

Vilnius Half Marathon, Lithuania

If Arsene Wenger had had his way, this would have been in the Caribbean. But it wasn't.

This was a 'generous' Christmas present from our son, Alex, who is currently working in Vilnius – he purchased the €12.50 entry fee, and then I paid for the trains to London, flights to Vilnius, hotel accommodation, etc. ... as he says to me sometimes with a wry, definitely not guilty, smile, "Kids, the gift that keeps on taking". He even bought us a plaque to remind us for when he's not at home. So we don't forget.

I had excitedly checked the weather forecast a week before the race and it had shown 27C and thunderstorms for the race time, and an hour either side – but I wasn't too concerned as we all know how inaccurate long term weather forecasts are.

I arrived a couple of days before, and was surprised by how very hot it was in the sun – according to the knowledgeable locals, far hotter than usual, apparently.



Bib pick up was the day before – there had been nobody from the UK last year, so we were looking forward to flying the flag. The theme was 'Running for Ukraine' so we were encouraged to wear blue and yellow – and we also had to sign a form to say that we were not Russian or Belarussian, and had to understand that if we were later found to be either, we were in big trouble. I'm not sure what sort of trouble as it was all in Lithuanian, but we were told it was 'big'.

The pre-race goody bag was not on a par with Ridding Park, but I've not had bread buns before (they are proud of their bread) and I'm also not sure on whether the tablets would get me into trouble if I was good enough to be 'tested'.

The start was in the heart of Vilnius Old Town, at Cathedral Square next to the Clock Tower (both visible in the picture below), and the race website said it started at both 5.00pm and 5.30pm. We went with 5.30pm as that was mentioned twice, as opposed to 5.00pm being mentioned once.

We set off for the start line at 4.30pm – an hour before the race start, and exactly when it was supposed to start thundering and lightning according to the previous week's forecast. As we set off, it started thundering, lightning and chucking it down with rain.

None of the locals were prepared for rain, so most of them stood under trees for shelter. Perhaps they don't get much lightening.

Bag drop queues were long - all the pre-printed tags had disintegrated in the rain, and so they were having to make new ones, but didn't have many pens. This delay meant that we were at the start line at about 5.32pm, so were about the last 2 to cross the start line – my preferred place to be, but not where Alex wanted to be. The good news was that it had all but stopped raining by this point, and the even better news was that whilst it continued thundering and lightening on and off for the rest of the race, this meant it was cloudy throughout so a lot cooler than it could have been. Yay!

The 10k and HM set off at the same time, so you weren't sure who you were running against until the 10kers peeled off and the runners thinned considerably. It was a lovely course around the old town and along the city's two rivers, taking in most of the point of interest, and probably fits my definition of 'undulating'. There was also considerable and varied musical accompaniment – ranging from the usual rock anthems to a classical guitarist who was in a world of his own. And saxophonists; Lithuania seems to love saxophonists. And it was won by a Brit! - Andrius Jaksevicius.

There were two other points of note I contemplated as I meandered around the course. As with races I have competed in, in other eastern European countries or countries where there has been a Soviet influence, it was marshaled by surly looking police officers living out the old Russian proverb of "Smiling with no reason is a sign of stupidity" – but there were also a couple of hundred mainly female teenagers all around the course doing drinks, cheering on, banging drums, hand slapping, staffing barriers on minor streets – all very encouraging,



The other point was the age of the runners. It was a young person's race – I only saw one person older than me although the results suggest there were a handful more. Probably another Soviet influence.

I had some sort of bug for about three weeks shortly before the race, so had low expectations. I was aiming for sub-2.15, so was pleased with 2.11, particularly as Garmin suggested I had run an additional third of a mile. I could beat Alex easily 5 years ago ... those days are well gone, as he proved once again with a 1.33 finish.

Sadly, there was no water or food at the end ... it had all gone. Alex said he had seen a couple of runners walking away with full boxes of whatever bars they were handing out – perhaps one of the downsides of using teenagers.

Ah yes, those teenagers ... after we'd had a meal, as I walked back across Cathedral Square there were about 200 teenagers in blue shirts all tucking into their own individual pizza; so that's how they motivated them!

On the way home to the UK, I had some spare time ... we got to within 40 minutes of London City Airport, and the pilot decided he needed to make an emergency landing ... in Warsaw – so I spent an additional evening on an industrial estate in Warsaw ... so I took some time to look at the results, and there seemed to be a fair bit of erratic running – these Lithuanians must train in a different way to us to get the results they did. These are for the finishers in positions 45, 68 & 88.

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I have never really studied splits before ... is this normal? Or are the apparent abnormalities of statistical significance. I don't think these would get past Mr Chatterton. I'm down as finishing around 1,100th, but perhaps it was really about 300th.

And I almost forgot ... why should it have been in the Caribbean? Well, Alex works at FIFA as an international football talent coach for a bloke called Arsene Wenger, who used to be a famous football manager. Alex was offered the Caribbean as his area to work, but said it was too far away and wanted to be closer to home. Lithuania was the closest qualifying country to home, so he was offered that – where it's too cold to play outside for 4 months of the year. He might beat me at running now, but possibly not at decision making ...