

RACE

LET YOUR RUNNING LOOSE



Patagonia is a long way to go for a race, but when the scenery is this majestic, you know you have made the right decision.

NATURE, WE DON'T DESERVE YOU

The beauty of the Patagonia International Half Marathon is hard to believe, finds Kerry McCarthy



THERE ARE TIMES AS AN RW STAFFER when you have to take one for the team, and times when you strike it lucky. My trip to do a half marathon in Chile last year was a combination of both. I'll give you the spoiler right now, in case you want the short version: it is a race for the intrepid amateur, the average-but-adventurous runner; and it is unlike anything you've ever experienced before or are likely to again. It's one continuous Kodak moment (younger readers should ask their parents), and you should insert it somewhere near the top of your bucket list.

Patagonia is the wilderness region on the southern tip of South America, straddling Chile and Argentina. It's home to Torres Del Paine National Park, a conservation area of wind-whipped, snowcapped, raw beauty that sits in what's known as 'The Province of Last Hope'. This was the last part of the planet to be colonised by humans as we travelled down to the end of the Americas.

The best way I can describe it is that it's like a 360-degree version of one of those Microsoft mountain-landscape wallpapers. You know how you look at them, perfectly pixelated, and think, 'They've ►



This is not a race in which you should be concerned with your finish time; your watch is the last thing you should be looking at.

touched that up – nowhere on earth could look like that? But it could.

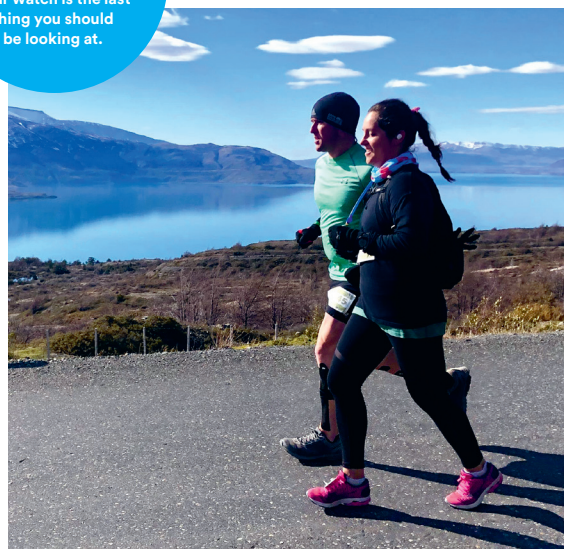
It was through here that the race was run. Almost 450 runners (a roughly even split of Chilean and international entrants) turned out across the marathon, half marathon and 10K distances on offer. Although it was bitterly cold, we were lucky: the forecast was for sunshine and low winds soon after the start. Patagonia experiences such placid conditions for an average of 15 days a year. The rest of the time it is apparently a battle to walk half a mile down the road without being buffeted from side to side by the elements. Indeed, Charles Darwin wrote of Patagonia: ‘In winter, the climate is detestable, and in summer it is only a little better...the winds are very boisterous and the sky is almost always clouded: to have a week of fine weather is something wonderful’. Smart man.

In keeping with the eco-friendly ‘leave no trace’ ethos of the event, the start village was minimalist. But none of the participants seemed to care – we were all far too busy enjoying being halfway up a remote Chilean hillside while hopping about stiffly to a 1970s disco playlist, as the low-hanging clouds gently caressed the tops of our heads.

Macho Man by the Village People merged effortlessly into *Ma Baker* by Boney M, and we had barely got through half of the immortal *Don’t Go Breaking My Heart* (Elton John and Kiki Dee) before the gun went and everyone shuffled off at a conservative pace. We’d all looked at the elevation profile the day before and clocked that it bore a close resemblance to a stegosaurus’s back.

The first couple of miles were fairly prosaic – a mist hung along the route and the sharp purity of the air bit at my lungs, making it a challenge to get the breath to settle down. But by the three-mile point, the clouds had burnt away in the morning sun and I rounded a corner to be greeted by the sight of a piercingly turquoise river winding peacefully into the distance, between two vast snow-capped mountains. I stopped and, for the first time ever in a race, whipped out my phone to take some photos.

This set the tone for the rest of the race, not only for me but for most of the runners around me. Nobody was interested in what time they ran or what splits they clocked, for two good reasons: 1) the constant undulations made it almost impossible to get into a rhythm – even the front runners walked up the climbs; and



PATAGONIA INTERNATIONAL HALF MARATHON

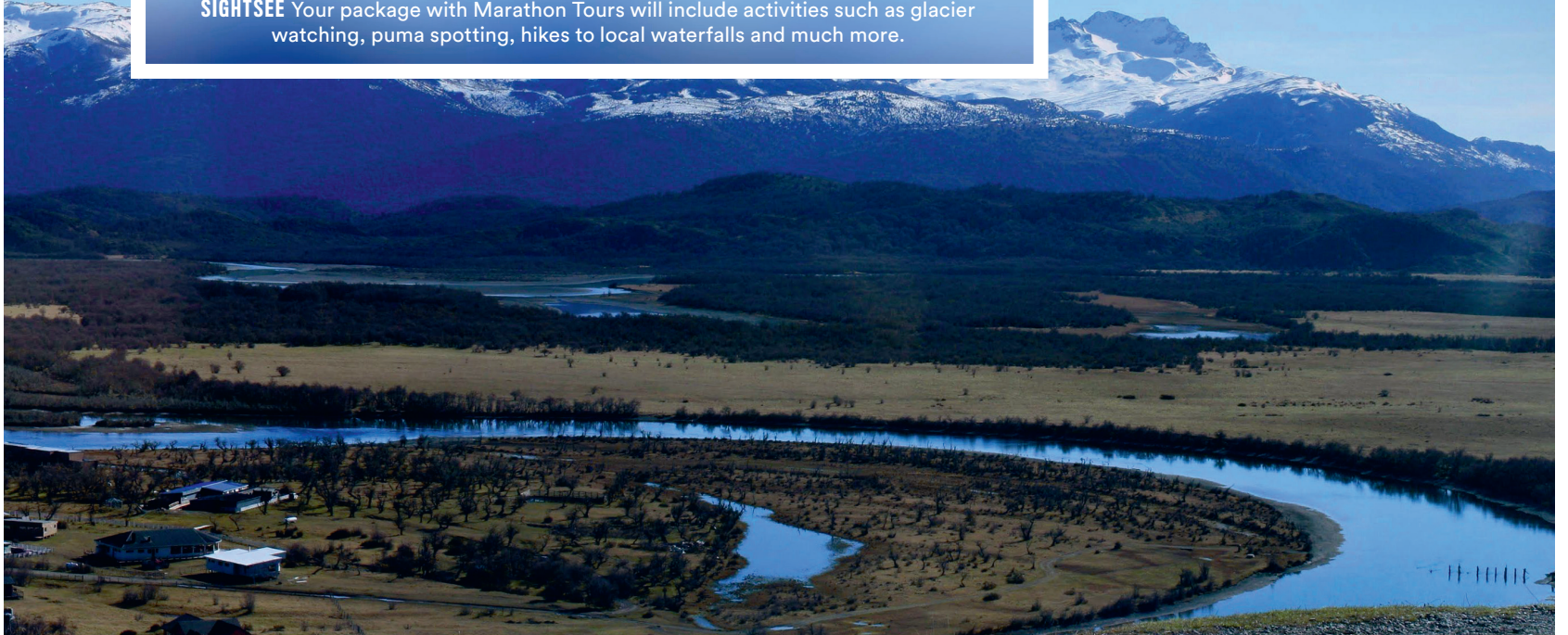
RACE

THE LOWDOWN

GET THERE Delta Airlines flies to Santiago, Chile, from London Gatwick, from £650rtn (delta.com). A connecting flight from Santiago to Punta Arenas is via Latam Airlines from £47trn (latam.com). Total flight time is 20.5hrs.

STAY The Rio Serrano hotel (rioserrano.com) is a sparkle of luxury in the wilderness.

SIGHTSEE Your package with Marathon Tours will include activities such as glacier watching, puma spotting, hikes to local waterfalls and much more.



PHOTOGRAPHS: JEFF ADAMS, ED GAUGHRAN

2) as the saying goes in these parts: 'Those who hurry in Patagonia lose time', which, I think, is a Chilean way of saying that there's no point stressing about anything. In this instance, it clearly meant: sod your watch and concentrate instead on making some wonderful memories.

A little further on, I stopped to observe a gang of pink flamingos pecking diligently at the lichen-covered branches that floated past them; and at the halfway fuel station (bananas, vats of drink from which to refill your own cups, and nothing else – it was all we needed), I took my time sipping something purple and sugary while a pair of condors wheeled overhead, perhaps hoping the strange, fluoro-covered humans would leave something tasty for them.

I stopped increasingly frequently in the second half of the race, partly because I was knackered, and partly because there was always something to marvel at, and I cursed myself for only having two eyes.

Here, a small herd of guanacos (a kind of Chilean llama); there, a plain of deep-brown marsh grass being flattened by the wind; around the corner, a deep-red mountain ridge that reminded me of the kind of place from which Sioux warriors on

horseback launched surprise attacks in 1950s Technicolor westerns.

With two miles to go, I came across two bemused local cops guarding the one fork in the road we had to navigate. One gave me a hard stare, then broke into a toothless grin as I shuffled past. No doubt the air of delighted discomfort I carried with me confirmed his view that we foreigners were all completely loco.

The finish line was back at our oasis of a hotel, the Rio Serrano. Non-running hotel guests and faster finishers were outside to high five everyone over the line and from there it was a matter of 10 metres to the nearest beer and a seat next to the enormous Mongolian barbecue, which was well underway.

A little later, fed and watered, I sat in the window of my hotel room watching the stragglers coming in and the after-party raging. It seemed an ideal moment for contented reflection: right then, in my universe, for miles around there was nothing but mountains, wildlife and runners. Nature coming together in perfect harmony. It doesn't happen often.

This year's event is on September 5. For the latest package prices, including accommodation, catering, race entry and activities, visit marathontours.com

THE RUNDOWN

Patagonia International Half Marathon
Torres Del Paine, Chile
(2019 stats)

First man: Alan Carreno, 1:15:45
First woman: Stephanie De Brita, 1:46:44
Last finisher: 4:25:26
No of finishers: 168