

Antarctica Marathon 2023

To compete in this marathon, we had to take it as a package – there is no other way to attend. We congregated in Buenos Aires for 3 nights prior to flying out to Ushuaia – I presume this was to get everyone together in one place prior to us all boarding the onward flight, in case of delays (which worked well, apart from the one person who slept in and missed the early morning flight to Ushuaia).

There was a bit of sightseeing in Buenos Aires, a welcome meal and a briefing. A summary of the briefing would be, “Plan A is to run on Sunday 12th March, but Plan A rarely happens”, and the course will be in the vicinity of the Chilean, Russian, Uruguayan and Chinese research stations on King George Island. The organisers also kindly put on a couple of 4pm training runs in the 30-32C heat ... I have no idea how many people went to those (I did a couple of runs at 6am when it was a little cooler).

I did learn that there were approximately 104 marathon runners, 49 half marathon runners and 18 supporters – and that for 40 of the marathon runners it was their ‘7th continent’ and so they hoped to be able to be admitted to the hallowed 7 Continents Marathon Club (run by Marathon Tours, the company we had to book through to get on to the marathon).

All but one of us made the plane from Buenos Aires to Ushuaia at the southern tip of Argentina (that proudly claims to be (1) the southern-most city in the world and (2) – albeit less formally - the capital of the Falkland Islands). Sadly though, 45 pieces of our luggage didn’t. This delayed us in port for the best part of a day, but once the tour operator had paid the required \$7k for the passage of the 45 ‘unplanned’ bags from the port entrance to the ship (around 100m) we were all set.

As a consequence, Plan A was consigned to the bin. Plan B was that we would run the race on Monday 13th, but the course wasn’t confirmed. There was a rumour that the Chilean Commander at the Chilean Research Station wanted to start the race from his base. The Chinese base had parked a lorry across the track to stop the run going in their direction, the Uruguay Base wanted the run to go by their Station, and it was believed that the Russian scientists would all still be very friendly, but that had to be checked out.

The sailing down across the Drake Passage was tough. The Captain did his best to re-route us past the storm with 30 feet waves, but we still got hit, and the re-routing cost us further time.



I also discovered during this early part of the trip that we had a ‘Save the Rhino’ running (Brad, from South Africa), together with a film crew creating a documentary about the Rhino running a marathon on what would be his 7th continent (to be released on Netflix).

By the Saturday night, the forecast for Monday 13th wasn’t looking good (or for the Tuesday for that matter) – it would have been possible to run the race, but not possible to use the zodiacs to get people to the shore. The decision was made to run the race on Wednesday 15th or Thursday 16th (this being the last possible date as we had to head back north on the evening of 16th).

In the meantime though, there was lots of preparation required that we wouldn’t normally do for a marathon.

All outer clothing had to be presented for bio-security checking to check it was clean and could be taken on to Antarctica. This included the hoovering of pockets and seams in used clothing, and the removal of all Buddy's (our dog) hair from Peta's woolly hat.

The scrubbing of race shoes to get every single speck of mud and dirt from them followed the next day, together with the dipping of them in disinfectant. This was Sunday, and the likelihood of the race being on the Wednesday was confirmed.

This meant that Monday was available for visiting penguin colonies, and looking for leopard seals and whales. The penguins were not bothered by us, we found a not very friendly looking leopard seal and were fortunate to see a pod of around 30 orcas – the first time I had seen them in the wild. It was a spectacular day.



An overnight cruise took us back to King George Island where the race would take place. Tuesday 14th also saw the issuing of race numbers and the race logistics. One of the complicating factors for running the race is that only 100 people are allowed on Antarctica from a vessel (and only one vessel in a particular area) at any one time. So the plan was for the half marathon runners and around 45 of the slowest marathon runners to start at 7am (assuming the Russians agreed to this as they tend not to get up until 8am and enjoy the tranquillity), with wave 2 of the marathon runners starting at 11am and wave 3 (the fastest 39 marathon runners) at 1pm.

The categorisation was based on fastest marathons in the past 12 months. And who came in at 39? Yes, me. Number 40 had a fastest time 1 minute slower than mine. It was on the one hand nice to be in this 'elite' group (their term, not mine), but on paper it would make me the last person to finish. Pros and cons to that ... last person off Antarctica, but, if I had a problem, I might not get to finish before sunset when we had to be off. So when the final checks revealed couple of non-starters, I was pleased that I was able to leave the 'elite' group, and move to wave 2. 11am start it was.

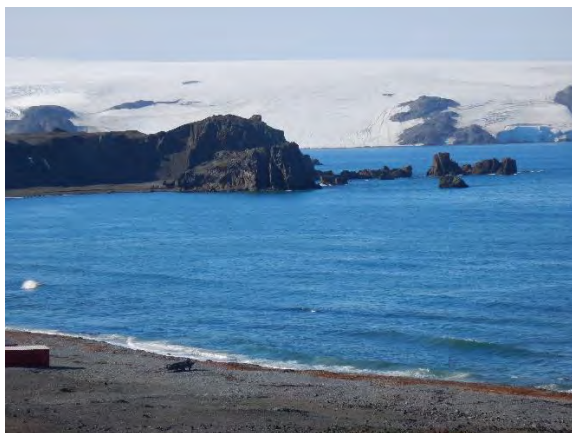
The afternoon was course set up time, and an evening briefing confirmed that the course would be between the Chilean and Uruguayan bases via the Russian base. It would be a six-loop run for the marathon with 3,000 feet elevation gain overall. Other obstacles we had to beware of were penguins (of which there were many, and who had right of way) and a particular bird which can divebomb runners and peck at runners heads (and the reason headphones are banned, so you can hear them coming).

Initially, race day weather was not good. High winds meant that the zodiacs could not leave the boat, thus preventing course set up and runners getting to King George Island. The winds soon subsided and the race started at 8.35am for the first wave.

For the rest of us, it was a strange ... being on the boat, watching the runners running a race we were taking part in, trying to busy ourselves while we waited. At 10.50 we got the call to go to the 'mud room' for our bio security checks prior to leaving the ship, by 11.20 we were on land and we – wave 2 – were off at 11.30 (joined by a couple of Chilean and a couple of Russian scientist runners).

By this time, the sky was clear, the sun was out and it was zero degrees; there had been some overnight snow so the course was slightly muddier than the day before, and we were soon to discover there was a cold wind blowing in from a nearby glacier.

True to what we had been told, the course was tough. The majority of the route underfoot was firm but there was some mud and some areas where the track had been filled in with loose rubble – and some of this was on a couple of steep inclines / declines, which made them tricky. But there were some magnificent views – together with reminders of where we might meet the locals.



My preference is generally for 'A – B' type runs, but the 6 loops worked nicely here. There were interesting things to look at and it was nice to give and receive support to and from people we had built up relationships with during the past week.

I found it very tough though – whilst my kit worked perfectly, my legs didn't. This was mainly due to the overall elevation gain, and how steep it was in a couple of places. But I did it.

I finished in a time of 5 hours 39 minutes and 41 seconds. I was aiming for between 5 and a half and 6 hours, and so was happy with that. The winning time was 3:47:41 (less than 2 hours ahead of me!).

Of the 104 starters (including the rhino, Superman and 2 penguins), 22 either reduced to the half marathon during the race or didn't finish, 6 were 'FNT's (finisher, no time) and 76 completed it within the allotted 6 hours 45 minutes. I was 37th overall and 3/11 in my gender age category.

The supporters had a good time at the Start / Finish too, due in part to the favourable weather. They were able to assist runners with drinks and food, and when not doing that, visiting the local Russian Orthodox Church and being entertained by juvenile wildlife (there were a dozen or so interested penguin and one not very interested seal in the start area).



I had achieved what I came to do. The reason I started running 5 years ago was to run a marathon as a 'thank you' to the charity – St Leonards's Hospice – for the help they gave my mum in her last week or so of her life. I was crying for parts of the last lap, and burst into tears at the end. On reflection, it was probably my first real grieving for mum.

So I can stop running now. I will probably continue, but I need another purpose ... but for the moment, I will just enjoy what I have achieved in Antarctica.



There was a real buzz back on board, but for those who had come to complete their 7th Continent and had not been able to, there must also have been huge disappointment. Brad the Rhino had struggled – he said that was it with the rhino costume (and he refused to wear it on the next outing so the film crew had to wear it themselves for their filming).

The fact that every competitor is back together again for a few days gave it a very different feel to any other race, and led to interesting and varied discussions.

Glen had become for first indigenous Australian to complete the Antarctica Marathon and asked me to take some photos for him, two runners got engaged and there was the (apparently) traditional 'Polar plunge' – which I passed on – for which Mary Poppins made an appearance.

And for one guy it was his second time of having completed a marathon on every continent, and his 644th marathon overall. Goodness knows how many miles he must have run in his life so far ...

We had another day sightseeing – an old whaling station, even more penguins and lots more glaciers – and then it was time to head back north to Ushuaia.



Finally, thanks again to everyone who offered me words of support and / or sponsorship. I am very, very grateful, and know it has gone to a worthy charity – and hope you are slightly more impressed at my achievement than the penguins and seals ...

