

Skopje Marathon

09th May 2010

Prologue

This is my first trip to the Balkans and a country from the former Yugoslavia. The fact the country is called Macedonia though is apparently a muted point with neighbours Greece with both countries also claiming Alexander the Great as their own; Skopje's airport for example is named after him. There aren't any direct flights from the UK, though there are a few indirect flights involving a single stopover.

Registration

After a very early start around 4am Friday morning for a very early flight from London via Prague I arrived at Skopje airport around lunchtime. A small airport with no public transport links to the city so the only way to get to and from the city is by taxi. Thankfully I had done my research on this and was thus duly prepared by getting my hotel to sort this out in advance and thus bypass the hoards of over-eager would-be taxi drivers waiting outside the small arrivals hall.

I was quite jetlagged. Though this might also had something to do with not going to bed the night before in order to watch the live UK election results; yes, sad I know! In fact by the time I arrived in Skopje the outcome of the election was still not fully known.

What also wasn't quite known was the location of where I had to register. I had a map from the official web site giving a rough idea with a street name but a lack of any signs or posters directing to the actual building didn't help along with the fact that Macedonians use the Cyrillic alphabet. A trip last year to St Petersburg's White Nights Marathon helped me to remember a few letters and I eventually found the registration office in a small unimposing building that was the headquarters of the local sports club.

Inside though everyone spoke good English so getting registration sorted was no problem; I had registered on line but needed to pay in person. As marathons go, this must surely be the cheapest in the world at a mere €5 or 300 denars; the local currency. Other marathon organisers take note!

Race Day

The race was on Sunday with the morning starting with bright sunny weather and clear blue skies; pretty much as the previous days had started, though there had been some thunder the night before. For those days the temperature rose to the high twenties with some humidity by the afternoon. In fact the local tourist blurb typically describes it as barmy! Not sure via the translation whether that is something to be proud off! However, bizarrely in the distance you could see snow capped mountains; just like Marrakech. Anyway, things were looking to be more of the same hot sunshine. The fact that on my arrival at the start area waiting for the race to begin, I had to take shelter from the sun was not a good sign.

However, the warm weather did allow me to arrive 'ready to go' as there were no baggage area. Also, for a certain 100 marathon club member bemoaning the Marrakech marathon for having no toilets at the start, there were none here too! Also, no special drinks were on offer on the course,

only water as well as some fruits. So as was the case at Marrakech, I came along with extra energy-based provisions.

The race was originally due to start at 8:30am, but was delayed to 9am. The fact that the start gantry was only erected shortly before 8:30am might have had something to do with this, but this was followed by some local dignitaries saying a few words. What those words were I don't know as it was all in Macedonian but I'm guessing to formally thank the organiser etc, play the national anthem I guess and formally 'start' the race. In fact once the dignitaries had left the race was promptly started at 9am.

There were three events on; the marathon, a half marathon starting at the same time and a 5km run starting later. The marathon and half marathon followed the same route that left the city centre to the west, returning to the city centre, heading out of the city centre to the east before returning. The half marathon was one lap of this course with the full marathon being 2 laps. The colour of our bib numbers indicated which race we had entered.

There wasn't a big turnout for the half and full marathon; a few hundred, but it was nice to be able to get across the start line in seconds and not be bunched up with fellow runners. The route was also flat, so surely things were looking good? Well, the route was mostly through the city suburbs and residential areas, taking in very little of anything particularly scenic; missing out the old Islamic part of the city altogether, though in fairness a lot of the city centre is a building site of new buildings being erected and older ones being restored. Also, the route was predominately on wide, straight boulevard-type roads which offered little or no shelter from the sun. A few trees scattered on pavements en route offered the rare oasis of shade, though this wasn't always possible to make use of as many of the pavements in the city centre seemed to double up as parking spaces.

Fairly early on I felt that despite being a flat course, this was not going to be a race for heroics and PBs, so I duly kept to a steady pace. Distance markers were a little sporadic, but there was one at 10km where my watch clocked 49 minutes, quite a bit slower than my norm. The other thing that was sporadic was the crowd support. Most of it was in the city centre and pretty much non-existent elsewhere, if it wasn't for the marshals serving drinks and the police controlling the city traffic. However, occasionally a lone figure would be on the side of the road clapping or shouting 'Bravo' and in the latter stages that was enough to keep the motivation going.

There was also no fancy chip timing here, instead at strategic points on the course, marshals were noting down the bib numbers of running as they went by. No doubt to ensure no one cheated.

At the end of the first lap, the half marathoners proceeded to the finish whilst the rest of us had to cruelly go for another lap. I say the rest, but there weren't that many of us. I saw a fellow marathoner in the distance. This figure dressed in white I would spend the next 3 miles catching. There wasn't a halfway distance marker but I guess my time was around 1:49. Again down on my usual, but considering the heat, I wasn't too concerned.

Up to around the $\frac{3}{4}$ distance; a lack of regular distance markers made it hard to be precise; I was gradually reigning in the odd fellow runner. One or two were clearly struggling in the heat and resorted to walking. At around 3 hours 10 minutes, I stopped at a drinks station to take refuge from the sun. My body was also not only generally tired but also tired of consuming water, so I resorted to

pouring it over me to try and keep cool. I walked for a few minutes to pass the 35km marker, where I got running again.

For the next 5 kilometres, I would do a mixture of walking and running. It would appear I wasn't alone in doing this as I could see runners ahead of me doing the same thing. If anything, a couple of them who had passed me on the first lap were now going slower than me so I was actually gaining on them albeit marginally. However, regardless of what they were doing, I had resigned to the fact that just getting under 4 hours was the best I was going to get.

For me, a marathon over 4 hours is not a good result. The few occasions where it has happened have generally occurred when I've not been fully fit or the marathon was part of an Ironman triathlon where anyone in the know will tell will take longer than 'stand-alone' marathons. So whether it was a pride thing or not, but at 41km with the finish in the distance and a sub-4 hour looking doubtful, I went for a final push, overtaking another runner a few hundred metres before reaching the finish line on the main city square, where on receiving my medal and some water and food, I headed straight for shade.

That shade was under a tree, and for a few minutes felt like the best place in the world!

Stats and Postscript

My finishing time was 3:59:13, so yes, I made it but only just! But look at my placing; my overall position was 52nd and I was also the 45th male home, both my highest positions ever! Ok, only 74 people finished of which 66 were male. The half marathon incidentally had 206 finishers. I was 10th in my age group. Ok, there were only 16 finishers in my age group. But wait, I was the first Brit home; actually I was the only Brit home! So where were all of you then?

The race was won by not a Kenyan, but a Hungarian. In fact no Kenyans took part; perhaps they thought they couldn't handle the heat!

On Monday I took it easy in the morning, partly because of yet again another warm morning, but also because I had caught the sun, particularly on my now red sore shoulders. My return flight was uneventful, though the ash cloud wasn't too far away; it had reach Austria apparently.



Mother Theresa; Skopje's most famous daughter



Main Square with historic Stone Bridge in background