

Dear Family, Friends in Running, et al

I feel compelled to write and tell you guys about an incredible experience that I was privileged enough to enjoy in Bordeaux, France.

We South Africans can become a little smug (with some justification perhaps) about the quality of road races that we organise each year and are sometimes wont to believe that we know it or have experienced it all when it comes to marathoning.

Well, thanks to my friends Amit and Neepta Sheth from Mumbai whom I met at the Runner's World Comrades Pasta Party this year, I decided since I had to be there on business, to coincide work with a run; the *Marathon du Médoc* to be precise. What an unbelievable, and oh-so-different experience! I thought I'd pretty much seen it all in road races...

The weekend begins with a pasta party on the Friday evening at a grand wine estate in the region, the Château Lamargue. Picture a 600 year-old castle right next to a massive marquee seating 1 400 to 1 600 runners and their families on the lawn of a huge, pristinely-maintained estate, surrounded by ancient oak and maple trees. That's just for starters (excuse the pun) – the dinner (remember you're in France) begins and you are served a five-course meal (yes, five) **at your table!** No standing in a queue to get to a buffet, volunteers from the local wine estates and business community serve you your food, accompanied by a different wine with each course, right where you sit! And this isn't just any wine – you're in Bordeaux: one of the world's premier wine-growing regions and the vintages that we enjoyed were superb, aged reds. Proper!



There's a great band playing and a huge dance-floor in the marquee and you easily forget that there's a marathon to be run the next day... Oh ja, lest I forget, everyone tumbles out of the marquee between the main course and dessert to watch the fireworks display above the castle! My kids would have loved it!

So, to race-day then - Saturday.

The first thing you need to know is that running in fancy-dress at this event is imperative. Absolutely. Period.

I am not a fan of fancy dress in marathon races as marathon running is a bit more serious than that, but in Médoc it just *works*. The theme this year was animated film / TV or comic-book characters. I didn't get that memo so I pitched up in SA Flag shorts, a Bafana soccer shirt complete with a *makarapa* on my head and a *vuvuzela* in one hand, feeling not in the least bit self-conscious! Ignore this dress rule at your peril – you will look and feel like 'the odd-one-out' if you pull-in in your usual club gear complete with ASA licence number!

I revelled in being surrounded by hundreds of Smurfs, Asterixes, Obelixes (obviously!) Tintins, Thompson and Thomsons (*Du Pond et Du Pont* in French by the way...) and the other usual suspects: Batman, Spiderman, Superman *et al*. There were also plenty of bees – swarms of them in fact, which I didn't get. Must be a French thing...

Even though the fun had started the night before, the race begins a bit late in my view. A 09:30 start when the temperature later reaches the mid-thirties is a bit *dof* but the organisers' rationale for this was that it was really wet and cold a few years ago, so I guess you can't get everything right.



This would be a good time to mention that the race has its origin among some local doctors who were determined to debunk the myth that wine and endurance exercise are mutually exclusive. Consequently the route of *le Marathon du Médoc* winds its way among the vineyards and châteaux of some 16 or 17 wine estates. Quality wines are served at every one of them (although not always water too!) along with a splendid array of the finest French baking: croissants, fruit cake, pastries with jam-filled centres – you name it. Oranges, bananas and even sugar cubes, both white and brown are available – go figure! Most châteaux have their own live band playing as you enter their grounds (forget the car parked up on the pavement with the window open and the radio on!) and while most serve their wine in plastic ‘glasses’ a few of them serve you in real wine glasses and nothing was too much trouble for our hosts. Astounding.



But that's not all ... at about the 35 km mark, just when you've kinda had your fill of carbs – *oysters!* Fresh, delicious, big, juicy oysters straight out of the sea! With freshly cut lemons! And at 37km – steak: perfectly grilled (medium-rare) steak cubes. You can smell it at least a kay away – awesome! Those being the culinary highlights for me I guess I should mention that cheese with bread (baguettes, what else?) and smoked loin of pork were also available elsewhere on the route. Running is *SO* not important in this ‘race’...



I met some new friends, a Canadian couple from Ontario and was happy to help the lady take her husband through to his debut marathon finish – a great experience on its own; and can honestly say that I cannot recall having more fun in a pair of running shoes. The only reservation was that my most loyal supporters, my family, couldn't be there to share this all with me – school really does suck...

Anyway, once you finish and the obligatory medal is placed around your neck, you are also presented with a bottle of the local fruit of the vine, neatly packaged in a branded wooden presentation box. Then it's on to the food tent at the Finish where, you guessed it, more wine is available as well as bread with cheese, pâté or jam, tea, coffee (the real stuff – forget Nescafé and that instant junk), cold meats, fruit and beer. All free. Incredible.

However the weekend is not quite yet complete, as on the following day (Sunday) the race organisers host a 10km Walk so that you can stretch out some of the previous day's stiffness and... well... enjoy yet more of what Bordeaux and Médoc have to offer from their vineyards. So off you set at 10:00, strolling through mainly different estates from the ones on race-day, enjoying both food and wine and perhaps capitalising on the opportunity to purchase a few bottles of the region's finest to take home. The day culminates in a lively lunch at Château Lamargue once again – same marquee, new band, more food and even more dancing! Some weekend, some marathon!

A few closing thoughts.

- If you've been considering or possibly even saving up for one of the world's major Big City marathons (London, New York, Berlin or Paris) then perhaps you may wish to reconsider. Special though the travel to these great cities may be, these big-field races are sometimes a bit overrated. Think 'The Argus' in *tekkies* - most of your fellow runners turn out to be clueless novices who just get in the way of 'real' runners, which can be problematic when trying to get to a water-point in a 40 000-strong field ... If you're ever going to run a marathon in another country I promise you that none will be as much fun as Médoc. It's quite simply – unique.

- It is definitely possible to run 42.195 km with a *makarapa* on your head!

- The now infamous *vuvuzela* provided me with plenty of opportunities to market South Africa and our own great 'must-do' road-races. Rowyn James will love me as I think there are a few Oceans recruits on their way next year. Comrades is a bit of a tougher sell – only we Saffers get this, the greatest of all road races. Mostly.

- Wine and distance-running are perfectly compatible. As long as you drink way more water than wine you don't even know that you've consumed alcohol, although I suspect that this may have more to do with the quality and purity of the wine than the fact that you're consuming alcohol while running. While I imbibed at every one of the 16-odd châteaux that we visited, one doesn't have more than a mouthful or two at each stop. The good doctors of Médoc are therefore, in my view, wholly vindicated. And after all, didn't St. Paul advise Timothy to, "Take a little



wine to settle your stomach?"

- Finally, I plan to run the Antarctic Marathon in 2013, the year that I turn 50, DV, travelling to that wondrous wasteland with Gill and rounding off a marathon run on each of the seven continents. I suspect however, in fact I know, that none of the however-many marathons that I'll have run by then will come even close to being as much fun as Médoc. And isn't that what running should be about? Fun??

For the record – I finished in 6 hours and 3 minutes, beating the cut-off by 27 minutes. But, who cares?! ...

Regards,

Rory Steyn, Director

Nicholls Steyn and Associates

Tel: +27 (11) 462-7540

Cel: +27 (82) 800-6765

Direct Fax (Local): 086 628 3693

General Office Fax (International): +27 (11) 462-4134

www.nicholls-steyn.com