

## **The marathon tourist**

### **Globe and Mail**

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CALGARY -- Jim and Ruth Ralston know what they want in a holiday -- and they'll do their legwork to make sure they get it right. The Niagara Falls, Ont., runners plan all of their vacations around their passion -- the 42-kilometre endurance race known as the marathon.

Once the exclusive domain of Olympic athletes and hard-core fitness fiends, today's marathon is geared toward people who compete not to win, but to finish. New races are springing up across Canada and the United States, and even successful, long-established marathons are diversifying with new options such as shorter runs, concerts by big-name musical acts, elaborate fitness expos and hotel discounts.

"We pick a race just for the destination," says Mr. Ralston, race director of the Casino Niagara Marathon and a veteran of 19 marathons. The Ralstons are among a growing number of Canadians -- especially those in the baby-boomer bracket -- who are planning their holidays around marathon events.

Long gone is the myth of the lonely long-distance runner -- today's marathoner has plenty of company, according to U.S. Track and Field Association statistics. About 451,000 people completed a marathon in the United States in 2000, compared with 25,000 finishers in 1980. The trend is similar in Canada, race organizers say, although specific figures are not available.

"It isn't about the competition any more," says John Stanton, owner of an Edmonton-based chain of running stores and a finisher of 55 marathons.

A former couch potato who changed his lifestyle through running, Mr. Stanton has watched the two Running Room outlets he founded in Alberta in the mid-1980s grow into 53 stores across North America.

"These marathon destinations are a . . . celebration of our wellness and our fitness. It's very much about what else you are doing after the race. It turns into a whole one-week or two-week celebration," he says.

Royal Victoria Marathon Festival general manager Cathy Noel says the 23rd annual event, which will attract more than 9,000 finishers this Thanksgiving weekend, has become so popular that participant numbers may have to be capped next year for the first time. Organizers are also looking at other options such as a canoe/kayak marathon as another way to attract and entertain tourists.

"We don't want to take away from the marathon . . . but we are focused on lifestyle. We are offering more options that meet everyone's needs," Ms. Noel says.

Distance runner Tracy Turcott, a computer programmer analyst who moved from London, Ont., to Vancouver three years ago, says marathoning provides travel and social opportunities for people with a common bond.

Ms. Turcott launched a Web site last year (<http://www.canuckrunner.com>) to promote marathon destinations for Canadians, which hosts thousands of on-line visitors from more than 50 countries each month.

Calgary runners Maggie and Bill Boyes took two weeks off work this summer to run in the 32nd annual Nova Scotia Marathon/Half-Marathon in Barrington -- a town on the southwest tip of Nova Scotia that is known as the "lobster capital" of Canada. The couple flew from Calgary to Halifax with four running friends, then spent 10 days after the July 28 race sightseeing in the Maritimes.

"It's not a cheap hobby," concedes Maggie Boyes, an oil patch data quality analyst who estimates the couple spent several thousand dollars on airfare, accommodation and other travel expenses.

"But it's a nice way to visit a place. There are so many beautiful places in the world to run." The couple plans to travel to Maui next year for a marathon on the Hawaiian island.

The vast majority of Canadians opt to take part in North American marathons, which are accessible, abundant and tourist-oriented. Here are 10 marathon destinations from the classic to the upstart to add to your 2002-03 calendar.

**Royal Victoria Marathon**

**Victoria**

**Oct. 13, 2002**

You don't need a reason to visit the B.C. capital in the fall -- but if you do, let this be it. Rated by Runner's World magazine as one of the top 10 destination marathons in North America, this is one of Canada's best. Race conditions are usually supreme -- cool, dry and sunny -- and the route is lovely. Starting at Victoria's picturesque Inner Harbour, the race travels past the provincial legislature, through the historic old town and downtown, past Beacon Hill park and through residential neighbourhoods before finishing back at the harbour. Organizers have recently added several new race options -- a half-marathon, an eight-kilometre race, a one-kilometre "family fun" run and an early start option.

*Race information:* <http://www.royalvictoriamarathon.com>; *travel info:* <http://www.tourismvictoria.com>.

**Marine Corps Marathon**  
**Washington, D.C. and Arlington, Va.**  
**Oct. 27, 2002**

There's no better way to explore the U.S. capital than on foot -- every twist and turn offers something interesting. The Marathon of Monuments, as it is also known, begins and ends at the Marine Corps War Memorial in Arlington, Va., and passes by the sprawling Pentagon complex, the National Mall district and such attractions as the Smithsonian Institution, Washington Monument and Kennedy Center. At the end of the race, a uniformed Marine appears to help remove the timing chip tied to your shoe. The race is already full for this year -- but the lottery for spots in the 2003 race opens early next year.

*Race info:* <http://www.marinemarathon.com>; *travel info:* <http://www.virginia.org> and <http://www.washington.org>.

**Big Sur International Marathon**  
**Carmel, Calif.**  
**April 27, 2003**

The best things in life don't come easy, and Big Sur reminds us of that. Straddling steep, shamrock cliffs high above the Pacific Ocean, the race is as physically challenging as it is dramatic. The route sinks and climbs repeatedly and the wind on the bluffs can be fierce -- at one spot so intense that runners have been blown off their feet. That said, most finishers are so taken by the beauty of the race that they complain little about the challenges, which can add an hour to a runner's usual finish time.

(The majority of marathoners take 3½ to 4½ hours to finish a race; Olympic athletes take closer to 2½ hours.) Voted the Best Marathon in

North America by the *Ultimate Guide to Marathons*, the race starts on Highway One at Big Sur and winds along the coast and through stands of giant redwoods before finishing in the chic seaside town of Carmel.

*Race info:* <http://bsim.org>; *travel info:* <http://gocalif.ca.gov/state/tourism/tourhomepage.jsp>.

### **Casino Niagara Marathon**

**Niagara Falls, Ont.**

**Oct. 27 , 2002**

This 22-year-old race provides a new way to see Niagara Falls along the Canadian-U.S. border. The event offers full and half-marathons for runners, walkers and wheelchair athletes, along with a separate marathon for in-line skaters that travels the same route. (Very few marathons offer an in-line skating option, although that trend is expected to grow.) The cross-border marathon starts at the falls in Buffalo, N.Y., and travels through city parkways before crossing the Peace Bridge to Canada. Runners circle past Old Fort Erie and travel along the scenic Niagara Parkway before finishing in front of the Niagara Falls, Ont., power plant and world-famous falls.

*Race info:* <http://www.niagarafallsmarathon.com>; *travel info:* <http://www.discoverniagara.com>.

### **Boston Marathon**

**Boston**

**April 21, 2003**

For many distance runners, this race is the pinnacle. Runners must achieve strict qualifying times to compete in the world's most famous marathon -- a fact that has caused some race hopefuls to run a string of marathons in repeated attempts to make the cut. The event -- which along with the New York City Marathon is one of the world's most recognized -- is so popular that next year's race will be capped at 20,000 participants. Launched as a 40-kilometre race with 15 runners in 1897, this marathon is steeped in history. The race travels a point-to-point route from the rural New England town of Hopkinton to Boston, following Route 135 and then Route 16 through such Ivy League towns as Framingham, Wellesley and Newton. The race ends near the John Hancock Tower in Boston's Copley Square. The race is watched by more than 500,000 cheering spectators.

*Race info:* <http://www.bostonmarathon.org>; *travel info:* <http://www.massvacation.com>.

## **Woody's RV World Marathon**

**Red Deer, Alta.**

**May 18, 2003**

This little race might not be on every runner's radar, but consider the possibilities: Situated halfway between Calgary and Edmonton, Red Deer is a small city with many lovely river pathways that are used extensively in the marathon and half-marathon. Since launching three years ago, the race has built a loyal following among runners who praise its small size, riverside surroundings and community spirit. The city is a great jumping-off point to explore Alberta's two biggest cities (Edmonton is 90 minutes by car to the north; Calgary an equal distance to the south) and offers easy access to excellent recreation-oriented destinations such as the central Rockies and the dinosaur badlands near Drumheller.

*Race info:* <http://www.reddeermarathon.org>; *tourist info:* <http://www.travelalberta.com/Central/index.htm>.

## **Suzuki Rock & Roll Marathon**

**San Diego, Calif.**

**June 1, 2003**

This relatively new marathon had a rocky start in 1998 when exceptionally hot weather and organizational glitches caused many of the 20,000 participants to suffer heat-related problems such as dehydration and exhaustion. Hundreds of runners dropped out during the race, while many others saw their anticipated finish times extended by two or more hours. Since then, the race date has been moved forward a month, the logistical glitches have been ironed out and there is, as promised, at least one musical act every 1.5 kilometres to keep runners and walkers entertained. The race starts at historic Balboa Park, skirts the famous San Diego Zoo and downtown Gaslamp Quarter, passes by Sea World and through the city's beach communities before ending on the Parade Deck at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot. The same people behind this race have also launched the Rock & Roll Half Marathon (Sept. 1, 2002) in Virginia Beach, Va., and a Country Music Marathon and Half-Marathon (April 26, 2003) in Nashville, Tenn.

*Race info:* <http://www.rnrmarathon.com>; *tourist info:* <http://www.sandiego.org>; *Rock & Roll Half-Marathon:* <http://www.rnrhalf.com>; *Country Music Marathon and Half-Marathon:* <http://www.cmmarathon.com>.

## **Honolulu Marathon**

**Honolulu**

**Dec. 8, 2002**

Known informally as the "people's marathon," this colossal race is a favourite with Canadians because it offers, among other things, a reason to head to the tropics in early December. Unlike many races, Honolulu's does not impose a time limit on participants -- meaning even if you take 10 hours, someone will be at the finish line to see you in. The race -- much of it along the sea -- is popular with first-time marathoners and walkers, who make up a sizable contingent of the roughly 30,000 participants. Racers begin at Ala Moana Beach Park and travel past sites such as Honolulu Harbour, Aloha Tower, Chinatown and Diamond Head Crater before ending at Kapiolani Park. (The finish line is just a short limp to Waikiki Beach and the surrounding hotel strip.) Former Beach Boy Brian Wilson is the headline act for a premarathon concert this year.

Race info: <http://www.honolulumarathon.com>; travel info: <http://www.gohawaii.com>.

**Marathon by the Sea  
Saint John****Aug. 10, 2003**

What this race lacks in size, it more than makes up for in style and substance. Traversing New Brunswick's rolling Atlantic coast and the Bay of Fundy, the race boasts awesome scenery, perfect weather and loads of tourism opportunities. Now in its eighth year, Marathon by the Sea was rated the Best Bang for Your Buck In North America by the *Ultimate Guide to Marathons*. (Hotel rates are a bargain compared with those in bigger North American cities and the race entry fees are half the price of many larger marathons. Fees for a full marathon vary widely, but generally run from \$60 to \$100 depending on the popularity of the race and how far in advance entries have been booked.)

The 42-kilometre run (there's also a half-marathon and an eight-kilometre run) is an out-and-back race that starts in downtown Saint John and heads across the rolling Falls Bridge and historic Lancaster. Participants (usually totalling about 1,000) swing around the Bay of Fundy and hug the woods before turning back toward the historic downtown.

Race info: <http://www.marathonbythesea.com>; travel info: <http://www.tourismnbcanda.com>.

**Walt Disney World Marathon  
Orlando****Jan. 12, 2003**

Marathoners who feel guilty about leaving their children behind when they take a race holiday can make everybody happy with this destination. The race, which celebrates its 10th anniversary early next year, is perfectly timed for the Christmas break. (Don't mark it on your calendar just yet -- the Jan. 12 event is already full. However, several charities have pre-purchased entries, so runners may still have a chance to enter if they take part in one of the designated fundraising campaigns.) Before and after the race, travellers can amuse themselves with such attractions as the Space Coast, the Everglades, funky seaside towns and the Florida Keys. Disney also provides a marathon travel package that includes on-site accommodation and park-hopper packages to its theme parks and Disney-MGM studios.

*Race info: [dwws.disney.go.com/wideworldofsports](http://dwws.disney.go.com/wideworldofsports); travel info: <http://www.flausa.com>.*

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