

Death Valley Trail Marathon
Death Valley, CA
Saturday, February 6, 2010
8:00 AM

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Now that I am done with running marathons in the 50 states and D.C., destination marathons are next and Death Valley Trail Marathon was the first one.

According to its web site, "Death Valley was given its name by a group of pioneers lost there in the winter of 1849-1850. Even though it is believed that only one died, they all assumed that the valley would be their grave. They were rescued by two group members, William Lewis Manly and John Rogers, who had learned to be scouts. As the party climbed out of the valley over the Panamint Mountains, one of the men looked back and said "goodbye, Death Valley." It is about 140 miles long, from the head of Last Chance Canyon in the north to where the Amargosa River makes its big bend near Saratoga Springs in the south. It is the hottest and driest of the national parks in the United States.

The 21st edition of the Death Valley Trail Marathon was organized by Enviro-Sports Productions, Inc., a California based organization. The main reason people sign up for the marathon is to run a point-to-point route through Titus Canyon, the most popular back-country road in Death Valley National Park.

The following was clearly stated in the marathon's web site: "By signing up for this event, participants acknowledge the possibility of a last-minute course change and agree to run the alternate course or, if not, agree to abide by the rules set forth by the Death Valley National Park Service." And for the 7th time since the marathon's inception, Titus Canyon was closed, this time due to snow/ice – bummer! The alternate route was Westside Road, a dirt/gravel road that runs parallel to Badwater Road along the valley floor and crosses the wide salt pan known as Devil's Golf Course. The out-and-back course was below sea level. The first mile was a gradual downhill which meant that the last mile would be a steady uphill and I found the finish quite hard. The rest was flat.

The race day temperature was in the 50s and 60s, cloudy, rain-free, and a bit breezy. In short, we enjoyed a nice running weather. The packet pick-up was at Furnace Creek Ranch from 6:15 to 7:00 AM. After an introduction by the race director, Good ol' Dave, which was quite amusing (the man does not need a loud speaker!), the buses transported the runners to the start line. There were aid stations (water, sports drink, and snack items) at approximately every three miles. Mile markers and crowd support were not applicable and I doubt if anyone expected them. Each finisher received a short sleeved

cotton T-shirt and a medallion. There were adequate recovery food items and drinks at the finish. The buses transported the runners back to Furnace Creek Ranch. There were 167 finishers (124 males and 43 females) in the average finish time of 4:26:00. The winning times were 3:01:03 (male) and 3:17:53 (female). There was also a 30K run.

I flew into Las Vegas on Friday morning. There was a 115 mile drive from the airport's rental car terminal to Furnace Creek Ranch, where I stayed. It is a nice oasis at the middle of the desert. There is also Furnace Creek Inn which is fancier and more expensive than the Ranch. Most runners stayed in the Ranch. The group rate was \$142.50 per night (including tax and fees). The marathon entry fee was \$125, plus \$9.35 processing fee and \$10 National Park admission fee; not a cheap marathon to run.

I treated the marathon as an easy long run. I took the time to take photos and made quick stops at a few spots alongside the route to check out the salt formations. I ran the half in 2:07 (9:41 pace) and crossed the finish line in 4:27:21 (10:12 pace). Frankly, it was a boring run. Although we were mindful of the fact that the closure of Titus Canyon was not race organizers' fault, no one could hide the disappointment to travel all the way to run on a monotonous course. Nevertheless, it was an interesting experience and I can always say that I ran a marathon in Death Valley.

If and when you are in Death Valley for the marathon and do not have plenty of time for sightseeing, do what I did. On the way to or from Furnace Creek Ranch, visit Amargosa Opera House and Zabriskie Point. Drive on Badwater Road to Badwater Basin (the lowest elevation in the U.S. at 282 feet below sea level) and go for a walk. On the way back, take the Artist's Drive, which is a one-way road, and you will find the drive quite entertaining!

The marathon was on Saturday. On Sunday morning, I found out that a dear friend and fellow CRRR runner had died of heart attack! Bill Dodge was an experienced marathoner. He used to run the Harbor Bridge with me on some Sunday mornings. While running the out-and-back route, we talked a lot and got to know each other quite well. Personally, coping with his departure has been difficult for me. Our small, yet active, running community lost a great person. Bill was 56 years old.