The Australian Outback Marathon is a fully “packaged” marathon experience. This means that participants don’t just enter the race but get to choose from a selection of fully hosted Outback holidays which range from a basic trip of three days and two nights up to 7 days and 6 nights.

I chose the longest package so as to allow me to fully appreciate all that the Australian Outback Marathon has to offer. The trip is centred around Uluru (Ayers Rock) and was packed with memorable events and visits. The marathon was my first visit to Central Australia and I couldn’t have asked for a better initiation.

Every day we were treated to a new experience as the tours that were included were spectacular. We watched the sun come up over Uluru - something everyone should experience at least once; we did the 11km walk at the base of Uluru; we visited the cultural centre to meet the local indigenous people; and we trekked through Kata Tjuta (The Olgas) and Kings Canyon. All were experiences not to be missed. Kings Canyon is similar (although much smaller) to the Grand Canyon; it is a small oasis teeming with life in the middle of the desert, with walks, waterholes and abundant plant life.

All of which contributed to a huge appetite, which was more than satisfied by the gourmet buffet meals that were included. These ranged from an outdoor “welcome” dinner on our first night – giving the opportunity to meet with some of our fellow runners as well as the event management team, to a smorgasbord-style dinner that allowed us the chance to sample some of the foods that Australia is famous for – barramundi, crocodile, kangaroo and emu amongst others. There were also plenty of “regular” foods on offer, such as salads, roast meats and a great variety of desserts. A pasta party offered all the runners the chance to mingle and carbo-load the evening before the Marathon.

We arrived early, the Tuesday before the race. Guided training runs, or even just relaxing by the pool, gave us a chance to familiarize ourselves with the resort, the other people and the management team, who were no longer just names on the end of an email.

It was my second marathon in July and my third of the year, but the only thing it had in common with the other two was the distance of 42.195km. In contrast to pounding the pavement with 5000 other runners through the hustle and bustle of city streets and suburbs the quiet, serene remoteness of the Australian Outback was another world. There is a certain intimacy you get in the smaller marathons, which is missing in the larger ones. The Australian Outback Marathon definitely had it.

We were up early for the race start on Saturday morning and runners were transported to the start line via a fleet of specially chartered coaches. We were treated to the delicate sounds of a didgeridoo as our welcoming music. Nowhere else in the world would you hear the words “three, two, one” and then, rather than a starting pistol, have the didgeridoo blast out the “Go”.

The Marathon itself is run on private red earth bush tracks that are a feature throughout Central Australia. The tracks are made of packed earth and were specially “graded” for the race meaning that they were slightly soft. A few small sand dunes were strategically included which, whilst challenging to climb, offered some spectacular views of Uluru (Ayers Rock) and Kata Tjuta (the Olgas).

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There was plenty of support out on the well-marked course, with drink and aid stations every 3km. It was an unusually warm day for the time of year (it is normally around 20°C but climbed to 26°C) so the water and sports drinks were very welcome, as were the cheers and support of the volunteers and medical personnel at each of the stations.

The area has been inhabited by the traditional owners, Anangu people, for 40,000 years. The surroundings brought everyone together, enjoying the serenity of one of Australia’s most sacred places.

Continued on page 17
After finishing in a respectable 3:30 (only two minutes slower than my city marathon three weeks earlier) the applause and congratulations of fellow runners contributed to a friendly, supportive atmosphere. Although we had only met days earlier many of them I now claimed as friends. And did I mention the magnificent backdrop of Uluru at the finishing line?

The Celebration Dinner held on the Sunday evening was a final highlight. It was held outdoors in the desert, with Uluru to the east and Kata Tjuta to the west. As the sun set behind Kata Tjuta, the palette of changing colours and the silhouette of the desert oaks was then replaced by a multitude of stars in a clear bright sky. We were treated to a delicious meal, fine wines, a slideshow of the previous day’s exertions and the comradeship of the other runners. Many had come from countries around the world to share in the natural beauty that surrounded us.

The Australian Outback Marathon allowed us to share part of our great country along with others from the global running community. It is a truly unique experience that will be long remembered.