

The Petra Marathon

You will hear this statement from a quite of few people lamenting their unease at breaking into the running habit 'but I hate running'. The best response I have and the one that ultimately changed my outlook is - 'so don't go for a run, go for an adventure'.

We're born with an inherent desire to discover and to discover things for ourselves, not just through books or online. Our internal voice is full of curiosity 'What's around that corner, over that crest, beyond that cluster of trees, what does the sunrise look like in these parts?' Adventure is about exercising your imagination and absorbing the world's elemental beauty as a reward.

The Petra Marathon is a pinnacle example of an adventure runner's outlook. For sure it's a pretty grueling 42km long run, though there's seriously much more to it than that. The Petra Marathon is an outdoor adventure through stunningly desert scenery with natural rock formations that are 'rose-red as if the blush of dawn, that first beheld them were not yet withdrawn' and into these mighty rocks carved 'a city half as old as time' as elegantly described by John William Burgon's Poem Petra.

Petra's credentials as a travel and adventure destination are first class; the site remained unknown to the Western World until 1812 when Swiss explorer Johann Ludwig Burekhardt discovered and introduced it, it is described as one of the most precious cultural properties of man's cultural heritage, chosen by the BBC as one of "the 40 places you have to see before you die" and to top it off voted as one of the New 7 Wonders of the World. If you've been there you know this, if not then its time to go for an adventure.

When I humbly discovered Jordan's Petra Marathon voyeuring through Google I was rightly inspired. An adventure race and travel opportunity that measures up to the best of them, plus being a UAE resident, it is literally in my own back yard. I signed up later that afternoon and like most participants chose to leave the tour travel arrangement duties to the team at Albatross Travel, who organize and manage the event with the assistance of the Petra Region Authority.

A race like this attracts an interesting collection of people.

The idea of being on tour with them taking in a few sights and sharing the experience leading into the marathon proved to be a good one. The 'Team' consisted (amongst others) of; an arm slapping Judge from California, a super nice couple from Peru, two Celtic lass from Ireland, a tanned Spanish couple, a competitive but light hearted Aussie, a Brazilian adventurer with a quirky saying I never figured out, Aussie girl living in Hong Kong, a South African running buddy, a breaded Canadian, a few pastry loving Danish, a one minute mile marathoner (Google it) and a bunch of other lovely folk - all humble, all with very interesting chat.

Race mornings are usually pretty intimidating because of a series of self-doubt questions; how are the strains? What's my time going to be? Has my preparation paid off? How fast will everyone else be? What if I don't finish? God I wish I'd done more! Have I been to the toilet? This time I can honestly say it was a feeling of excitement, enough to make the hairs on your back prick up. I felt a little like a hound, on a lead, keen to sniff out the start line.

Gear packed, stomach full I was about to leap from my room and bolt down the stairs when the phone rang. I answered and surprisingly realized it was my sister from Hong Kong. She'd tracked me down to say a quick 'Good luck and enjoy!'

Our tour bus rolled down to the pre-race gathering and finish area in the cover of night. There were only a couple of military trucks on the road. I'm sure I saw these guys again on the course at Km 8 mark with a few other soldiers sporadically placed at Km 9 and 12. Not sure if they were there to protect us from the 'unknown' or prevent some insane person from taking a short cut. Either way it was another interesting addition to the day.

Under the orange glow of the car park street lights we stretched, skipped and chatted through the pre-race anticipation. It was also a chance to place drop bags with the organizers that would be later picked up at the 13km and 31km mark. I took energy gel and salts. From there it was a 2km convoy styled walk past the main Petra access gates, towards the Sik and onto the start area.



The Sik, translated to 'The Shaft', is the main entrance to the ancient city of Petra. The dim, narrow gorge (as little as 3 meters wide and between 91-182 meters in height) winds its way approximately one mile and ends at Petra's most elaborate ruin, and our start line, Al Khazneh - The Treasury. A mind blowing sight.

As the sun started to rise, gradually illuminating the rose-red rock walls, a degree of honor humbled us all - this was a truly great adventure. Our pre-race buzz was focused on the stark beauty of the surroundings, which revealed the chronicles of elements and time, the work of focused people and their compulsive imagination.

The 10th of September's focus (race day) was about the exploration of Petra, and not so much digits and the finish line. Our global band of 50 competitors was afforded the right to enter Petra very early morning, when it is closed to the public we experienced the



area while it was deserted, with no tourist crowds; it was bare and startling.

Within a few delighted minutes of arriving at the front of 'The Treasury' and clicking off some photos, our race organizers called for our attention 'Competitors just 2 minutes until departure'. We had been briefed by the Petra Authority a day earlier that the first 1km would be walked. This is part of their ongoing and increasing efforts to protect the fragility of this world heritage site. Naturally we'd all willingly agreed. Preservation of the outdoors is a key concern for all lovers of nature and we all knew access like this was a very special opportunity.

Around 6.30am the running adventure began. We panted our way down through many of Petra's Ruins; evidence suggests settlements began in the late eighteenth dynasty of Egypt (1550-1292 BC). Running past a huge display of tombs, caves and monasteries carved out in the mountainsides is a dreamlike experience. I found myself thinking 'what's over this smooth rock hill, what's around the dirt gravel track?' The answer was more natural beauty and much more inspiration to keep moving and adventuring. This is the outdoors. This is the kind of experience an expat, country kid like me, lives for.

I settled into a nice pace along side a South African lady who was running the 1/2 marathon. We quickly realized that the mountainous and rocky beauty would not come without a price - hills. The course is a mix of off road and tarmac, and in my opinion a lot of hills. At the 6km mark I was happy to get off road to feel the grit of sand and loose gravel under my feet. As the sun climbed over the mountains, filling the waiting basin with its light, the terrain took on a 'Mars-like' feel. 'The Red Planet! This is brilliant' I gleamed.

The trail was loaded with excuses to stop to pull your camera from its hoister; a rock formation that looked like a baby elephant, a portrait photo with a Bedouin tribesman climbing the same track who sounded like he seriously needed an asthma inhaler, a goat herdsman wanting to know where I was from and encouraging me to quickly inspect the quality of his flock, a local school with excited children no doubt thinking 'why?', many panoramic views across the vast valleys and, towards the end, a seemingly birds-eye-view from the mountain side down into the ruins of Petra.

The sun brought with it a serious side to the adventure; safety. Once on the road, with the sun blazing a high summer trail, there was a little protection from its relentless stare. For sure competitors would be pretty brave or crazy not to wear a hat and even long sleeves. Cramps are absolutely no fun and in this race a real concern. So if like me (showing signs of cramp from 37km onwards) you're not used to hills, and are planning to tackle this adventure, pack lots of salt tablets.

Crossing the line in 3rd place behind a couple of wiry Jordanian gentlemen was a proud moment. What was even greater was that all the competitors stayed around post-



race to cheer their new friend's final steps over the finish line. The comradery of this group had been forged on the 3 tour days leading into the Petra Marathon. By the end of this race it was hardened by the shared experience of traveling to a far away and strange land to participate in an adventure story that will last for a life time.

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