

Crossing continents

By Sergey Porada
and Yelena Kurdyumova

The Istanbul Eurasia Marathon has a unique intercontinental course, crossing the Bosphorus Bridge from Asia into Europe and passing ancient historical sites from several world cultures. Istanbul today is a huge multicultural metropolis with a population of 14 million. It has been known through the ages as Byzantium, Constantinople and Stambul. Each name is associated with different epochs, cultures and languages. Due to its advantageous strategic location on both sides of Bosphorus Strait, connecting the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, it served in turn as the capital to Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman Empires.

It is the only city in the world built on two continents, with a history dating back to 667 BC when Greek colonists called it Byzantium after their king Byzas. Constantine the Great, in his turn, called the city Constantinople after himself. As the centre of Greek Orthodox Christianity, Constantinople was embellished with many magnificent churches, including Hagia Sophia (Divine Wisdom), once the world's largest cathedral dating back to the sixth century. It is now a museum, and the marathon course runs past this magnificent sight.

At 09.00 sharp, 4200 participants from 54 countries set off in the Marathon - incorporating the European Police Championships - and an associated 15km race over the Bosphorus Bridge on the way from Asia to Europe. A strong elite field of 104 international athletes promised good results in a tough competition for the \$572,000 prize purse.



Pic: Ali Suat Karadag



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Pic: Ali Suat Karadağ

Before crossing the Golden Horn runners pass by the 17th century Egyptian Spice Bazaar

Half an hour later a large Fun Run followed, with runners offered a stunning view from the Bridge, of the sunlit city. It was good running weather with 7C at the start and a calm, sunny morning following two days of non-stop rain and a snowfall the afternoon before. It was as miraculous an escape as that in any Oriental fairy tale. Fresh transparent air rendered even the notched fortifications of the 15th century Rumeli Fortress visible, on the European side of Bosphorus. It lies directly across from the Anadolu Fortress, and was built to control shipping movements.

By 5km Tanzania's Faustin Baha Sulle and Moroccan Mythar Echchadi headed the race with Kenyan pacemaker Simon Tonui. Two big chasing packs gradually fell behind by some 600m and 800m respectively. Runners soon passed through Taksim Square in the historic downtown with its statue of Kemal Ataturk, first President of the Turkish Republic. From there a 2.5km descent goes past the 62m-high Galata Tower, formerly known as the "Tower of Christ" - a remnant of the city fortifications built in 1348. Runners then cross Ataturk Bridge over the Golden Horn. With the Sea of Marmara, the Golden Horn forms a peninsula with a deep natural harbor, and it was here that the ancient Greeks founded the city.

The two leaders, still with the two packs behind them, climbed towards the Valence Aqueduct, a legacy of the late Roman and Early Byzantine era which for centuries served to distribute water in the city. By 15km the course becomes absolutely flat and runs through the parks alongside the Sea of Marmara to the turn around point shortly before 25km.

By the half marathon point nothing had changed and a two-man finishing duel seemed to be likely. But soon afterwards, at 22.5km, Sulle broke Echchadi and gradually built up a big lead. He led by so much that from 35km he did not notice that his rivals had not given up. Lithuania's Mindaugas Pukstas, Ukrainian Andriy Naumov and Russia's Sergey Lukin had narrowed the gap to a mere 15m. At 40km they passed Sulle in that order, leaving him in fourth position. All four of them broke Taye Moges' 1997 course record of 2:13:37.

While the prize winners were already celebrating victory in the Inonu Stadium, the mass runners were passing the enchanting palaces and mosques of the historic peninsula. The course led them past the old city walls to the magnificent 17th century Sultanahmet Mosque, better known as the Blue Mosque, for the 20,000 blue glazed tiles that cover its exterior. Its architect

Mehmet Aga attempted to construct a dome bigger than Hagia Sophia's but could not succeed.

Runners next encounter the 15th Century Topkapi Palace which served for more than 400 years as the imperial residence of the 24 Ottoman Sultans. In 1853 the imperial court transferred to the luxurious Dolmabahce Palace, situated across the road from the marathon's finish area. Its baroque, rococo style makes it look like a miniature Palace of Versailles.

Just before crossing the Galata Bridge over the Golden Horn, runners pass by Yeni Mosque and the 17th century Egyptian Spice Bazaar. On the other side of the bridge lies one more unique site: the Tunnel, or Old Istanbul Metro constructed 132 years ago by French engineer Eugene-Henri Gavand and still operating today.

The women's race was as dramatic as the men's. By the 5km a large pack had reduced to a dozen runners, including Turkey's Mehtap Dogan, Russia's Lilia Yadzhak, Natalya Volgina and defending champion and course record holder

Madina Biktagirova. The Turkish runner led the pack, testing her Russian rivals who did not want to let her go. By 25km she tired and allowed Natalya Volgina, last year's runner-up, to take the lead for the next 10km. It was clear that the course record would fall, but it was hard to believe that it would be beaten by six runners. Biktagirova seemed in no hurry, and fell behind Volgina by 100m at 35km. Her pace judgement paid off as she gradually pulled up to Volgina in the next 5km. After 40km she headed the race, almost sprinting up the hill towards the finish line, a minute ahead of the rest, to beat her own course record.

The strong elite field in the marathon were chased by participants in European Police Championships. Andriy Naumov added the title of European Police Champion to his second overall place in the marathon. Moldova's Yaroslav Musinschi finished second in 2:15:02, and Russia's Nikolay Kerimov third (2:18:33). The women's winner, Valentina Poltavaska, finished 10th overall.

MEN:

1	Mindaugas PUKSTAS	LIT	2:12:52
2	Andrei NAUMOV	UKR	2:12:59
3	Sergei LUKIN	RUS	2:13:08
4	Faustin Baha SULLE	TAN	2:13:25
5	John KIOKO	KEN	2:14:09
6	Hillary KIPKERING	KEN	2:14:17
7	Iaroslav MUSINSCHI	MDA	2:15:06
8	Elias CHEBET	KEN	2:15:47
9	Joseph YEGO	KEN	2:16:30
10	John MALUNI	KEN	2:16:35

WOMEN:

1	Madina BIKTAGIROVA	RUS	2:28:21
2	Liliya YADZHAK	RUS	2:29:22
3	Natalya VOLGINA	RUS	2:30:07
4	Mehtap DOGAN	TUR	2:31:13
5	Alina GHERASIM	ROM	2:32:13
6	Malgorzata SOBANSKA	POL	2:32:40
7	Mihaela BOTEZAN	ROM	2:37:01
8	Tatyana ZHIRKOVA	RUS	2:39:25
9	Nancy KIPRON	KEN	2:40:13
10	Valentina POLTAVSKA	UKR	2:40:42

15 KM RACE

MEN:

1	Abraham ROTICH	KEN	43:59
2	Tewodros SHIFERAW	ETH	44:00
3	Yuriy HYCHUN	UKR	44:35

WOMEN:

1	Binnaz USLU	TUR	50:28
2	Julia GROMOVA	RUS	50:51
3	Rima DUBOVIK	UKR	51:14

RACE CONTACT DETAILS

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Full race contact listings start on page 74