A glorious Saturday in mid-September, and the sun welcomes you to the heart of Stockholm. It’s just a few minutes before the start of the race and I am spellbound by the beauty of the Swedish capital.

I turn around and have a last glimpse of the baroque Royal Palace just behind me. Could it be King Carl XVI Gustaf hiding behind the curtains of one of the hundreds of windows? His daughter the Princess married the owner of a gym last summer; shouldn’t he be here handing out free tickets to his establishment?

My fantasies dissolve in the mild late summer afternoon. We are almost 11,000 runners and one cavalier, King Gustavus Adolphus riding a marble horse in the square that is named after him. Almost 40 years after the submission of the original plans to erect the first statue of a Swedish monarch, the King finally mounted the horse. And 215 years later he hasn’t jumped off yet.

I plan to move a little faster, a couple of hours and 21km through the islands, around the Riddarfjärden Bay. The sound of Blondie’s “Heart of Glass” fills the square, not exactly what is played at the Opera, on our right side, and I hope that my own cardiac power will prove stronger than that.

Bang! Here we go; slowly up Brunkebergsåsen, an esker that once reached over much of Stockholm’s central parts. After less than 2km the scene becomes surreal as we turn into the Klaratunnel underpass, normally the scene of rush-hour snarl-ups, all the cars have vanished. Soon the sky is back and we head into Vasagatan, once a narrow and filthy alley with derelict houses and boathouses, but now a busy street full of commuters and tourists converging on the Central Station. I wonder who gives the more frantic impression, the 11,000 of us running by or the travellers rushing to catch their trains?

Continued on page 25
Quite a few of the capital’s million-plus inhabitants enjoy the unexpected late summer day. It seems like every block has at least one café where Stockholmers sip a caffe latte and bask in the sun, forgetting all about the long, dark winter ahead of them.

After half an hour the first of many bridges awaits us: the Orphanage Bridge to the King’s Island. It seems like every place in Stockholm is connected to the Royal Family but who were the abandoned children that gave the crossing its name? I have already forgotten these unanswered questions by the time we are running along the waterfront. This incredible city always bounces back to its rivers, lakes, canals, bays – all part of the immense archipelago that embraces the Swedish capital. There are fishermen next to the City Hall, kayaks, sailing boats and even a swimmer who refuses to admit which month it is. The water is so pure that a local politician once drunk a glass of it in front of bewildered foreign guests.

Ice cream eaters alternate between admiring the runners and feeding the swans with their leftover cones. We leave the King’s Island (“Kungsholmen”) down the little slope and up the Brick Hill (“Tegelbacken”) right into the heart of Swedish political power. We run right through the courtyard of the House of Parliament before taking our first steps in the Old Town.

Now we are back at the Royal Palace, one of Europe’s largest, and still functioning as an official residence. However it could be difficult to know in which of the 609 rooms the monarch is working. I try to remember the window I looked at before the start.

After a quick refreshment - there is no time to divert into the narrow medieval streets of the Old Town - we reach Slussen, the lock that controls the flow between the Lake of Mälaren and the Baltic Sea.

We have covered two thirds of the distance as we turn towards the bohemian island, of Södermalm. Maybe the cool guys are still sleepy after a late Friday night, I can’t spot too many of them along the quays. But as we approach Bergsund, or Knivsöder as the locals love to call this edgy end of the town, it’s obvious that the beat is going down. It could be just a hazy notion, but I’m sure that we are slowing down as the course goes slightly but unmercifully uphill. Bite the bullet!

What goes up has to come down, and a sharp descent brings us back towards Slussen. The fastest runners can observe the slower moving fellows who have almost half of the race still to enjoy, as they cross in opposite directions here on Skeppsbron, Stockholm’s oldest quay. It was developed during the first half of the 17th Century by King Gustavus Adolphus (our cavalier from the beginning of the story) when he ordered the defensive wall that surrounded Stockholm to be torn down.

The last turn around the Royal Palace brings us back to where we started. The sun still shines, the king hasn’t dismounted his horse, and Blondie no longer blasts out of the speakers.

My heart is not of glass, but it has softened during its journey through the lovely city of Stockholm. A half marathon it may be - but a whole experience.

**Result**

**MEN:**
1. Adil BONAFIF SWE 1:04:41
2. Haben IDRIS SWE 1:06:34
3. Daniel WOLDU SWE 1:07:27
4. Matthew BARNES GBR 1:07:32
5. Janne HOLMEN FIN 1:07:34
6. Emilio LERDAL SWE 1:07:39
7. Johan LARSSON SWE 1:07:44
8. Erik PETERSSON SWE 1:07:52
9. Andreas AHWALL SWE 1:08:16
10. Kristian ALGERS SWE 1:08:27

**WOMEN:**
1. Isabellah ANDERSSON SWE 1:11:07
2. Jenny JANSSEN SWE 1:17:04
3. Annah RAHM SWE 1:17:30
4. Inga KAZLAUSKAITE SWE 1:17:40
5. Gabriella SAMUELSSON SWE 1:18:24
6. Josephine AMBJÖRNSON SWE 1:18:26
7. Charlotte KARLSSON SWE 1:18:44
8. Kajsa BERG SWE 1:18:56
9. Anna Von SCHENK SWE 1:19:22