



LEG IT  
The course was flat and fast



CENTRE OF ATTENTION  
Sections of the route were postcard-perfect

# POLISHED PERFORMANCE

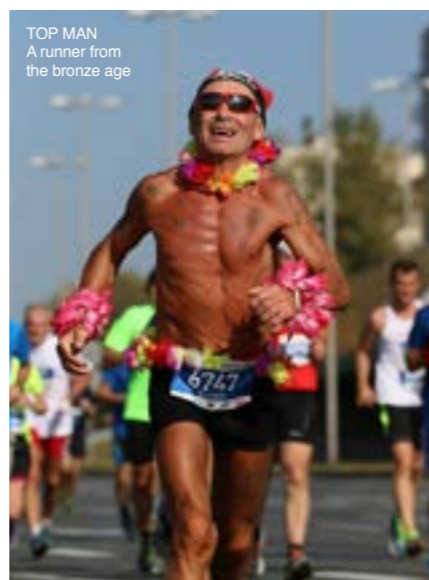
Fast, flat and superbly organised, the Warsaw Marathon also offers a crash course in the city's history, says Justin Bowyer

Poland – and capital city Warsaw, in particular – has a long history of defiance, uprising and rebellion, but when it comes to staging a marathon it does things by the book. Hustling almost 7,000 runners into some kind of order is no mean achievement, but with 35 editions of the race under their belt, the organisers of the PZU Warsaw Marathon clearly know what they are doing. Bag drops, twin lines of timed start pens, 17 pacer groups – ranging from 3:00 to 4:50 – and plenty of toilets (300, for you loo-counters) all set the tone for an immaculate and unseasonably warm September event.

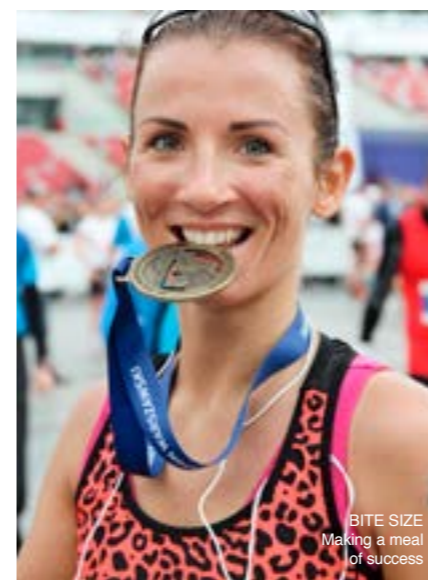
The race, which begins on the Poniatowski Bridge, has a reputation for being fast and flat. And although the first mile slopes gradually upwards (which is perfect for finding both pace and space), this proved to be the case.

Most big-city marathons offer a condensed sightseeing experience; Warsaw also throws in a crash course in history – and nothing says more about the country's progress than the site of the former Communist Party HQ, which has been transformed into the city's stock exchange, with a Ferrari showroom at ground level. But if history isn't enough to distract from the effort of running 26 miles, the course also features 41 'entertainment stations' – ranging from military bands at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, to choirs, punk-jazz combos and a lone 'robot dancer'.

Miles three to six took runners through the old town – it's largely a postwar reconstruction, but still postcard-perfect – and past the luxurious Hotel Bristol. Those looking at their feet at this stage would also have spotted a blink-and-miss-it point of interest – on an otherwise unmarked stretch of cobblestones sits a manhole cover, an entrance to Warsaw's



TOP MAN  
A runner from the bronze age



BITE SIZE  
Making a meal of success

Words Justin Bowyer Photography Warsaw Marathon

## THE RUNDOWN

### PZU Warsaw Marathon

Poland (2014 stats)

First man  
Victor Kipchirchir 2:09:59  
First woman  
Svitlana Stanko 2:33:04  
No of starters/finishers  
6,840/6,678 (97.6% finished)

#### Finishing stats

2-3 hours 2.4%  
3-4 hours 37.9%  
4-5 hours 47.4%  
5-6 hours 11.6%  
6-7 hours 0.7%



ancient sewerage system and a main point of escape for many Jews from the city's ghetto during the Second World War.

Heading back along the river's edge, at mile eight the course took runners to Lazienki Park. Warsaw is a city of splendid parks, but the Lazienki is a particular gem; shaded and cool for running, home to hundreds of red squirrels and, oddly, bedecked with Chinese lanterns.

Squeezing enough miles into any city to achieve a marathon distance inevitably means a stretch or two of less desirable running; Warsaw serves this up in the four-plus miles that follow the relief of the park. The basic, could-be-anywhere ring road offers nothing but the opportunity to crank out some distance and hit the halfway point; the thin crowd support here added to the sense of isolation and focused the mind on the challenge still ahead. Only at the turning point at mile 15, down narrow tracks, did things become interesting again.

The affluent suburbs to the south, while not particularly remarkable, are an interesting glimpse into the day-to-day existence of the city's residents and another reminder of how far they have come not only from the devastation of the war but also from the collapse of communism, a mere 26 years ago. On this

long stretch, jubilant supporters offered smiles, waves and high-fives; this is a city whose people have taken the marathon to heart and they seem determined to cheer on its heroes – so long as they don't have to do it on a ring road.

By the time I had cranked out my 21st mile I was starting to flag – it never matters how well I hydrate, eat or otherwise plan my race strategy, this is always the case. There's really nothing to do but dig a little deeper for a little longer – and in Warsaw, at least, this is helped by the fact that all but the final mile is a long straight section through the crowd-thronged outer city.

Finally, I glimpsed the plastic palm tree I'd been looking forward to. This, perhaps, needs some explaining: at the centre of the Charles de Gaulle roundabout – site of the Communist Party HQ/Ferrari showroom and the final turn to stadium glory – stands a full-size artificial palm whose leaves are changed twice year. Every runner knew the fake foliage meant the end was in sight. With a sharp right and a final water station, there it was.

As finishes go, stadiums rock, and as stadiums go, Warsaw's takes some beating. The scale is simply staggering (as was I) and, despite a brief uphill through the players' tunnel, utterly uplifting – with music, video screens, cheerleaders and what appeared to be all the children in Poland. The finish was as slickly organised as everything that had gone before – medals were draped, water and sports drinks were collected, bags were reclaimed and both changing and shower facilities were on hand within moments. The PZU Warsaw Marathon is as close to perfection as I have seen; saying that they do this 'by the book' is perhaps a disservice – it's as if they wrote it.

Ninety-three per cent of runners at the PZU Warsaw Marathon are Polish and of the foreign contingent less than one per cent is British – a number that deserves to be far higher, given not just the quality of the race but the surprising beauty and richness of Warsaw itself.

● Run it The 2015 PZU Warsaw Marathon is on September 27 ([warsawmarathon.com](http://warsawmarathon.com))

## THE LOWDOWN

**GET THERE**  
LOT Airlines flies from London Heathrow to Warsaw (Chopin Airport) return from £150. A bus to the city centre costs £1. There is also a train service to the city, and taxis are easily available.

**STAY**  
Budget There are three Ibis hotels (ibis.com) within 5km of the centre, with rooms from £27 per night. Upmarket Try the Radisson Blu Sobieski (radissonblu.com). Rooms from £65.

**SIGHTSEE**  
Warsaw is compact enough that you can walk almost everywhere. For the best views of the city, head for the observation deck of the Palace of Culture and Science – known as 'Stalin's Gift.'

**FUEL**  
Pierogi, Polish dumplings, are ubiquitous, delicious and excellent race fuel. Or you could try Pasta i Basta (5 Odolarńska) for an Italian carb fest from just £5.

**WARM UP**  
Warsaw has dozens of green spaces where you can stretch the legs but Lazienki Park also has running paths. If you run in the old town early in the morning you'll feel you have the place to yourself.