

Bratislava Marathon

28th March 2010

Prologue

I arranged this trip many months ago, not aware of what would or could unfold leading up to this event. First, not getting in much running, or for that matter any serious exercise (other than skiing) in February and March and secondly, the airline that I had planned to use (i.e. BA), deciding to go on strike on the very day I was due to return to the UK. So it was with some interpretation when I set off Friday morning.

Friday

The trip out there involved flying to Vienna and then catching an unsurprisingly scenic 1-hour bus journey to Bratislava via the equally picturesque and neighbouring Austrian town of Hainburg. It is only when you approach the Austro-Slovak border that you realise just how near Bratislava is to the border with the city's high rising buildings so tauntingly close. And with Hungary not that far away either, it was probably not surprising that over the weekend, my mobile phone provider would send me regular welcoming messages for Austria and Hungary as well as of course, Slovakia!

Registration

As I arrived around late afternoon, I took the opportunity to get registration over and done with before some local sightseeing. Registration was at the Primatial Palace within the old part of the town. Registration was a straight-forward affair where in showing a form of id, I was given two race numbers, a goody box and a technical t-shirt. Two numbers were issued as one had to be worn on the front with the other on the back in true triathlon style! The goody box contained some leaflets and a glossy event brochure which didn't really give much more info than what I already knew from the fairly informative website, as well as a pasta party ticket and a 'marathon pass' ticket than granted free use of the public transport system over the weekend. I've never been given a goody box, before, bags yes, and for someone who was travelling with just hand luggage, the A4 sized box was probably the most impractical thing the organisers could have given me! Thankfully, having previous experience working with boxes, I realised later I could flat pack it to fit in my backpack.

Outside registration in the adjoining square there was a small Expo of sorts. Basically a few tents selling what looked like end-of-line stock that was ideal for people who were either very small or very large, but certainly not much on offer for people of 'normal' build!

Saturday

On Saturday I was up for some serious sightseeing, but also keen to use my free use of the public transport system ticket. Most of the sights of the city are within easy working distance of each other, so public transport isn't really a necessity so I took the opportunity to travel further afield and decided on a trip to the ruined castle of Devin, which is right on the Austro-Slovak border, about 20 minutes by bus away. In fact the River Danube runs right pass the castle and at this point also marks the border. In fact so close was Austria that even a light stone thrown with the most girly of throws would have had a good chance of leaving Slovakia! In the afternoon I returned for the pasta party, which was right next to the registration area and was a simple low key affair.

Sunday

Thanks to daylight saving time, I lost a whole hour sleep and boy I can't wait for October when I get it back! However, things weren't too strenuous for me as the race start was at 10am and my hotel was a mere 5 minute walk away. The start also served as the finish and was next to the grand looking Slovak National Theatre. The weather was partly sunny and partly cloudy, generally mild but a bit windy, but overall quite pleasant, though the fact I didn't need a bin liner to keep warm in for the start was a little worrying from a 'this could get quite warm' perspective. As the minutes ticked by for the start, an announcer spoke in both Slovak and English. With ten minutes to go he did a roll call of the elite runners, which included 100 Marathon Club's own Steve Edwards! However, all the 'elite' seemed reluctant at first to come forward, perhaps because they feared they would have to give an interview, eh Steve?

The start area was quite busy thanks to the fact that along with us marathoners, there were half-marathon runners and relay runners. So when the start did happen, it was no surprise that many of the relay runners leapt into action, followed by many of the half marathon runner with us marathoners generally taking a more measured approach to things. It was at this moment that the wearing of a number on your back was a brilliant idea, since as most people had done what they were told; I could generally see who I was really 'racing' against and thus not worry about the short distance hares!

The course was a single lap for the half marathoners and 2 laps for the marathoners. The first part of both laps would cover most of the old town area before heading south away from the city centre over the River Danube via the 'New Bridge' (Nový most) with the infamous 'UFO' shaped restaurant on it and later returning via the functional rather than impressive or pretty 'Old Bridge' (Starý most).

I in particular was taking things easy as my legs were unusually lacking any real life at this early stage. So I did enjoy the welcoming distraction of the sights of the old town area along with the sporadic, but very supportive crowds. The only exception was an incline up to St Martin's Gate. Not particularly hilly, but the sort of incline you wouldn't miss, yet alone experience it twice. After leaving the old town we crossed the New Bridge to find a completely different atmosphere in the form of a rather less than inspirational dual carriageway with little or no crowd support. In fact most of support now was from the supportive and cheering marshals. By 10km I was just over 49 minutes, quite slow for me this early on but thankfully a few kilometres later we were off the main road onto a foot and cycle path, which though still had very limited crowd support was at least away from the traffic, green, tranquil and generally flat.

As the kilometres crept by I was beginning to struggle to keep close to a 5min/km pace and by 17km was passed by the 3:30 pacer. But rather than be deterred, I kept with him as well as his entourage for the next couple of kilometres before slowly easing off at the back of the group by which time we had reached the 'Old Bridge' that would take us back north towards the finish where the half-marathoners ran to the finish line and us poor marathoners had to peel off in a separate direction to start our second lap. As I pass the 21km mark a digital clock showed my time as 1:46, so at least my pacing was fairly consistent if not particularly impressive.

The second lap was more of the same except now there were fewer runners about. This didn't worry me too much as my legs decided now that they wanted to participate in this marathon proper. Oh well, better late than never! In fact, some of my fellow

marathoners who had passed me earlier were now slower than me as I began to catch them, some quicker than others. Two guys in particular I had my sights on as they were going only slightly slower than me. However for one of them, I would catch in the cruelest of manners as on the incline up to St Martin's Gate he stopped sudden and sat on the side of the road in 'Paula-Radcliffe-in-Athens' style. I continued to chase his friend who I would soon discovered had more to give as without his friend was now showing his true form by actually going slightly quicker than me!

Back on the dual carriageway and again despite the lack of crowds and decent scenery, I was feeling ok and was now overtaking nearly as many runners as other runners were overtaking me. Not to say that was loads of us out there, but it was a nice feeling to be making progress on at least a few people! By the 30km mark my split times was suggesting perhaps a 3:48 finish, but when I left the main road for the foot and cycle path I felt a bit uplifted and upped my pace a little. But around 35km my efforts were to be challenged as the wind was now getting quite blustery. In fact at times it was difficult to keep to a straight line, but literally in the face of a head wind I was now thinking of possibly getting near a 3:46 time.

I crossed the Old Bridge for the last time for the final kilometre that would be a flat one to the finish. As I approach the final turn for the final 200 metres I was closing in on a fellow runner, but he spotted me and unfortunately for me had just enough energy left in the tank to respond and match my pace to keep ahead at the finish line.

As I crossed the finish line a scoreboard showed my finishing time and overall position; a nice touch. What was better though was that after collecting my medal, in the recovery tent there was free food and beer, not just the alcohol-free stuff, but the real stuff as well. Good to see that some event organisers haven't yet bowed to pressure from silly health promoters!

Stats and Postscript

My finishing time was 3:45:55. Despite the use of chip timing, only gun times are available, so there were no separate 'personal' times. Anyway, my time netted me 201st position of the 428 marathon finishers. I was also 58th in my age group and the 6th Brit home. The results also stated that I was a good 1:18:16 behind the winner, a Kenyan (no surprise there), but then he was 13 years my junior!

Overall the marathon was well organised, though there was some minor human traffic issues with the relay change points on the first lap. The city itself is described by its own tourist board as the 'little big city', but I think describing it as a great little city is more apt.

Finally, on Monday after a bit more sightseeing, I returned to Vienna by bus for my flight home. Thankfully it hadn't been cancelled; so in all a good result!



Bratislava Castle and New Bridge at sunset



The New Bridge at night



St Martin's Gate