

Culture shock

Reykjavík Marathon, Iceland. 20 August 2005

By Alëx Elliott

From humble beginnings, the Reykjavík marathon has grown into a major national and international event. In 1984 it attracted 214 runners but now, in its 22nd edition, 4,136 athletes turned out – in a nation of less than 300,000 people.

Runners come to Reykjavík not least because of the extremely comfortable running conditions: the route is smoothly paved and very flat, while the weather tends to be breezy and in the mid-teens centigrade.

The atmosphere surrounding a race is also a hugely important factor for most runners, and the atmosphere at the Reykjavík race this year was electric. While the Icelanders would enthusiastically support the race anyway, it coincided with 'Culture Night' (Menningarnótt), a national event that brings up to a third of the entire population of Iceland onto the streets of the capital.

There is another reason to run. The city's Viking name literally translates as 'smoky bay', but the name refers to Iceland's abundant geothermal steam and Reykjavík has the cleanest air of any city in the world. Situated on a peninsula, water features heavily in the self-proclaimed 'party capital of the north', the old-town nestles around a large pond – Tjörnin.

Teeming with birdlife Tjörnin is like an oasis in the maze of old wooden houses covered in colourful corrugated iron that comprise downtown. Reykjavík has the very unusual feel of a modern international city trying to fit into a nineteenth century fishing village.

The 2005 marathon started and finished within sight of the pond and was made up of four races: the marathon, the half-marathon, the 10km and the 3km fun-run. The charity marathon runners set off first, at 09.00 - an hour before the main race started. The laid-back attitude of the Icelanders was charmingly more evident than ever – a crane was still fixing the advertising sign at the edge of the start line. The stage, which would later host the awards ceremony, featuring live music and a man dressed as a penguin, was still only half erected. But the organisers remained confident that everything would be ready in the next hour.

At 09.55, the flagpoles at the start line were up and adorned with the flags of Iceland and the city of Reykjavík. Although this

Beside Tjornin



brought to mind phrases like 'in the nick of time' and 'by the skin of their teeth', the starter's gun sounded right on time for the 330 participants in the full marathon. They were set to run a course all the way around the north of the peninsula, then down through the suburbs to the south coast and back towards the city centre past the domestic airport terminal and the city's geothermally-heated beach. A second tour of the peninsula's north coast would bring the runners back to the finish line.

By the 10.00 start, some of the charity runners had already rounded the peninsula and could be seen running past the top of the street in the distance behind the athletes who were about to start their mission to overtake them. The charity runners then headed east along the scenic coastal path, where the dominant green bulk of Mount Esja looms ever large, but ever distant, across the bay.

It is only in the last few years that Culture Night (Menningarnótt) has happened on the same day as the marathon, but they are now firmly intertwined. Menningarnótt is the city's greatest celebration, and this year it was officially opened at 11.00 by the mayor, Steinunn Valdís Óskarsdóttir who gave a short speech before firing the starting gun for the 3km fun run.

The 10km and half marathon runners were set loose simultaneously ten minutes later. Momentarily, the start/finish line



Mount Esja looms ever distant



lost its festive atmosphere, but not for long. The fastest fun-runners soon began rounding the corner towards the finishing line, still fresh and smiling. A constant stream of runners followed. Some looked more exhausted than others, but everyone received the same well-earned cheers and applause.

The applause was particularly well deserved for the 240 runners from 'Team Diabetes Canada'. The group has been participating in the marathon for the last three years and entered runners in every distance this time. "I've been looking forward to this all year,"

said Sarah, one of the many Canadian spectators in town to support the team. "You know, these 240 people had to raise at least 6000 Canadian dollars each to be here."

After the races, many competitors chose to freshen up and return to the city centre for the long programme of cultural events that stretched right through the day. A myriad of art exhibitions, string quartets and theatre events rubbed shoulders with rock bands, graffiti artists and an air display in the run-up to the fireworks at 23.00. The spectacular display heralded the

official end of the celebrations, but as the heavens opened, many thousands of people made their way to the bars and nightclubs to find out why Reykjavík thinks of itself as such a cool place to be.

The world's most northerly capital city was not a pleasant sight early on Sunday morning, and as the army of street cleaners set to work, marathon officials were also working hard.

The 2005 Reykjavík Marathon yielded a unique result. The winner of the men's marathon (for the second year in a row) was Mans Hoiom from Sweden, while his brother Runar won the half-marathon. On top of this, Icelander Bryndís Ernsdóttir won the women's marathon and her sister Martha won the half-marathon.

Reykjavík Marathon officials were stunned by the coincidence. "The fact that brothers and sisters won both events is almost unbelievable and probably a unique result in the world of running," boasts the event's website. Bryndís Ernsdóttir's winning time makes her the

MEN:			
1	Mans HOLOM	SWE	2:29:10
2	Colin DEASY	GBR	2:38:35
3	Jeremy ROGERS	GBR	2:40:18
4	Paul DANGER	USA	2:47:02
5	Runar CB28988	ISL	2:51:12
6	Mike GILLAM	USA	2:53:36
7	Harry FLINT	CAN	2:54:33
8	John KRIEGSMAN	USA	2:54:36
9	Steve MATTINA	CAN	2:56:12
10	Valter HVALA	SLO	3:00:47
WOMEN:			
1	Bryndís ERNSTSDOTTIR	ISL	2:55:39
2	Rannveig ODDSDOTTIR	ISL	3:06:38
3	Shaun GAST	USA	3:16:22
4	Karen WARRENDORF	CAN	3:17:59
5	Christina WILSON	USA	3:19:29
6	April WHITT	USA	3:19:29
7	Eva Margaret EINARSDOTTIR	ISL	3:28:47
8	Kate LLOYD	CAN	3:29:56
9	Carol ROBERTS	CAN	3:30:35
10	Annie VAN DIJK	NED	3:34:33
HALF MARATHON:			
MEN:			
1	Runar HOIOM	SWE	1:13:32
2	Sveinn ERNSTSSON	ISL	1:15:43
3	Thorlakur JONSSON	ISL	1:16:25
WOMEN:			
1	Martha ERNSTDOTTIR	ISL	1:20:12
2	Huld KONRADSDOTTIR	ISL	1:33:43
3	Ylfa Run OLADOTTIR	ISL	1:36:52
10KM:			
MEN:			
1	Kari KARLSSON	ISL	32:50
WOMEN:			
2	Helga BJORNSDOTTIR	ISL	43:59

fastest Icelandic runner in the entire race, and the second fastest ever Icelandic female. With surprises like these, the marathon in Reykjavík is never a dull event – no matter what the weather is like.



Brothers in arms