

Antarctica: the last marathon by Suzanne McKeen

Known as the last marathon for the simple reason that it is the last place on earth anyone would consider running a marathon, 2015 marks the 20th anniversary of the Antarctic Marathon. Each year two sister ships, the Ioffe and the Vavilov, each carrying approximately 100 passengers, make the journey from the port of Ushuaia across the Drake passage, one day apart, to the shores of King George Island off the tip of the Antarctic peninsula, where two waves of the marathon take place over two days. What follows is my account of race day, March 10th 2015.

The zodiac ride from the Vavilov to the shore seemed to take an eternity, a bumpy excursion through choppy waters drenching the unfortunate occupants with freezing cold spray. Our small group was amongst the first to arrive at the start/finish area, and with around 100 participants to ferry to the shore, no one was in any hurry to change out of their warm waterproofs into their relatively skimpy race gear. It was cold. Really cold. And the strong, blustery wind was not helpful, adding to the chill factor that was already pushing my limits. It was no wonder no one wanted to be the first to strip down, or metaphorically speaking, be the first penguin in the water.

Someone eventually took the lead and soon we were all extracting ourselves from our wetskins and boots, replacing them with race friendly compression and various wind-stopper and Gore-Tex garments. Running shoes were gleaming bright and colourful after the enforced scrub-and-disinfect exercise to allow them onto the precious and vulnerable Antarctic shores. It was ironic that this footwear was to end up in far worse condition than its pre-sanitisation state.

Whilst in the midst of the outfitting process, I noticed a guy with a TV camera kneeling alongside, lens pointed at me as I desperately attempted to stuff unwanted items into my dry bag in a bid to prevent them from being blown to Hawaii. I presumed this was the 'film crew' we had been told would be filming a documentary of the race. With that sort of cutting edge footage, it should be a real ratings winner.

The original course plan comprised two loops directed away from a central start/finish point near the Russian base, the first loop heading out towards the Uruguay base, the other towards the China base, each loop a little over 4 miles (or 7km in modern terms). We were to run 3 laps of this bi-loop arrangement to complete the marathon distance. The race course had to be modified owing to excessively muddy terrain on the first loop, whereby an ATV became bogged the previous day during final inspection of the course. Following this modification, we were expected to complete 6 laps of the loop towards the China base.

The race began with a gentle downhill slope followed by a lengthy, slightly steeper, uphill section that ended in a sharp left hand turn. We had been warned during the pre-race briefing not to miss the turn-off, as to continue straight ahead uphill would bring us to the airstrip and a relatively firmer section of terrain that was somewhat less unpleasant to run on but ended in a dead-end. We were told the turn-off was well-marked and 'couldn't be missed'. A small board depicting an arrow and the words "turn left" partially hidden behind a post apparently qualifies as 'well-marked'.

Heading out towards China, the course was undulating, and initially seemed more downhill than up, though in hindsight there was probably little difference – the relative ease of the outward leg was more likely a result of the strong tail wind we experienced early on in the race. The terrain was generally mud of various consistencies, some firmly packed but with reasonable quantities of gluggy, squishy, slippery goo that clung to our shoes and any other part of us it latched on to. Puddles were plentiful and carefully avoided, though occasionally unavoidable with the two-way traffic on the course.

About two-thirds of the way out the course flattened somewhat, though any anticipated advantage was offset by the surface of loose gravel and small rocks that shifted underfoot, the wet adding a slippery degree of difficulty. Reaching China, I dropped off my water bottle which I had carried out from the start line (no luxury gels and potions provided in this race, it was strictly BYO). I gave the thumbs-up to Bill, hoping he checked my number off, and headed back towards Russia following the same course in reverse.

The return leg was inspiring, with many of the runners waving and shouting messages of support as they passed each other, their spirits high despite the ordinary conditions. I was setting a rather good pace despite a sluggish first kilometre, probably a result of being confined to a rocky ship for the previous 4 days with no possibility of a decent run. Whilst tapering before a race is part of any good training plan, abstaining for that period is probably not the best idea, and my legs took a few minutes to get back into rhythm.

Towards the end of the first lap I passed two of the ships more colourful characters, and owing to my unashamed inability to remember people's real names, I had affectionately named them Cindi and Miley after their resemblance to pop singers Cindi Lauper and Miley Cyrus. A mother and daughter combination, they seemed the most unlikely marathon runners I have ever met, though given their enthusiastic vocal support to runners passing in both directions, I suspect their motives for the race were supportive rather than athletic.

Arriving back at Russia, I dropped my mittens with the support crew there, since I was starting to warm up, a mistake in hindsight and one that I will learn from should I ever be silly enough to run a sub-zero temperature marathon again. I took a long swig of my personal electrolyte drink, as I was particularly keen to avoid dehydration after my recent experience in the mountain marathon. So keen to avoid a repeat of that disaster, I drank enough water the night before the race to ensure I was up every hour on the hour to relieve myself, though careful to avoid the need for the port-a-loo at the race. Heading back out towards China, I was feeling pretty comfortable, glad to have finished one lap and familiarised myself with the course, though still with a massive task of 5 laps ahead of me.

As is often the case during any long run, in a bid to alleviate the boredom that goes with long stretches of time alone, my mind wandered to other things and became distracted from the race. I was running alone and realised it had been quite some time since I had passed any runners from the opposite direction. The terrain was firmer and the mile markers I had passed at regular intervals on the first lap were nowhere to be seen. I noticed the air strip towards my right and realised I had missed the sharp left turn. So much for a marker that cannot be missed. I retraced my steps and joined the correct route, my body less than impressed with my brain for the extra kilometre it had been forced to do. My brain's response: toughen up, princess.

Feeling rather stupid, I headed back towards the China turnaround where I kept to my strict hydration regime. My pineapple flavoured electrolyte drink tasted like a pina colada, though didn't give me quite the same buzz. Perhaps adding some spirit wouldn't have been such a bad idea, at least I would have a genuine reason for my poor navigation. Apparently one year during the race, a participant who was worried that his refreshment would freeze in the conditions added a dash of whisky to his gel-electrolyte concoction – it didn't freeze, nor did anyone else's, but it gave him something a little more to look forward to at the turnarounds.

Heading back towards Russia, the weather had stabilised and was almost bearable. The head-wind that confronted me on the first lap was not nearly as strong, and the dark clouds had given way to a lighter version. Cindy and Miley were still going strong in full supportive mode, and many of the runners exchanged cheers of support, waves or simple thumbs up. Still, the going was getting tough, as I was accumulating mud on my shoes (and half way up my legs) which made the going heavy particularly in the gooey mud which seemed to have a suction effect. I allowed myself the option of walking the two steepest hills, but still made the lap in reasonable time.

Lap 3 was almost pleasant, and I maintained good pace despite walking more of the steepest hills. Cindy and Miley were still in full voice, and I pondered just what additives were in their hydration packs. I managed a reasonable half-marathon time for the conditions (which beat the eventual winning time)and, rather naively, thought that I was on track for a similarly impressive marathon time. The improved conditions had allowed my shoes to dry to some extent, and I was becoming more adept at avoiding the worst of the muddy sections, either by taking a wide berth of using the tracks made by other runners. But as we had been forewarned, conditions can change rather quickly in Antarctica.

Lap 4 and I once again successfully negotiated the sharp left turn, not so lucky the guy about 100m in front of me who went cruising straight up the hill towards the airport. I learned later that quite a few people made this same mistake, and hopefully the race organisers will work on their signage skills for future races. Midway through the lap the wind picked up and seemed to swing around to become a cross-wind rather than the predominantly head or tail wind I had endured during the early part of the race. It was also noticeably colder and the various muscle and ligament insertions around my knees were becoming painful, not uncommon with hill running, especially downhill, which is why I tend to avoid it in training. It was somewhat disconcerting knowing that I still had two more laps remaining after this. Body was still pissed off at brain for the unnecessary additional kilometre, brain's response typically philosophical: what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Still, there was a need to negotiate a new plan, and I elected to walk all the uphills, run the downhills and jog the flats. At this stage, time was less of a factor; finishing was essential.

Lap 5 was downright miserable. The wind was fierce, the temperature dropping and the going was getting very tough. The number of runners remaining on the course diminished as the half-marathoners completed their 3 laps, and the camaraderie amongst the remaining runners dropped considerably as the reality of three more laps of torture struck home. Even Cindy and Miley were becoming subdued, relative to their earlier boisterous enthusiasm anyway. My hands particularly my fingers were frozensolid, and I regretted dropping off my mittens rather than pocketing them. Running became virtually impossible, as my knees did not seem to want to flex. Discarding my previous plan, I began to walk the flats in addition to the hills whilst attempting to run the downhills,

though my technique was not something that any running coach would advise. To heighten the enjoyment factor, it began to snow.

At the China turnaround I drank too quickly giving myself an ice-cream headache. I donned the hood of my gore-tex jacket which reduced my field of view, but with the driving snow and dark clouds visibility was already bad enough such that it didn't matter. Snow settled on my jacket and icicles stung my face, my nose no longer feeling like a part of me, but rather a freezing blob of plasticine. I stuffed my fisted hands into my pockets and decided that brisk walking would be sufficient from this point onwards, irrespective of gradient. The two bricks of mud that in a previous life were my Asics trail-runners were seriously weighing me down, and whilst I did have a spare pair of runners to change into, these would no doubt suffer the same fate within a short time on the increasingly muddy course. I would need something to wear on the return plane trip anyway, and it would be a shame to ruin a near-new pair of Salomons.

Back at Russia for the bell-lap turn, and despite Mother Nature's best efforts to the contrary, I was determined to finish this race even if I had to crawl. Every part of my body was either frozen or in extreme pain, some were even doubling up. Brain was chanting its familiar marathon mantra – pain is temporary, failure lasts forever – whilst body was trying hard to conform. I had already been lapped by the leading male runners, which was rather discouraging but I was aware that many of these were from regions of colder climate and had extensive trail-running and ultra-marathon experience. The guy running in shorts was clearly showing off, whilst the bare-foot runner had been convinced by the race organisers that it was in his (their) best interest that he use footwear for this particular race.

It was somewhat relieving to see Andy, the leading Australian male and eventual fourth place runner, walking through the latter parts of his race. I later found out that he, too, was suffering from the extreme cold conditions, and I expect that no amount of training in our warmer climate can prepare for the extreme cold in Antarctica. Whilst the hills and muddy conditions may have played a minor role, the cold was undoubtedly the major factor in the deteriorating performance of the warmer climate runners, especially coming over directly from summer training.

I trudged, splashed and slogged my way through the last lap, no longer bothering to go out of my way to avoid the worst of the muddy areas – they were all pretty mushy by now and it wasn't worth the effort of the extra distance to walk around. The snow continued to fall, the wind blew harder and as I reached China, even Bill had his scarf pulled up over his nose, his hat low over his forehead, so that he resembled a tall version of Kenny from South Park. He shout-mumbled some words of encouragement as I collected my water bottle to carry back. I would have preferred it to be filled with hot water, rather than the ice-cold remains of my virgin pina colada.

I passed the 24 mile marker for the final time. In the lead up to the race we had been given the opportunity to sponsor a mile marker for \$200 (proceeds going to some penguin charity), and to take it home at the end as a keepsake of the race. Mile number 24 was inspirational in its irony. Miles 13 and 26 were auctioned off at the end of the race along with numerous other unique items, and each fetched sizeable sums for the nominated charity – in total over \$30,000 was collected. The 23 mile marker was mysteriously stolen.

The final kilometre seemed to go on forever. The conditions were dark and gloomy, absolutely freezing and entirely uninspirational, but there was a light at the end of the tunnel. I soon saw that light ahead in the distance, passing the 26 mile marker and seeing the finish line 200 yards away up a gentle incline that resembled a small mountain. Emma – a radiographer at FMC also on the trip and pretty good company for the duration – was shuffling towards me heading out for her final lap and high fived me as she passed. Eyes on the prize, I tried unsuccessfully to pick up the pace in a bid to at least look like a runner, rather than simply a finisher, covered the distance and crossed the line to the cheers of the dozen or so staff and volunteers manning the finish line. Thankfully, one of them had a camera. A chunky medal was placed around my neck, and I was handed a mug of warm brew which doubled as a hand warmer. Incapable of anything, I was helped into my warm clothes and taken on the longest zodiac ride in the world back to the ship. Mission accomplished.

Suzanne has completed marathons / half-marathons at Uluru (bottom left) and Mount Everest (bottom right)

