

It's all Greek to me....

Hopa!

by Elaine Doll-Dunn

(What you shout after a shot of Ouzo...if you're still standing)

Measured footfall, rhythmic breath; a distant bird serenading the golden coast...my running companion spoke quietly. "Wow! Just think, when Pheidippides ran, this is what he heard, nothing but his breathing, the birds, and sandals on the sand." It was true, the roads were closed to traffic, we were in a space of runners fore and aft...it was eerily wonderful.

On this date 2,500 years ago, a battle raged on the plains of Marathon. The herald, Pheidippides, by birth an Athenian, by profession and practice a trained runner, carried the message to Athens that the powerful and barbaric Persians had been routed....the women and children of Athens were safe, democracy prevailed. However, he first ran 150 miles to Sparta to seek help, the Spartans were happy to oblige, but were in the midst of a religious holiday and said they'd be over at the next full moon. So he ran the 150 back to Athens to report; then on to Marathon to join in the battle. It was the 25 miles back to Athens to announce the huge victory that did him in..."Rejoice! We conquer!" Or, "Kiki!" as some say...and dropping dead was the result of more than 300 miles with no Gatorade.

The race began with the mayor announcing that 88 nations were represented in this tribute to peace, unity and freedom...we were running history, and the prime minister was leading the charge. Piped over the thousands of runners, a pre-race mandolin rendition of "Never on a Sunday" ...a subtle jibe to us and a tribute to Melina Mercouri, star of that movie and a national heroine... was just the touch of humor needed to ease our tension.

Racing through the Attica, under the watchful eye of Zeus and blessed by Athena, the marathon unfurled in 42 kilometers of beauty, history, myth and magic. On a course reminiscent of the old Black Hills Marathon, I felt strangely at home. With serious up hill and seductive down hill; it was a poignant memory of the long ago course on which I cut my distance running teeth, and the one responsible for this amazing addiction. Terminating on a four-lane concrete avenue through the urban districts of east Athens with a finish at the all-marble Panathenaic Stadium-site of the 1896 Olympics-the race is a challenge for runners. The intricacies of the uphill course complicate record-setting efforts for the elite; that was so not on my radar, I'm just happy I train in the Canyon

On a hurried vacation of sensations defying description, succulent memories are the intense blue of the Aegean Sea, blinding white homes stacked on the mountainsides, sunny slopes of verdant green, and a lovely joyful people. Dinner at an outdoor café where a cat was bus boy and pigeons minced at our feet, an interesting feast redolent with olive oil, feta cheese, lamb, dense bread and fine wine, gentle old dogs sleeping on the trail up the Acropolis, lazily unmindful of the hordes stepping over and around them.

On the course, the miles of enthusiastic Greeks waving olive branches and cheering; “Bravo! Bravo!”, the two soldiers in traditional skirted uniforms guarding day and night the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Kostas Varotos’ spectacular statue, ***The Runner***, two stories tall, dashing forever in sharded glass, the sight of the Olympic rings as I ran across the finish line into the marble stadium. I heard the deafening roar of the crowds, felt the soft silk ribbon as a beautiful stadium-shaped gold medal was placed around my neck, and savored the thrill of the finish. Marred only by extreme fatigue, I was very happy to spot the florescent shirts of my stalwart team... one really should train.

Apostolos Tours hosted our adventure...first class. With assiduous attention to detail, luxury buses ferrying us to points of interest, and a charming guide narrating our historical journey, it was worry-free; tourist friendly. The post-race party was a seven course dinner with wine flowing like water, presentation of our olive branch crowns, Greek Dancers performing and then pulling us onto the floor.... a great way to erase lactic acid build up...a little iffy for the toes.

Miles and memories. To the top of the Acropolis, around the Parthenon, down the labyrinth of the Agora and several shopping excursions in Plaka...the oldest neighborhood in the city...we walked at least five miles a day. Add the marathon distance and dancing with the Greeks; I see why these people are fit.

The event was closed months ago, but I had my name on the waiting list. When I received the call that an injury had side-lined a runner and there was room for me, I had just three weeks to find a travel buddy (I don't solo anymore; somebody's got to take notes), dust off my passport, pile up some Euros (we were informed Greece is a cash-based society so forget credit card, US dollars, and traveler's checks), and pretend to train. It all worked, but had I not secured the inimitable help of the redoubtable Johnson Sisters, I might not have made it. Annette Johnson, our retired middle school teacher and athletic director and her equally organized sister, Jan Campbell, were priceless companions. They donned matching pink Leading Lady Hoodies and, like a pair of animated bookends, made not only my trip easy,

but helped orchestrate the tour program as well; we won't even go to then rampant camera action. Don't leave home without them.

But all good things must come to an end. On our last night there, we strolled along the shore watching the full moon gild the cool waters lapping at our feet; listening to the silence, inhaling the Mediterranean air, enjoying the relaxed pace of the Grecians. Wandering into an elegant restaurant on the beach, we found a table by the window and ordered one last lovely meal before next day's early reveille and the long flight home. Loathe to leave this idyllic haven, we savored the day, toasted the night, and decided in summary:

If you are a runner, you will one day do a marathon. If you become a marathoner, you will somehow find your way to the prestigious Boston. And after you have experienced Boston, the imperative will be to run where this all started....from the plains of Marathon to the City State of Athens....a journey for freedom, and birthplace of the marathon.

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