Jerusalem Marathon, Israel

A popular pilgrimage in the Holy City

The City of Jerusalem hosted about 15,000 runners from all over Israel and from about 50 countries worldwide in the Marathon, Half Marathon and 10km races. They fought driving rain and strong winds in the second ever marathon held in the Holy City.

Hundreds of police were deployed to provide security along the course, part of which ran through annexed Arab East Jerusalem, and 4,000 Israeli soldiers also ran in a special race along the route.

No amount of security could have afforded protection from the cold and wet weather. A wave of rain swept over runners as they awaited the 07.00 start and it was cold throughout, with rain, strong winds and hailstones pounding the runners as they fought their way up Jerusalem’s famous hills. But the wintry showers did not stop runners from enjoying the experience of running in Jerusalem and a festival atmosphere prevailed, with crowds turning out along the route to support the runners.

The challenging course also provided a scenic and historical tour from the start outside the Knesset, Israel’s Parliament, past the walls of the Old City, the Sultan’s Pool, Mishkenot Sha’ananim, the Mount of Olives, Ammunition Hill, Armon Hanatziv and more.

"I’ve done 12 New York City marathons but nothing compares to this," said Jerry, a 65-year-old American runner. “People warned me how hard the hills were, and they are”. A thousand runners completed the full marathon, 4000 ran the half, and 10,000 joined the 10km race. Some came from as far away as Trinidad and Tobago and Indonesia.

Nielson, a Brazilian in his 50s said: “I’ve run marathons all around the world: along the Great Wall of China; in Trinidad; in Dubai; but this was the hardest because of all the hills. I really enjoyed myself, with all the people saying ‘shalom’ to me. But next time, you come run in Brazil. It’s much warmer.” he grinned.

Starting from the Knesset, Israel’s parliament, the route took runners up and down several hills, through the walled Old City and areas of East Jerusalem, including the biblical Mount of Olives. Israel captured East Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War and later annexed it in a move never recognised by the rest of the world.

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A participant from France said: “the Jerusalem Marathon was indeed breathtaking. It was a unique experience to pass through the city’s incredible scenery. I will come back in 2013 too, of course.”

Nir Barkat, Jerusalem’s mayor, who took part in the half marathon, said: “Jerusalem is on the international marathon map. This impressive event is not only a sporting spectacle but also a financial boost for Jerusalem since it attracts many tourists and runners to our city. About 1,600 runners from all corners of the world came, especially so that they could have the experience of running through Jerusalem’s historical sites.”

“No training in the world could prepare you for the terrain of Jerusalem and the hills,” said Noella Pio Kivlehan, a first-time marathon runner from Ireland who completed the race in just under six hours. “There was really good camaraderie among those of us who were among the stragglers. It really helped me when things got difficult.”