

# A new corner of Europe



By Inese Kikule

Latvia's capital Riga has long had the ring of an exotic, faraway place, but it is rapidly establishing itself as a cornerstone of Europe. Although the population is only one million, and it may seem like a pocket-size metropolis, the city takes you by surprise with its incredible intensity of life. Only an hour from Berlin and less than three hours from most European capitals, Riga is establishing itself as a weekend destination of choice. Riga had long been a hidden treasure on the shores of the Baltic Sea, but it possesses all the attributes of a world-class city. Among these a fast-growing marathon must be mentioned near the top of the list.

There has been a long tradition of running in Riga. This year's Riga Marathon was the 19th edition, but it all started long before that. In the early 1980s, when marathon running enjoyed its first real worldwide boom in popularity, in Latvia it was also part of a national awakening and integrally entwined with the independence movement. In those early days there were close to 10000 participants running in one or other of the



events on offer. If not the full marathon then the half - or at least the 5km. Participation was a personal statement: "I run for Latvia". Ironically, after national independence was declared, most runners in the Riga Marathon continued to come from the

territory of the former USSR.

After riding this initial wave of popular acclaim the Riga Marathon encountered a period of stagnation in the early 1990s. There was a prolonged hiatus, but it got back onto the international map in 2007.

That was a year of dramatic changes: a new organizing team came in, a prestigious new title sponsor signed up (from then on it became known as Nordea Riga Marathon), and for first time the course was measured to international standards. Events at other distances were added, increasing the focus on recreational runners and swelling overall numbers. Currently the Nordea Riga Marathon is the fastest-growing marathon event in the Baltic and East European region. In 2009, for all four distances offered (Marathon, half-marathon, 5km and marathon-relay), around 8600 participants registered, and of those more than 2500 were entered for the Marathon or Half Marathon. Participants came from 35 countries, and 55% of marathon runners were foreigners with the largest international representations coming from Finland, Great Britain, Italy, Denmark, Germany and Sweden.

"Distance Running" is all about marathons but people base their decisions on where to run their next marathon by taking into account all the attributes that a city can offer. So what can you do in Riga besides running the Marathon? There is a vibrant cultural agenda with



numerous galleries and museums – from the National Museum and its classical paintings to the contemporary art gallery placed in old warehouses next to the city market. The market also exemplifies Riga's architectural attraction. Over the centuries architects have loved the city and bestowed great treasures upon it. If you visit Riga you will be able to appreciate the renovated but still authentic medieval old town (established more than 800 years ago), Art Nouveau districts with

Jugendstil houses and, across the river, picturesque indigenous wooden architecture ranged along cobblestone streets. The marketplace features an architectural curiosity: the market buildings date from 1922, and were constructed using the legacy left by the German Kaiser's army - Zeppelin hangars. And last but not least if you love classical music then you must visit the Latvian National Opera to enjoy their outstanding productions.

**RESULT**

MEN:			
1	Oleg GUR	BLR	2:18:35
2	Rik CEULEMANS	BEL	2:20:08
3	Raivis ZAKIS	LAT	2:28:19
4	Ivo ZIGADLO	LAT	2:30:43
5	Janis ARSENIKOVS	LAT	2:34:21
6	Normunds FRIEMANIS	LAT	2:35:59
7	Valts EIDUKS	LAT	2:44:51
8	Kaspars TUBELES	LAT	2:45:51
9	Andris DUDELS	LAT	2:46:17
10	Gerry HOGG	GBR	2:47:29
WOMEN:			
1	Katsiaryna DZIAMIDAVA	BLR	2:47:30
2	Kirsi KOVACS	FIN	3:02:55
3	Michelle MITCHELL		3:04:49
4	Katrin KUUSK	EST	3:07:10
5	Irina STULA-PANKOKA	LAT	3:07:34
6	Anita CUHNOVA	LAT	3:14:24
7	Kaja VALS	EST	3:17:41
8	Rosalie WILSON	GBR	3:20:25
9	Elinor SCOTT	GBR	3:24:06
10	Maija PUPOLA	LAT	3:24:



If you are coming to Riga more for fun and relaxation you will find plenty of cafes, bars, restaurants and night clubs. Some realise great concepts, some serve great food, some offer great wine list and some have all of it.

You might ask what is so special about running a Marathon or half-marathon in Riga. In 2010 it will be the 20th anniversary of the Nordea Riga Marathon, to be held on 23 May. This year a brand new course was launched with the start next to the President's palace where all national celebrations take place. The course tours the most distinctive neighbourhoods of the city – the Art Nouveau district, the wooden architecture of Kipsala, the River Daugava crossing over the Vansu Bridge and the Old Town. There are no significant hills on the course and the highest elevation is encountered in getting over the bridge. If you have prepared well there is every chance that you could achieve a new personal best, just like this year's overall winner Oleg Gur, who finished in 2:18:35.

There are some other noteworthy features of the Nordea Riga marathon not to be missed. The eve of the event pasta dinner in the restaurant of the official hotel is like few others. Runners can meet and chat with the leading runners and just soak in energy in preparation for the next day's exploits. All runners and their supporters can buy tickets, but the number of places is limited.

For the last two years the Nordea Riga Marathon has invited one of Latvia's leading artists to design the official T-shirt Completing runners get a quality adidas running T-shirt with a unique design of some signature place from the course.

The course is traffic-free and the time limit is a generous six hours. Don't worry if you arrive a little after the advertised limit – the music will still be playing and the commemorative medal will await your arrival, bearing an engraving of the cobble streets of the course so that you will remember the most charming parts of Riga, and your running tour through them.

**RACE CONTACT DETAILS**

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*Full race contact listings start on page 62*