheureux (Cape Misfortune). There is a short out-and-back section to be run, to a turnaround point at 35km, and this is perhaps the most picturesque part of the course. Runners weave their way past the Notre Dame Auxilia Trice Church, with only a clipped green sward between it and the shallow white sand beach. Beyond lies the coral reef, and the deep blue Indian Ocean.

After runners turn around at Anse La Raie they head back along the coast





towards Grand Baie. They pass another church on the seaward side, with a graveyard attached, giving on to the sea. Cap Malheureux may be named after the numerous shipwrecks that occurred here, their victims buried alongside. But the melancholy name may also, from a French colonial viewpoint, testify to the successful British landing there on 2 December 1810, which led to the conquest of the entire island.

The first attempted English invasion had previously been repulsed, and this was the only naval victory which subsequently became inscribed on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.

Now into the last 5km of the course, runners may be concentrating exclusively on the tarmac a few metres in front of them. They could be excused from glancing right, seaward, for the magnificent view across to the

island of Coin de Mire. The name is taken from its profile, which resembles the wedge used to adjust a canon's trajectory of fire. Beyond this, the 38km point, there lies only the picturesque tourist village of Peréybère, the 40km point exactly at its centre, where the final refreshment can be grabbed off the carefully tended tables.

Then it was head down to the finish – even for Paul Rugut, who

MEN:

| | | | |
|----|-------------------|-----|---------|
| 1 | Paul RUGUT | KEN | 2:22:24 |
| 2 | Jorge AUBESO | ESP | 2:42:28 |
| 3 | Neizam HEMMASH | MRI | 2:53:17 |
| 4 | Serge HOAREAU | FRA | 2:53:45 |
| 5 | Henri BRELU BRELU | MRI | 3:07:17 |
| 6 | David HODDELL | GBR | 3:07:22 |
| 7 | Clement PIROQUE | MRI | 3:11:11 |
| 8 | Neelkaunt BHUJUN | MRI | 3:12:45 |
| 9 | Jean TISSIER | FRA | 3:12:49 |
| 10 | Eric Marie DANIEL | MRI | 3:14:17 |

WOMEN:

| | | | |
|---|--------------------------|---------|---------|
| 1 | Gitte KARLSHOJ | DEN | 2:48:05 |
| 2 | Epiphane NYIRABARAME RWA | 2:53:44 | |
| 3 | Marlene Chane SEE CHU | FRA | 3:34:14 |
| 4 | Jenny ALLÉBONE | RSA | 3:36:53 |
| 5 | Jenny SCOTT | RSA | 3:41:23 |
| 6 | Lorraine HUMAN | RSA | 3:44:03 |
| 7 | Doris CHELLEN | MRI | 3:47:34 |

HALF MARATHON:

MEN:

| | | | |
|---|---------------|-----|---------|
| 1 | Judex DURHONE | MRI | 1:12:03 |
|---|---------------|-----|---------|

WOMEN:

| | | | |
|---|------------------|-----|---------|
| 1 | Karin DEQUEECKER | MRI | 1:40:00 |
|---|------------------|-----|---------|

10km:

MEN:

| | | | |
|---|-----------------|-----|-------|
| 1 | Jeetun DHARANGI | MRI | 34:17 |
|---|-----------------|-----|-------|

WOMEN:

| | | | |
|---|-----------------|-----|-------|
| 1 | Anne Marie EVEN | FRA | 40:05 |
|---|-----------------|-----|-------|

by this point had a lead of almost 5km. The only remaining touristic sight to be had was on crossing the finish line. There, tantalisingly beyond the tape, créole beauties performed the séga, a wonderfully alluring dance developed during slave times. If ever there is a crock of gold at the end of the rainbow, then, for weary but wide-eyed marathon runners, this was it.

Pictures: Alain Somville and David Sui