

Should've Been There: Running Highs at Low Altitude

The Dead Sea Half Marathon and 10K

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The notice arrived in my in-box on a day where the thermometer never made it to the freezing point; an invitation to run in the 25th Annual Dead Sea International Half-Marathon in Israel on February 17th, offering a respite from the cold and a glimpse into a culture of enormous historic and contemporary significance. The idea of visiting the Middle East and racing at the lowest point on earth was one I couldn't resist, so I packed running shoes, hiking boots and spa gear and set off on an Israeli adventure that culminated in the race.

When I arrived at Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, I met up with two foreign journalists and headed to the Ein Gedi Kibbutz. The 140 km ride from the airport to the kibbutz was the only time I felt even a little unsafe during my stay in Israel. I walked alone through the streets of Jerusalem with significantly less fear than I did riding shotgun with our driver. This was a man for whom the term multi-tasking was invented. While traveling at an impressive rate of speed past Bedouin encampments in the desert, he listened to Dire Straights at top volume while talking on not one but two cell phones, driving with his knees, and smoking with an intensity that has been mostly lost in the US.

Any trepidation I had about my trip melted away when I finally arrived at Ein Gedi, an oasis of indescribable beauty in the desert above the Dead Sea. The guest house and the kibbutz are set in the middle of a botanical garden that has over 900 species of plants from all over the world. In nearby Ein Gedi National Park I discovered an abundance of hiking trails ranging in difficulty from easy to very challenging.

After a day on the trails I took the shuttle down to the Ein Gedi Spa, where guests can float in the therapeutic waters of the Dead Sea. I treated my road-weary muscles to a massage and took a healing bath in Dead Sea mud, which the literature reported is not only rich in minerals, but also absorbs toxins, increases circulation and strengthens hair.

At the dining hall of the guest house I met contingent of runners and walkers from Bad Kissingen, Germany, sister city to Ein Gedi, The bond between the Germans and the Israelis is one that has been forged over two decades. Many of these German families return year after year to participate in the race and show support for their Israeli counterparts.

Race day dawned warm and sunny, a significant headwind blowing across the Dead Sea and taking with it any hope of a PR. The festivities at the start echoed those of races around the world. There were over 2000 runners, many accompanied by family and friends; there was loud music, long lines at the porta-johns, and endless announcements over a scratchy P.A. system. The announcements were in Hebrew, most of the other details, however, were universal. A rough New England winter and a serious scarcity of long runs lead me to choose 10 kilometers over 21, a decision I appreciated more as the temperature rose. The course for both races runs along the Dead Sea toward the ancient fortress of Masada, which looms over the half-marathon turning point. The desert landscape changed little along the course, but the feeling of running through lands described in the bible was unforgettable.



Runners still active after finishing the Dead Sea Half-Marathon and 10k

As I ran, I looked to the east, across the Dead Sea to the hills of Jordan rising in the distance. On the return of the out-and-back course the heat caused the pavement to shimmer and dance as the finish line loomed ahead; the crystalline desert air created the illusion of proximity and made the last 3 kilometers seem interminable. On the plus side, there are real benefits to running at almost 1400 feet below sea level. The air is rich in oxygen and bromide, which lowers the blood pressure, boosts oxygen intake and, according to local lore, has a calming effect.

The Spa was opened to all who finished the races. What better way to recuperate and relax after a hard race than sit in a pool of warm, spring-fed mineral water, before taking the plunge into the cerulean waters of the Dead Sea?

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