The Victoria Falls Marathon has one of the most spectacular backdrops to any race – the majestic Falls on the border of Zimbabwe and Zambia which so impressed Victorian explorer David Livingstone that he described “scenes so lovely that they must have been gazed at by angels in their flight”, and then promptly re-named the Falls after his Queen.

As the Zambezi River discharges over the Falls a plume of moisture rises high into the air, descending over a broad area to form a lush microclimate, and a huge refreshing “mist” station for runners. The original name of the Falls, Mosi-oa-Tunya, means “the smoke that thunders”.

The town of Victoria Falls grew up to service tourist interest in the Falls, but over the last 10 years much of that has shifted over the border to Livingstone in Zambia. The race itself, launched six years ago when Zimbabwe was in financial turmoil (the tumbling currency did not help at all), has run counter to the trend. At first international and tourist runners were wary of coming but today, with over 700 runners participating in one or other of the three distances, it is poised to become one of the premier races of Africa. The scenery and the opportunity to see wildlife are big draws.

The town offers a good selection of hotels for visitors on any budget, and there are varied activities and places to see including whitewater rafting, canoeing, bungi jumping and ‘gorge swings’ from Victoria Falls Bridge, 100m above river level. Those wanting less strenuous options can enjoy high tea at the Victoria Falls Hotel, an helicopter ride or flight over the Falls, and perhaps an elephant-back safari or an encounter with lions. The many national parks in the region (Hwange, Chobe, Zambezi National Park) all offer multi-day safaris with fantastic game viewing available.
The race benefits from many local sponsors and involves the community as much as possible. The race supports the disabled people of Zimbabwe (over a 100 wheelchairs were donated this year), and the Victoria Falls Anti-poaching – wildlife conservation initiative.

Race weekend coincided with a sudden spike in the temperature. All that time spent training on the road, but did we have what it took to deal with the heat? We wandered down to registration at The Kingdom Hotel and were immediately enveloped in a positively buzzing pre-race atmosphere. We met serious, lean athletes, honed to performance, club runners with carefree banter yet very clear intentions, nervous first timers, and tourists who'd just decided they'd give it a bash while they were in town. Race numbers in hand, we left to carboload.

Next morning we were up early, performing our individual pre-race rituals, trying to quell flip flopping tummies and shaky lace tying hands. As soon as we arrived at the start, outside the row of banks and post office of Victoria Falls, the music and jostling bodies swept us into the fever of the atmosphere was electric. The gun sounded, and runners surged forward. The wheelchair athletes lined up next, to wait for the gun to go off a few minutes later. It was a humbling experience to see these amazing people, despite their disabilities, push their bodies to the limits. All our moans and groans are silenced, it would be frivolous to whine about a blister when watching someone heave a rickety wheelchair up a hill. The half marathon runners started next, at 07.00, and it was a relief just to get running after waiting for so long, trying to stay warm and focussed, between regular dashes to the toilet.

The run across the Victoria Falls Bridge is utterly stunning. The soft early morning light dances across the spray, making the Falls ethereally beautiful. Quite a few runners simply stopped to absorb such a sight, and take pictures. Fortunately we get to run over the bridge twice. The scenery just gets better, as the run loops around Zambezi Drive, which is very close to the river edge, above the Falls. Rushing rapids, lush riverine forest and if you take the time to observe, fantastically varied bird life; for three kilomtres, it's hard to beat.

There are times when you could feel vulnerable, running in the bush but regular National Park scouts, armed and patrolling, set your mind at rest. A few gentler rolling hills take you to towards the Zambezi National Park, where a short loop through the park is an added treat. It was at this point that the marathon elite overtook us at breathtaking speed. Looking graceful, effortless and barely sweating, they slipped past us before we knew what was happening. Humbled and a little depressed, we soldiered on up the not insignificant hills to the entrance of the Victoria Falls Safari Lodge.

An utter delight awaited us: dancers, drums, cheering and festive supporters, right at the moment when morale is low. It could not have happened at a better time. It gave us strength to continue and picked up everyone’s flagging spirits.

By this time, the temperature was steadily climbing, and the regular water points were a godsend. Every point had its own character, sponsored by various companies, and it was a great experience to have enthusiastic folk every few kilometres, encouraging us all onward. Almost too soon we reached Victoria Falls Primary School, and after a lap around the field, the finish was suddenly upon us. The marathon sponsors have their hospitality tents dotted around the field, making for a very social ending for a thoroughly enjoyable race.

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We’ll be back next year (although we may do some training in a sauna first) for a unique, well organised race with so many extra experiences – the wildlife, the scenery and the welcoming people.

Result

MEN:
1 Michael NGASEKE ZIM 2:24:31
2 Kudakwashe KANDUNA ZIM 2:25:06
3 Chasara MASIYATSUA ZIM 2:27:44
4 Oliver KANDIERO ZIM 2:29:56
5 Jephias MUNONI ZIM 2:30:58
6 John DAYARIRA ZIM 2:31:38
7 Paul MHIZHA ZIM 2:32:07
8 Geturi BAYO TAN 2:32:19
9 Sampson TENAI KEN 2:32:23
10 Tawanda TOKISI ZIM 2:42:04

WOMEN:
1 Lizil CHOKORE ZIM 2:51:16
2 Olivia CHITANE ZIM 2:53:30
3 Banuelia KATESIGWA TAN 2:58:44
4 Chiyedza CHOKORE ZIM 3:10:01
5 Jill OLIPHANT RSA 3:21:00
6 Cathrine NYAKWISHIRA ZIM 3:21:56
7 Susanna VERMAAK RSA 3:28:27
8 Sandra DU BRUYN RSA 3:41:29
9 Janet ADAM RSA 3:52:59
10 Maggie HENTON USA 3:57:00

HALF MARATHON

MEN:
1 Kelvin PANGISO ZIM 1:07:11
2 Nkosiyazi SIBANDA ZIM 1:07:38
3 Gilbert MUTANDIRO ZIM 1:08:04

WOMEN:
1 Constance NYASA ZIM 1:24:20
2 Alicen MANAKE ZIM 1:30:28
3 Patience MUROWE ZIM 1:31:58