

Paris and London Marathons by D. Holman

April 2011

In April, 2011, Deb and I traveled to Paris and London for our first European vacation together. The timing of this trip was motivated by Marathon de Paris and the London Marathon falling on consecutive weekends for the first time in about eight years. We were traveling with Marathon Tours for both races, so we were staying in the same hotels as several other runners from the U.S.

Friday, April 8:

We arrived in Paris on an overnight flight from Minneapolis. Most of the other runners in our tour group arrived on Thursday, but we chose to arrive a day later, so we could align our stay in Paris with the days we would be in London. While the other runners were taking a half day city tour, we checked into our hotel, explored the Champs Elysees and went to the top of L'Arc de Triomphe. While we were there, we got museum passes to use on our last two days in Paris. In the afternoon, we met up with the tour group and went together to the marathon expo. We had dinner at a restaurant on Champs Elysees. This became a habit.

Saturday, April 9:

Since we missed the city tour on Friday, we booked our own city tour. It was a small group (only one other couple), and our tour bus was actually a minivan. We selected a tour that made two stops, one in Montmartre and one at Notre Dame. We also saw numerous sights from the van. Because traffic was light, we reached Montmartre early, and got to stay there for 45 minutes. This gave us time to see the inside of Sacre Coeur and also explore the neighborhood. We went to a square where local artists were displaying their work. We even had time to buy pastries at a local patisserie. Our stop at Notre Dame was 30 minutes, giving us time to see the inside of the church and also visit a few nearby souvenir stops. In the afternoon, we went up to the second level of the Eiffel Tower. Finally, we had a pre-race dinner with our tour group at an Italian restaurant in the shadow of L'Arc de Triomphe.

Sunday April 10 (Marathon de Paris):

Our hotel, Chateau Frontenac, was only a block from the starting line, so I was able to walk to the start on L'Avenue des Champs Elysees. As a long time follower of the Tour de France, lining up to start a race on this famous avenue was a magical experience. It was a very large race (40,000 runners), so I expected the start to be congested. When the gun went off, it was a very slow walk until we reached the starting line. Surprisingly, as soon as I crossed the line, I had room to run, and I quickly settled into a fast pace. My only goal was to run a Boston qualifier in a new country, but I was in the corral for runners targeting 3:15, so I felt obligated to go out at that pace. In the early miles, we ran past numerous landmarks, including Place de la Concorde, the Louvre, and the Bastille, but I was elbow to elbow with other runners, so I couldn't always take in all the sights. After a few miles through a park, we eventually turned onto a street that followed the right bank of the Seine. We were so close to the river that we went under some of the bridges. Over the next several miles, we had views of Notre Dame and the Eiffel Tower, as well as several majestic bridges. In the late miles, we wound our way through another park before reaching Avenue Foch for the finish, with L'Arc de Triomphe directly in front of us. It was a warm sunny day, with temperatures getting above 70. Aid stations were 5K apart, so it was vital to drink as much as possible at every one. After running the first half on pace for 3:09, I slowed in the second half, but still finished in a surprisingly fast 3:12:50. Although I felt pretty good, I was worried that I ran too fast and would pay for it a week later in London. In the afternoon, we took a bus back to the Eiffel Tower where we could catch a Batobus on the Seine. We spent the next two hours traveling the complete Batobus loop, to see views of the city from the river.

Monday, April 11:

This was the first of two days that we used our museum passes. Some museums are closed on Mondays and others are closed on Tuesdays, so we had to plan ahead. We arrived at the Louvre before they opened, so we could see the most popular exhibits before they got too crowded. There was already a long line to buy tickets, but we were able to go to a separate entrance, since we already had our museum passes. We made efficient use of our time and saw everything we were looking for, plus anything else that happened to be along the way. In the afternoon we visited Napoleon's tomb at Les Invalides. We traveled between museums using a hop on, hop off tour bus that not only visited the major attractions, but had multi-lingual audio commentary of other sights along the way. We continued to use these buses for the rest of our stay in Paris. We also stopped at Sainte Chapelle and Notre Dame (hoping to climb the stairs to the towers), but both had long lines, and we didn't want to wait that long.

Tuesday, April 12:

First we went to Sainte Chapelle to view the extraordinary stained glass windows. We got there early, so the lines weren't as bad. Next we went to the Orsay Museum. As with the Louvre, we couldn't possibly see all the exhibits, but we saw as many as we could. We saw several exhibits of impressionist works included several paintings by Monet. We were also fortunate to see a temporary exhibit of Van Gogh paintings. After lunch, we visited the Rodin Museum. Finally, we spend the rest of the day riding the tour busses to see as much of the city as we could. We ended up riding three of the four bus loops in their entirety.

Wednesday, April 13:

After checking out of our hotel in Paris, we took a taxi to Gare du Nord to catch the Eurostar train to London via the tunnel under the English Channel. It was a high speed train with no stops, so we reached London in about 2 hours and 15 minutes. This included 20 minutes in the tunnel. This was our first time traveling by train, and we found the train to be more comfortable than flying. Our hotel in London, the Crowne Plaza at St. James' Court, was only a few blocks from Buckingham Palace, where the London Marathon would finish. I went for a four mile run in the afternoon, and then we had dinner at a local pub.

Thursday, April 14:

This was our first full day in London, and we took an all-day guided tour of the city. It started with a bus tour. As with our city tour in Paris, this part of the tour was mostly sightseeing from the bus, but in a few places, we had time to get out and take pictures. After having lunch at a pub near Trafalgar Square, we had a one hour tour of St. Paul's Cathedral. Next, we visited the Tower of London. This started out as a guided tour, but then we had time to explore on our own for as long as we wanted. Our tour included tickets for a Thames river cruise, but we could catch the boat whenever we wanted (depending on how long we spent at the Tower of London). We saw the crown jewels and one other exhibit, but didn't stay long enough to see everything, because they sky was getting dark and we wanted to take our river cruise early, in case it rained later. From the river we saw several bridges, beginning with the majestic Tower Bridge. We also went by several prominent downtown buildings. We finished at Westminster Pier, where we had views of London Eye, Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. From the pier, we were able to walk back to our hotel.

Friday, April 15:

We took another all-day tour. This one didn't start until 11:00, but went well into the evening. This gave me time for a 6 mile run that included a lap around Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens. This tour went to Windsor Castle, Oxford and Stonehenge. At Windsor Castle, we were given two hours to explore at our leisure, using taped audio commentary. At Oxford, we had a guided tour of the best known buildings of the university, including Christ Church College, where some scenes of the Harry Potter movies were filmed. Our Stonehenge tour was after the normal visiting hours, allowing us to explore between the stones. Most visitors to Stonehenge can only view the stones from a distance.

Saturday, April 16:

In the morning, we went to the marathon expo. To get there, we had to take two tube (subway) lines and a light rail line. For slightly more than the cost of a round trip, we were able to buy all day passes instead. In the afternoon, we used our tube passes to visit Kensington Gardens, Kensington Palace and Hyde Park. We had dinner at the hotel, where the restaurant was serving a few pasta dishes, in addition to their normal menu.

Sunday, April 17 (London Marathon):

The London Marathon is a point to point course. Our hotel was close to the finish, but we had to catch a bus to the start in Greenwich Park. Marathon Tours brought us to the start in four large tour busses. We were dropped off about two hours before the start of the race. This was the only part of the race I didn't like. This was another large race, with 36,000 runners. The start was divided to help alleviate congestion, but there were several turns in the early miles, so I was worried we would come to a stop at the first turn. We started slow, but then I worked hard to pass people and find room to run my own pace. My one mile split was 7:20, but that was deceptive, since the first half mile was much slower. I ran the second mile in 6:40. I tried to ease up, but the early miles were mostly downhill and my third mile was even faster. I eventually settled into 7 minute miles. It seemed crazy to try to run this fast, but I felt good, so I decided to go for it. I'm sure we passed many sights in the first half of the race, but I really couldn't look for them, because I was too busy watching out for other runner in the crowded streets. The first big highlight for me was running across Tower Bridge. You turn a sharp corner just before the bridge, so you don't see it until you're turning onto the bridge. Then it's a breathtaking sight. The London weather, in general was much cooler than Paris, but on race day, it was warm and sunny. This race had aid stations every mile after mile three, so I was actually able to skip about half of them. They also had water in convenient squeeze bottles with flip tops, so I was able to drink water without slowing down much. In the second half of the race, I knew most runners would slow down in the heat, so I focused on passing as many runners as I could. Even though I was passing people, I was actually slowing down a little myself. Fortunately, the late miles are mostly downhill, so I was able to maintain my pace even though I was running out of gas. The last two miles are like a non-stop highlight reel. You turn a corner to see London Eye and then Big Ben comes into view. After a sharp right at Big Ben, you run alongside St. James' park and make another sharp right to run in front of Buckingham Palace. Finally, after one more turn, you finish on The Mall, with the palace directly behind you. After fighting for every second, I crossed the line in 3:04:58. This was only the second time in my life that I've finished under 3:05. The first time was 19 years ago, when I was in my prime. With one afternoon left for sightseeing, we took the tubes back to Tower Bridge. After a tour of the towers and engine room, we walked across the bridge at street level, so Deb could see it the same way I did during the race.

Monday, April 18:

We packed our bags and ate a late breakfast before taking a cab to the airport for a non-stop flight to Minneapolis. With the time change, it was a very long day, but we forced ourselves to stay awake until our normal bed time in this time zone. That helped a little with jet lag, but we still woke up too early. I took one extra day off work, so I could catch up on important things (like posting photos on Facebook and writing this race report).

Both of these races were unforgettable experiences. I highly recommend them both. Even if you don't run the marathons, I highly recommend visiting Paris and London.