

# Splashing out

**Making a splash is a way of life in the Arabian Gulf. The famous seven-star Burj-Al-Arab Hotel in Dubai is symptomatic of the way things are done: with nothing spared.**

But so far the big developments have been in Dubai itself. Various promoting big-budget sports like Formula 1, horse racing, golf and tennis it also has the region's only marathon, held in early January.

Ras Al Khaimah is a different place, only now aspiring to emulate its big brother. It is located about 100km northeast of Dubai Airport along the Gulf coast towards the rocky peninsula that juts out into the Gulf, the tip of which belongs to the neighbouring state of Oman.

Despite the mountainous backdrop, the town of Ras Al Khaimah lies on a flat coastal strip, around an inlet in which mangrove thrives. The lie of the land and the benign climate that the region enjoys in January and February suggested

that fast times can be run here. If sufficient riches are dangled in front of some of the world's best runners to tempt them to a new event, some great competition would result.

Nathan Clayton, an Arabic-speaker who had worked on marathons in Beirut, Lahore and Bangalore now lives in Dubai and had been looking around for a new running project. At the same time, Ras Al Khaimah had been making a concerted effort to market itself and its economic, residential and touristic opportunities. The newly established RAK Promotion Board had just been formed, and appeared as a natural partner. The potential to highlight the Emirate through a world class running event was enthusiastically recognised at the very first meeting Clayton had with the Vice-President of the Promotion Board, Iman Lattouf.

Sheikh Saud Bin Saqr Al-Qasimi, Crown Prince and Deputy Ruler of

Ras Al Khaimah, made a shrewd and purposeful decision to go, just once, for half measures. Instead of a marathon, he backed the idea of a half marathon – but it would be the richest race of its kind in the world. The distance is right for the town, allowing the out-and-back course to practically encircle the centre of the settlement, but avoid the one major gradient nearby – the bridge which spans the inlet.

official charity (The Paul Tergat Foundation, which drew Tergat himself to the race as a guest) was nominated and runners were encouraged to raise money for the charity. Prizes, on-air competitions and website training programs generated enough interest to draw just over 1,000 registered runners up to the UAE's most northerly emirate to take part.

The lie of the land  
and the **benign climate**  
that the region enjoys in January  
and February suggested that  
**fast times** can be run here

The race was originally slated for 1 December 2006 but as Clayton said: "we realized there wasn't enough time to do all we wanted to do and it seemed more appropriate to hold the race after the Asian Games in Doha (in the neighbouring Gulf state of Qatar). Once the date had been changed, everything fell into place. Like the impending springtime, everything seemed to blossom".

"To achieve the objectives it had to be world class, so we immediately declared the event the world's 'richest' half marathon and set about signing some of the best runners and up-and-coming running talent we could find. The attraction to the athletes was a decent level of appearance fees, the "richest" prize purse, a flat and fast course, and a favourable climate. Managers and athletes alike were soon vying to secure one of the 40 elite runner invitations."

Running in the United Arab Emirates had previously consisted of the Standard Chartered Dubai Marathon and a couple of half marathons run on modest budgets in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, both organised and run by expatriate 'Striders' Clubs'. This second international event was also intended from the start to benefit the locally based running community (which although not large, is growing all the time).

The heat prevents many people from running regularly. There are always the air-conditioned gyms, but "real" running is limited to the four coolest months of the year. To boost local participation a 'Team Relay Challenge' for local groups and companies was added. An

If an event of this kind is uncommon in the UAE, in RAK it is unheard of. The local community, although supportive, didn't quite realise what was descending upon their quiet, laid-back Emirate until six metre-tall photos of African runners, promoting the event, adorned the gateway to the city. Buses full of athletes arrived and their occupants started running around their golf course (one of the few grassed areas in the city). Amusement and bemusement went hand in hand in the build up to the event, but at the normally dead time of 08.00 on Friday morning the start line was buzzing with hundreds of local supporters. Many came out of curiosity but soon joined in the spirit of cheering on the runners and quite a few asking how they could be a part of it next year.

The Crown Prince, patron of the race, was also the official starter. He sent runners on their way from the Manar Shopping Mall, around the lagoon and towards the town centre. The leaders shot off at a fearsome pace, passing 5km well within world record schedule. At 6km the course turns back away from the centre, back past the main mosque and then turns again towards the Palace, situated at 12km as the runners go outbound. The Crown Prince was still at the start line, following the race commentary, as the leaders passed his father's home. The frisky young Kenyan, Samuel Wanjiru, who had held the world half marathon course record up to a year previously, was gradually grinding down his opposition with a determined display of front running. After coming back past the Palace at 16km and turning to



return around the bay, Wanjiru still had company. It was only in the final kilometre that he dropped Deriba Merga and Patrick Makau by covering the final 1097.5 metres in just over three minutes.

The Crown Prince was on his feet cheering him on through the finish. He was so impressed and thrilled at Wanjiru's new world record time that he offered him an impromptu cash bonus for the achievement. He, and plenty of others who followed him home, are bound to be back for an even bigger splash on 15 February next year.



**RESULT**

**MEN:**

1	<b>Sammy WANJIRU</b>	<b>KEN</b>	<b>58:52</b>
2	Patrick MAKAU	KEN	59:13
3	Deriba MERGA	ETH	59:43
4	Francis KIBIWOTT	KEN	1:00:07
5	Robert CHERUYIOT	KEN	1:00:37
6	John YUDA	TAN	1:00:38
7	Fabiano JOSEPH	TAN	1:00:53
8	Matthew KOECH	KEN	1:01:02
9	Mubarak SHAMI	QAT	1:01:15
10	Solomon BUSENDICH	KEN	1:01:36

**WOMEN**

1	<b>Berhane ADERE</b>	<b>ETH</b>	<b>1:10:58</b>
2	Teyba ERKESSO	ETH	1:11:02
3	Bizunesh BEKELE	ETH	1:11:06
4	Dire Tune	ETH	1:11:10
5	Rita JEPTOO	KEN	1:11:18
6	Caroline CHEPTANUI	KEN	1:11:32
7	Salina KOSGEI	KEN	1:11:38
8	Everline KIMWEI	KEN	1:11:44
9	Hellen CHERONO	KEN	1:11:48
10	Cathy MUTWA	KEN	1:11:50

**RACE CONTACT DETAILS**

**RAK INTERNATIONAL HALF MARATHON, FEBRUARY**  
 Nathan Clayton,  
 P.O.Box 282331, Dubai, UAE  
 Tel: +971 50 347 64 84  
 Fax: +31 84 754 5071  
 Email: rd@rakmarathon.org  
 Inet: www.rakmarathon.org

Full race contact listings start on page 70