A blend of authenticity and modernity

By Youssef Outmane · Photos by Valentina Oustampasidi

Marrakech is an oasis in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains; an imperial city surrounded by beautiful palm groves and ochre walls. Every year it plays host to the Marrakech International Marathon. Red Marrakech, also known as the Pearl of the South, which once gave its name to Morocco, still retains its capacity to amaze. Its own special blend of authenticity and modernity makes it the ideal offering for runners in search of a long weekend away.

The race begins at 08.00 on the last Sunday in January, with runners making their way past the luxuriant palm-grove of the city, the orange and olive trees of the Menara Gardens and the ramparts of the ancient Medina of Marrakech. The Marathon course is flat and fast and takes runners by numerous historic sights and landmarks.

With blue skies and a mild temperature of around 15C at the time of the race start the Marathon now boasts an impressive course record of 2:06:35. The road surface is excellent, there are refreshment stations every five kilometres and there are sponging stations in between them. Isotonic drinks are available at every alternate refreshment station.

Marrakech International Marathon held its inaugural race back in 1987. Frenchman Jacques Boxbberger won the men’s race while the women’s event was won by Morocco’s 14-year-old Nadia Colombero – an achievement not to be repeated since 18 has become accepted as the lower age limit to run a Marathon. Marrakech celebrated the silver anniversary of its marathon in the latest edition with 7,000 runners participating and coming from all over the world to do so.

During the 24th edition in 2013, the Kenyan two-time winner Stephen Tum Kipkem ei, broke Abdelkader Mouazu’s longstanding course record of 2:08:14 set back in 1999 with a win in 2:06:35. The women’s marathon record is still held by the Romanian Adriana Barbu who ran 2:29:21 in 1994.

The race route takes runners through portions of the magical city of Marrakech, making one big loop in, around and back into the city. The start and finish are right in the middle of the city, at Mohammed VI Street, and the course passes several historic sites and landmarks unique to the “Red City” – red mud buildings and 12th century fortifications – standing proudly besides the Ville Nouvelle (new city), where a strong French colonial influence is evident.

Continued on page 23
The course takes you through the Ville Nouvelle and alongside the ramparts of the old Medina. You pass through the upscale palm-grove area, where date palms once prevailed, before you cross the Tensift River and return back to the Menara Gardens. Here the marathon route comes close to Harti Garden, the Koutoubiya Mosque, the Kasbah, the battlefields and monumental gateways, Djemaa el Fna, the open-air theatre, and several impressive monuments. The entire area was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1985, two years before the inaugural edition of the marathon.

The “Red City” is a melting pot of Amazigh and Arab culture with more recent international transplants. While your eyes feast on the sights, amazing rhythms play out in front of you. The drumbeats rise along with the clinking of finger cymbals and filigrees of flute music. Together they take you along the entire course through to the finish line.

“Le Grand Atlas” association is the main organiser of the Marathon, and also offers an open half marathon both for elite runners and those aspiring towards the marathon. There is also a Children’s race over a 3km course which shares the same festive and friendly atmosphere.

The race is an exceptional tourist event, which draws in people from abroad to run and thousands of Moroccans who come to enjoy the festivity of the occasion.

Marrakech Marathon, organised under the High Patronage of His Majesty King Mohammed VI, is one of nine AIMS events in Morocco. The country has assumed a leading role in road racing in North Africa and the Arab world for the last 10 years through the efforts of Rachid Ben Meziane, who was last September appointed an “ambassador” for AIMS.

Road races in Morocco have enjoyed strong growth in the last few years. In particular, Rachid Ben Meziane concentrated on developing the RAHAL Running Morocco Series (with elite races in several cities, including the RAHAL Casablanca 10km).

One great result of this work is that the 10km International ASTA Footing Taroudant is ranked as the fastest 10km race in the world. Taroudant, a city just south of Marrakech, is hosting the 4th edition of its international 10km on 9 March, while the neighbouring town of Tafraout will organise the second edition of the Atlas 65km and 21km trail races.

According to Ben Meziane, more competitions will soon be announced in several Moroccan cities. Currently there are more than 30 races organized in the country, but an eagerly anticipated addition is the Agadir City Marathon, the inaugural edition of which is scheduled within the next few months. The main objective with all these promotions is to grow the running community in Morocco by staging well-organised races over a variety of distances.

Continued from page 21

Result

### MEN:

1. Deribe MELKA ETH 2:08:04
2. Tebalu HEI ETH 2:08:20
3. Daniel RONO KEN 2:09:07
4. Cosa TAFA ETH 2:09:58
5. Simon Kamama MUKUN KEN 2:10:42
6. Hillary YEGO KEN 2:11:54
7. Edeo MAMO ETH 2:12:51
8. Isaac Torotich KOSGEI KEN 2:12:59
10. Duncan Cheruiyot KOECH KEN 2:14:23

### WOMEN:

1. Meseret KITATA ETH 2:31:08
2. Genemo SHUKO ETH 2:31:09
3. Chaltu CIMDESA ETH 2:31:23
4. Taye GULILAT ETH 2:31:50
5. Ruth WANJIRU KEN 2:33:58
6. Halima HASSEN ETH 2:36:08
7. Selam ALEBACHEW ETH 2:36:08
8. Nazha MAC ROUH MAR 2:36:14
9. Emily Jemutai CHERUIYOT KEN 2:36:42
10. Soumila LABANI MAR2:43:39

### HALF MARATHON

#### MEN:

1. Guye ADOLA ETH 1:01:26
2. Richard Kiprotich SIGEI KEN 1:01:30
3. Hicham LAQUAARH MAR1:01:33

#### WOMEN:

1. Rkia EL MOUKIM MAR1:10:03
2. Eunice CHUMBA KEN 1:10:46
3. Kanbouchia SOUD MAR1:10:53

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Distance Running | 2014 Edition 2 23