Einstein Marathon in Ulm Germany
September 16, 2012 by David Holmen

On September 16, 2012, I ran the Einstein Marathon in Ulm, Germany. Ulm was the childhood home of Albert Einstein. This race was a late addition to my race calendar. When I found out I was making a business trip to Lenzburg, Switzerland, I checked to see if there were any races in Switzerland on the weekend before I started working. There weren't any in Switzerland, so I searched for races in neighboring countries and discovered the Einstein Marathon in Ulm.

Ulm is on the Danube River in southern Germany. My favorite Viennese waltz has always been "On the Beautiful Blue Danube" by Johann Strauss. It was cool to finally see this river. Ulm is about a three hour drive from Zurich, where I arrived by plane. It would have been possible to get to Ulm by train, but the connections were inconvenient, and I already had a rental car for work. Driving on the German autobahns was another new experience for me.

The Einstein Marathon isn't listed on any of the race calendars I usually use, but I discovered a website that lists European races. The website for the Einstein Marathon is only in German. Although I took German in junior high, I don't remember much, so I relied on Google Translate.

For a race that mainly attracts local runners, the Einstein Marathon is a surprising large event. There were several races, including a marathon, half marathon, 10K and 5K. Altogether, there were over 17,000 runners. I felt a bit isolated, however, since everyone else was speaking German.

This was my seventh foreign race, and I often encounter different customs than U.S. races. At this race, you pay a deposit for your chip, and get a refund (minus a small rental fee) when you return your chip after the race. As with most other European races, the course was marked in kilometers instead of miles. Unlike other European races, they didn't hand out bottles of water at the aid stations. They used plastic cups. Something else I've noticed at European races is that they have signs indicating when you're getting close to an aid station. At this race, the signs were always 150 meters before the aid station.

The first few miles of the race were along a parkway overlooking the river. Just before the 5K mark, we crossed the river and entered the outer neighborhoods of Neu-Ulm. We would eventually run through the downtown streets of both Ulm and Neu-Ulm, crisscrossing the river several times. After our tours of the two downtown areas, we began running on paved paths along the banks of the river. Most urban marathon courses are designed to feature the landmarks of a city. This one is designed to showcase the Danube, and it didn't disappoint. At times, we were only a few kilometers outside of downtown, yet all I saw were the river and the surrounding forest. It was hard to believe, at times, that we were still in the city.

If there was one major city landmark that was featured by the race, it's the Ulm Minster. This church, dating back to 1377, is the tallest in the world. Its steeple towers over the other downtown buildings, so we could see it whenever we ran toward it. It made a majestic landmark for the finish line, which was right next to the church.

My goal was to finish under 3:30, which translates to roughly 5 minutes per kilometer. After averaging about 4:45 in the early kilometers, I eventually settled down, running closer to my goal pace in the second half. I finished in 3:27:16. Navigating through the finish area was a bit confusing, since all the signs were in German, but after asking a few people, I found the chip return tent. On my way there, I saw runners who already had finisher certificates. At the next tent over, there were volunteers who could read your bib number, type it into a computer and immediately print out a finisher certificate.

I don't think this was a Boston qualifying event, but for what it's worth, I ran a Boston qualifying time. Germany is the eighth country where I've done that.