



MORE than a marathon

RF Editor, Fiona Bugler, travelled to Scotland to take part in the River Ness 10k, part of the Baxters Loch Ness Festival of Running

“The rain lashed it down as we ran to the taxi on Friday afternoon. Leaving Eastbourne, our home on the sunshine coast, bound for Inverness!

“As we were running at the weekend not just mooching about, we decided that travel should be as stress-free as possible. *The Caledonian Sleeper* train was the answer, no taking belts and shoes off, or hanging about at airports!

“And it lived up to our expectations of laid-back comfort. We travelled first class, and after a 20-minute relax in the first class lounge, boarded the train.

Step back in time

“It was very *Harry Potteresque*, and I could feel the rush and bustle of London shedding away as we arrived at the

platform. A tweed-clad man with a look of Alastair Sim from the Fifties film *Whisky Galore*, boarded the train in front of me. I was in no doubt we were heading for the Highlands!

“But before the Highlands, we hit the Lounge Car. A good tip for anyone travelling on the Sleeper train, the Lounge Car is lovely with great food, tea/coffee and of course booze – but it's also a popular venue for the first few hours of the journey, so dump your bag in your cabin and grab a seat quick!

“After a glass of red wine, some bread and olives, and even a Horlicks, we headed to bed. I decided not to close the blind as I didn't want to miss a thing. And sure enough, the tweets I'd had saying: 'It's amazing to wake up in the Highlands

– you lucky thing' and 'Some people get the best jobs', turned out to be true.

“We arrived in Inverness at 07:47, having left Euston at 20:15 the night before. But we were well rested and looking forward to the day in a new city.

Bed and Breakfast

“Janice from *The Furan Guesthouse* greeted us with a fry up of bacon, sausage, eggs, black pudding, haggis, and toast. Ideal for a pair wishing to run a fast 10k the next day! With a 'good' breakfast in us, we headed off to explore.

“As we walked around the town we got a real sense of the festival of running, as people dressed in *North Face* jackets and trainers, wandered around, too. Fresh-faced, skinny people, guzzling water, and looking a cross between curious and preoccupied with pre-race thoughts.

“Races are a perfect excuse for a break, and best of all 'you' can feel pious too, as 'you' drink whisky, eat fry ups (and two other big meals) and indulge.

Sight-seeing

“We took a cab to Loch Ness, to visit the well-know *Dores Inn*. 'Great food, music, whisky – and great views of the Loch,' we'd been told. We also worked out that we could check out the last part of the marathon route on the way there – and seeing the hill at around 18 to 21 miles, I was glad I'd opted for the 10k race.

“After a beautiful sun-soaked day on Saturday, Scotland showed its true

colours on Sunday with a refreshing downpour, which washed away any remnants of a hangover, (following our whisky tasting in the *Dores Inn*).

The races

“The marathoners had been delivered to their 10am start at Whitebridge on the south side of Loch Ness (a faster start than previous years) by buses. The 26.2 mile route is beautiful and includes running alongside the 600ft deep Loch Ness (and its reputed monster).

“Whilst the marathon runners were setting off, Mike and I were finishing off another fry up. When we got to the 10k start at *The Inverness Royal Academy* we decided a warm up was in order. We did our drills to the sound of the piper, who stoically stood at the side of the road playing tunes in the rain. When the 10k started at the very civilised time of 11am, we were soaked through.

“I, as usual, went off like a hare out of a trap! I know how important it is to run at an even pace – I just haven't mastered it!

“The course was fast. PB potential, with no hills at all, I was excited. Maybe today was the day I would run under 40 minutes (a target for too many years).

Lace-gate

“I felt good, I was ahead of Mike, and felt very comfortable, then, disaster, what was to become known as ‘lace-gate’ began. As I bent down to tie up my wet laces, my sodden, Raynaud's-stricken fingers weren't working. Mike and a lot of other runners stormed past me.

“I decided to think of the stop as a useful rest, and sprinted to catch Mike. Again I was ahead of him, and soaring ahead with another runner. I felt good at this guy's pace... Then I felt my foot tug on something under the sole of my shoe.

“And as we joined the final part of the marathon route (at around three miles),

“There was the usual mix: bleeding nipples, sprint finishes, collapses and tears”

part two of lace-gate had begun. Mike told me after the race, he'd timed my first stop at 38 seconds. This time, my fingers didn't work, and as I fumbled with my shoes, two women surged past... And this time no amount of positive thought about how lucky I was to have had the chance to rest worked. I lost my rhythm.

“When the laces came undone the third time, with around a mile to go, I decided falling flat on my face would be a better option than stopping again and had to settle with 40:18 on the gun, 40:11 on the chip.

Party time

“My disappointment was short-lived. With over 8,600 runners from 41 countries taking part in the *Festival of*

Running, there was plenty to distract me from my disappointment in and around the race village in Bught Park.

“Supping on tasty asparagus soup, we watched the marathon runners finish. There was the usual mix: bleeding nipples, sprint finishes, collapses, and tears.

“As well as the *Baxters Loch Ness Marathon* and the *River Ness 10K*, the festival included a *10k Corporate Challenge*, *The River Ness 5k*, and, new for this year, the *Wee Nessie*, a short race for the kids.

“A food and drink festival was also going on at the same time as the race, and as well as wet running gear, we left the race laden down with soup, jam, pasta sauces and shortbread.

“After leaving the village, Mike and I enjoyed a glass of wine, sitting outside a pub alongside the river, cheering in the never-ending stream of marathon runners, all pleased of the support.

More than a marathon

“The town was buzzing all afternoon. In 2009 the marathon brought in £2,178,066 to the local economy, and like all big races, it's not just the locals who benefit, but numerous charities, too, with over £660,000 raised by runners.

“Like many other big races across the world, it was more than a marathon. Events like these are a testament to the human spirit, with the effort, the blisters, the pain – and the gain.

“As for me, the 10k gave me a zest for racing again (after a rare three-month lull). Running in the rain with my laces undone, cheering on the marathoners, watching the sub-3 runners achieve their goals – all the inspiration I needed, and a very pleasant weekend that reminded me why I love being a runner.”

FACTS, FIGURES, TRAVEL & ACCOMMODATION

- We travelled on *Scot Rail's Caledonian Sleeper* from Euston to Inverness. Find out more at www.scotrail.co.uk.
- We stayed at *The Furan Guesthouse* www.furan.co.uk. The marathon website has details of other accommodation.
- Marathon entry is £40; 10k entry is from £21; and 5k entry is £10. Entry to all races includes: medal, t-shirt, goody bag, post-race food. There's also transport to the start of the marathon and from the finish back to the 10k start to pick up cars.
- *The Baxters Pasta Party* was held between 12.30 and 17.30 on the Saturday. The party, held at the village, got the atmosphere going with live music and included a three-course meal of: soup and roll; pasta and salad; and dessert. For a small charity donation you could book in with physiotherapists and massage therapists.
- Ethiopian Tomas Abyu of *Salford Harriers* won the marathon in 2:20:50. Dinknesh Mekash Tefera of Ethiopia set a new record of 2:46:39 for the women's race.
- Artur Kern of Poland was the 10k winner in a time of 29:42. First woman home was course record-holder Cathy Mutwa of Kenya in 34:46.
- For further information visit www.lochnessmarathon.com.

