

A LONG S-TROLL IN THE MIDNIGHT SUN

SET WITHIN THE ARCTIC CIRCLE, NORWAY'S MIDNIGHT SUN MARATHON MAY BE BATHED IN LIGHT, BUT THE WEATHER CAN BE A CHALLENGE

WORDS: JULIA HORTON



Rose running along Tromsø's iconic bridge



The Vikings are coming!

I am running down a quiet residential road to the soft, steady beat of other people's feet hitting the tarmac in a strange, grey half-light. When the peace is suddenly broken by an almighty clang of cowbells.

They are wielded by local families who appear, beaming, from their homes in the late evening to cheer us on with endless cries of: "Heia, heia, heia!" – which sounds like "Hey ya, hey ya, hey ya!" and means "Go, go, go!"

This is the 2018 Midnight Sun Marathon in the Norwegian city of Tromsø in the Arctic Circle.

PHENOMENAL LIGHT

Dubbed the world's most northerly, it starts at 8.30pm to take advantage of the phenomenal 24-hour midsummer light. There are record numbers of runners this year with over 1,200 from around the world.

Although I've done a couple of halves, I never thought I would run a full marathon until a friend decided this would be a great way to mark her 50th birthday.

And although the midnight sun is firmly hidden behind cloud, I feel great as the first few kilometres go by.

The crowd's enthusiasm is infectious and I high-five random toddlers and grandparents all eager to greet as many runners as possible.

Months of training seem to have paid off and I've already managed the most iconic and ominous-looking spot, the city's



Sore legs, happy heads. A memorable way to celebrate a 50th birthday!

distinctive bridge which rises steeply to a point midway over the water like an inverted 'v' and has been haunting me for months. Otherwise the course is mainly flat.

While some runners plug into headphones one Brazilian guy in the vibrant yellow football strip of his native land jogs along nonchalantly glued to his mobile phone as he watches his team play in the World Cup.

Most runners wear more typical gear and there is a broad mix of ages, nationalities and experience with multiple marathoners as well as first-timers like myself and my friend, Rose Livingston.

SNOW-CAPPED VISTAS

Fancy dress doesn't seem popular, though a couple of grinning Vikings pose happily with other runners at the start line near the city hall, where we queued the day before to collect our race numbers.

I lose Rose somewhere between the toilets and a madly aerobic pre-race warm-up but spot her not long after we set off. We run together for a few minutes before I go ahead slightly.

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Heading back towards the bridge and the second half of the run, I can't help but admire the distant snow-capped peaks as my legs tire and I lapse into my usual mix of walking and running.

I am jogging as we pass a bronze statue of world-famous Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen outside the Polar Museum, his features set for eternity against the elements.

It puts what we're doing into perspective briefly as I imagine his gruelling trek to the South Pole.

But that doesn't last as running out of town towards the airport the race feels ever more extreme as rain falls and a strong, icy wind whips up, numbing my hands despite gloves.

My brain freezes too and I struggle to remember where I need to be to get around the course by 2am – the 5hr 30min cut off time set by the organisers.

THERE'S NOR-WAY I'M GIVING UP

Like the first half of the race, the route goes out and back along the same path, so you see all those in front of you going past towards the finish.

There seem to be lots of fresh-legged people hurtling by, which is demoralising, and I don't realise until the next day that they are all half-marathoners.



Are you German? No. Er, Swiss? Oh, we give up...

On my side the pack has thinned out and I'm mainly alone, forcing myself to keep trying to run and hoping the wind will fade.

Feeling slightly dizzy I grab more energy drinks than water from the stations, where marshals are still really encouraging.

Coming back into the city my humour returns as I encounter a few high-fiving supporters who seem to have spent as much time in the bars as I've now spent on my feet.

As Rose's husband, our official supporter, wryly observes later runners and drinkers all end up staggering in time.

When the finish finally appears, I break into a last run and am soon sporting a space blanket, a medal aptly depicting two running women – based on a city sculpture – and a slightly dazed but happy expression. I've made it in 5hrs 12mins.

Just moments later Rose, a speech therapist from Helensburgh, sprints over the line.

She suffers briefly for her impressive last-minute push as she throws up. But we both make a speedy recovery, much helped by a blissful soak in a hot tub at the Vulkana Spa in Tromsø harbour later the same morning.

Summing up the run later in the week, Rose says: "It was not quite as sunny as I'd



Tromsø has some special surroundings

expected for a midnight sun marathon and I found it quite hard, particularly the second half because the wind got up and it was very cold and wet.

"The support was amazing though, particularly the people with the cowbells.

"My toes are sore, but I'm fine otherwise and I've been wearing my medal most days since, on the rest of our holiday here."

MORE INFO

NEXT YEAR IS THE 30TH MIDNIGHT SUN MARATHON, TAKING PLACE ON 22 JUNE 2019. VISIT MSM.NO/EN

WE DID IT!



"I thought this would be a good way to celebrate my 40th. Tromsø was beautiful and I loved

the fact I could see snow-capped mountains the entire way. Running under the midnight sun (or daylight at least) was special. Even though the weather wasn't ideal I thought the support from the locals was great and loved all the cheers of 'Heia!'"

Rebecca Brimage



"It's a weird concept running at night but it not being dark. It was like a winter's day in

England. Everyone was really cheery and I got a PB of 3hrs 51mins, so I'm absolutely chuffed!"

Jo Holl



"It was my first marathon out of the UK so I was very keen.

I heard it was one of the top 10 to do in the world, along with London and New York, so it sounded interesting. I ran the race alone so it was quite a lonely, bleak run at times, especially the second half when the weather and miles kicked in. It was well marshalled and there were a good few supporters braving the weather, bless them. At 12.45am when I crossed the line I was exhausted but pretty pleased with my time."

Debbie Hatt