

RACING THE Ljubljana Marathon

Local runner travels to compete in the capital of Slovenia



Downtown Ljubljana, a stately European capital, announces the upcoming marathon.

Story and photos by Gleb Velikanov

There were a few reasons why I chose to run a marathon in Slovenia. One of them had to do with the curiosity I always had about the region's history. Slovenia was a part of former Yugoslavia. I recall learning about Yugoslavia's role in World War I and World War II in school, then seeing footage of the Balkan wars on TV in the 1990s.

Yugoslavia may evoke images of an Eastern-European-“Children-of-men”-scenario in the popular imagination. However, Slovenia gained independence about 20 years ago in a mostly bloodless effort. Knowing quite well that the country has been a member of the European union since 2004, I still made sure no visa was required to enter the country, after registering for the 17th annual Ljubljana Marathon.

Another reason is that, in addition to traveling to an unusual destination, it sounded exciting to run the same race with world-class runners, some of who (according to previous years' results page) hailed from countries such as Ethiopia and Kenya, and who posted finish times around 2 hours and 10 minutes.

Intending to travel affordably, I enlisted my partner Barbara's help, planning to fly into Germany and travel by train

from there. I figured that her knowledge of German, my proficiency in Russian and hopes that English is a lingua franca in Europe would facilitate communication for us.

Once we made it to our destination in one piece, Ljubljana turned out to be how one would imagine a European capital. A city situated in a basin edged by mountain peaks, it had old buildings, small cars, cafes and restaurants with outside seating, even in October. Ljubljanski Grad, a castle that has been around since 1200 BC, presided on a hill in the center of the city. Most of the old city was quite clean, with one possible exception – graffiti. It seems that every bit of outside wall area within arm's reach was tagged and retagged by spray paint artists. Other than wall art, the city was clean and very safe. A part of the EU indeed, the city's prices were on par with other European and US cities.

Pre-race training

In the spring prior to this excursion, I trained quite intensively for the Eugene marathon, which left me exhausted, to say the least. This time around, I decided not to aim for a personal best, but rather make an attempt at a “respectable” time,

while taking in the atmosphere of this cobble stone-clad European capital.

My training program reflected such a “relaxed” approach. I ran four days per week, twice on one of those days, building up my long runs from 10 to 20 miles over the course of three months. Speed training was skipped in favor of resistance training, aimed at strengthening my lower body and core. Despite the lower weekly mileage, I felt prepared to take on the marathon distance.

The morning of the race

Race morning delivered a bit of a curveball: It snowed! Most runners, save for the elites, seemed to have come overdressed (in my humble opinion) wearing tights, long-sleeved shirts, jackets, some even rain ponchos. I ran in a t-shirt and shorts, feeling quite comfortable, as the temperature never dropped below about 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

The course, a 21 km (13.1 mile) loop went through the city, starting and finishing on Slovenska Cesta, near Park Zvezda, one of the city's central features. It curved through the old city streets, for the first five kilometers, then entering Mostec, an urban forest, which, according to street signs I ran by, is home to the Lju-



The author races towards the finish line, where the snow has since melted away.

ljubljana Zoo. After crossing the H3 highway with signs for Austria, Italy and other international destinations, the course dove into Ljubljana's northern suburbs, filled with newer, neat, bungalow-like cement buildings. Finally, after recrossing the H3, the run entered its home stretch on Dunajska Cesta, one of the city's main streets, which became Slovenska Cesta, and the finish line for half-marathoners. Marathoners continued around a second

time, while the 10K and a couple of shorter races wove through nearby city streets.

This race in a foreign land, with runners and spectators around me speaking unfamiliar languages went surprisingly similar to races I have run in the U.S. – one foot in front of another. One exception had to be the aid station contents: along with water, sports drink and bananas, the volunteers handed out pieces of chocolate! Not wanting to end up with a stomach cramp, or to spew everything I just ate, I skipped the chocolate in favor of an energy gel I brought along with me. Barbara met me at the end of the first loop with an additional gel.

Another new, and, I must say, pleasantly surprising aspect was having the field separated into expected finish time groups prior to start. Each group started about 30 seconds after another, which seemed to make for less of a bottleneck effect at the start, with each runner being able to settle into a comfortable pace right out of the gate.

I started with the 3:30 group. After finishing the first loop a bit faster than intended, I slowed down to be consistent with my race plan. I felt comfortable and relaxed, even making friends with a local, who ran at my pace. Primož was running

his second marathon after last year's Berlin race, and kept me company until the 35 km (19 mile) mark, where I lost track of him, only to be able to shake his hand after crossing the finish line.

It was around the 19 miles when I felt the proverbial "wall." Not a horrible experience, but I indeed experienced fatigue and difficulty maintaining my pace. Summoning will power and using past marathon experience, I pulled it together to finish in 3 hours and 42 minutes, receiving a celebratory local beer from Barbara and eating a bowl of Jota z domaco Klobaso (cabbage stew with sausage) at a tavern around the corner.

In retrospect

I did not inquire about Ljubljana's elevation before leaving on this trip. It turned out to be about 800 feet higher than my hometown of Portland. I want to believe that was at least partially to blame for my slower-than-expected finish, as most of my training was done at sea level.

While the race's elite competitors were indeed world-class runners, much more gifted and disciplined than me, I do feel that their possible familiarity with higher-altitude running can be seen as an advantage, even in Ljubljana's snow. •

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