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Feeling Jerusalem in every step



Jerusalem Marathon finish line

SUZANNE WINTROB
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

When the going gets tough, the tough go running. At least that's how Raúl Perez and Clemencia Sarna ended up scaling the hills of Jerusalem this year.

The Winnipeg couple had always dreamed of visiting the Holy Land but life got in the way. Then several years ago, after facing a series of personal and financial challenges, they made what they call a "spiritual commitment" to each other: if they could overcome their difficulties, they would make the trip.

"We were in really bad shape," recalls Perez, 52. "But with our faith and God's help we were able to commit to our promise now that we have recovered in every step."

The pair chose to heighten their week-long adventure by signing up for the Jerusalem Marathon – Perez for the full 42.2-kilometre course and Sarna, 47, for the half marathon. Perez hoped to qualify for his second Boston Marathon with a time of 3:35.

Jerusalem had a half marathon course for more than a decade, yet the race earned major international status five years ago when Mayor Nir Barkat – a former high-tech entrepreneur who has run marathons in Paris, Berlin and New York and often jogs to work – pushed for a full marathon route. Participation has grown steadily, with more than 25,000 runners from 60 countries joining Barkat for this year's event.

The event offers something for everyone, with 800-metre, 5 kilometre, 10 kilometre, half and full marathon and handcycle routes that all begin and end at Sacher Park. It's literally like running through 3,000 years of history, with participants sporting everything from

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It's literally like running through 3,000 years of history with participants sporting everything from skimpy shorts to skirts and kippot

skimpy shorts to skirts and kippot as they head past Machane Yehuda market, down Jaffa Road, into the Old City, through Hebrew University's campuses, along the Haas Promenade and onto residential streets. It's no wonder the event's slogan is "Feeling Jerusalem in Every Step."

Given the city's hilly landscape, the routes are breathtaking in more ways than one. Conquer one hill and there's another one – with another spectacular view – lurking around the corner. There's little flat terrain, and it's hard on the legs both ascending and descending (making hill or stair training a must for weeks beforehand).

Warns Barkat, who finished this year's half in 2:22:24: "Go slower on the hills, then take some air and recharge your batteries on the downhill." It's so challenging, in fact, that this year's winning elite male runner from Ethiopia finished the full marathon in 2:18:20, about 15 minutes shy of the marathon world record.

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Desert Marathon Eilat 2014

Marathon season

Israel's marathon season runs during Canada's winter months. Here's a sampling of the upcoming major events:

Desert Marathon Eilat: Heat, cold, sun, wind and sand combine for a tougher race than the distance suggests. There are 5K, 10K, half and full marathon courses through breathtaking scenery. Nov. 27, 2015, desertrun.co.il.



Tariku Jufar, Tiberias Marathon winner

Sea of Galilee Winter Marathon: It's the "lowest" marathon in the world at 200 metres below sea level. The flat 42.195-kilometre asphalt out-and-back course follows the shoreline of the Kinneret and winds through the Jordan Valley's historical landmarks. Jan. 8, 2016, tiberias-marathon.co.il.



Tel Aviv Marathon 2011

Tel Aviv Samsung Marathon: Billed as a "non-stop party in a non-stop city," this flat multi-course along the seashore and city streets attracts 35,000 people for 5K, 10K, half and full marathons, kids "mini marathon" and 42K handcycle. Feb. 26, 2016, tlvmarathon.co.il.



The Bible Marathon

Bible Marathon: In the Book of Samuel, a "man of Benjamin" ran from the battlefield at Eben Ezer (today's Rosh Ha'ayin) to Shiloh to inform Eli the priest of Israel's defeat, the falling of his sons and the capture of the Ark of the Covenant. This marathon recreates it on 5K, 15K and 42K courses. 2016 date TBD, biblemarathon.co.il.

Runners feel the energy

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

Some 6,000 runners run for charity. Jerry Solomon, who moved from Toronto to Jerusalem five years ago, raised \$5,000 to buy computer tablets for Herzog Hospital's dementia patients to aid in their therapy. He trained with his daughter Chaya, 24, who ran Tel Aviv's full marathon two weeks earlier and joined Dad for Jerusalem's half.

"Jerusalem is the crossroads of three civilizations, the crossroads of modernity and antiquity, that just being able to run and experience it is unbelievable," says Solomon, 60. "There's so much energy and excitement."

As for Perez, his knees gave out at the 30-kilometre mark but he managed to limp across the finish line in 4:32. Still,

he's grateful to have accomplished the feat as part of his spiritual journey.

"I ran with my legs when it was possible, ran with my heart when I did not have any legs left, ran with my soul when my heart wasn't big enough, ran without any pride left in me when my ego was totally erased by the hills, and walked when running wasn't an option any longer," he says. "The Jerusalem Marathon has hundreds of hills with the power to convert any man into the most humble being in this earth. A very good lesson learned. I'm so happy I completed it and got my medal with extreme sacrifice." ■

Next year's Jerusalem Marathon takes place on March 18, 2016. Register at www.jerusalem-marathon.com.

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