

RUNNING AWAY

Tourists are pounding
the pavement as they
combine road races
with a little R&R

By Christine Koubek

We're a motley crew. There's a trio of women in their 30s, each from a different state, meeting for their annual gabfest over the course of 13.1 miles; a fit guy in a shirt that says Army; an older woman with salt-and-pepper hair who will pull ahead of said guy (and me) before the finish; and more than 16,000 other racers, all here at the Virginia Beach Rock 'n' Roll Half Marathon to challenge ourselves on a beautiful September day.

This is what I love about running—the camaraderie, the chance to explore on foot and the realization that age needn't be an obstacle to doing what you love.

Runners and walkers of all ages have come to this flat, scenic course. And for the next couple hours, I'll wend my way through the city, seeing a runner impersonating Elvis (complete with sideburns and faux guitar), chuckling at spectators dressed as leprechauns, listening to bands playing everything from reggae to rock 'n' roll, admiring coastal homes and pushing out thoughts of exhaustion before finally ending up beside the ocean. Running with all these diversions makes the miles pass quickly.

And it seems that thousands agree. Distance race organizers have fueled a boom in tourism and in the sport of running by pairing popular destinations with runs ranging from 5-Ks to marathons. And the 13.1-mile half marathon leads the pack. According to Running USA's Road Running Information Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., the steady growth of road racing in recent years has been fueled largely by an increase in half-marathon participation. There were 373,000 half-marathon finishers in 1998; there were more than a million in 2009.

And as the number of participants has grown, so has the number of races. About 700 half marathons are taking place this year in such cities as San Diego, Phoenix, Miami Beach and New Orleans, where a recently launched race coincided with Mardi Gras.

But there is no need to hop a plane for a destination run. Here are three mid-Atlantic footraces worth the drive. ►



COURTESY ROCK 'N' ROLL MARATHON SERIES

VIRGINIA BEACH

September 5

Rock 'n' Roll Virginia Beach Half Marathon (and two-person relay)

The Run:

The 10th annual Rock 'n' Roll Virginia Beach Half Marathon is a music-filled circus maximus of 16,000-plus in running shoes celebrating Labor Day weekend on the run.

The course winds past beach shops and the sprawling Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center, travels through Camp Pendleton, home of the Virginia National Guard, and finishes on the boardwalk, with ocean waves rolling in on your right and a bevy of new and spruced-up beach hotels on your left. A two-person relay option was added last year so two runners could split the distance.

At the pre-race Health & Fitness Expo, runners can pick up packets that include race numbers that double as weekend concert tickets and timing tags, souvenirs and good deals on athletic apparel. They also can attend motivational seminars.

After the race, runners and their supporters can attend the post-race beach party, with food booths, a beer garden, a recovery area with stretching mats and, best of all, the beach. There is no better post-race reward than sinking your toes into the sand as cool waves lap over your hot, tired feet.

The Destination:

Virginia Beach's boardwalk has won a number of awards recently, including an American Coastal Coalition acknowledgment for best restored beach. This clean, soft-sand beach was expanded to the width of a football field and beautified with landscaping and three new parks.

Visitors can rent two- or four-person surrey-with-a-fringe-on-top bicycles along the three-mile esplanade, where they may see Atlantic bottlenose dolphins jumping through the waves, as well as im-

pressive public artwork, including a 34-foot-tall bronze sculpture of Neptune. The Old Coast Guard Station at 24th Street is worth exploring to learn about famous shipwrecks and how strategies for saving ships have changed over the years. There are also many open-air cafés. During Labor Day weekend, oceanfront stages are set up along the boardwalk for more than 40 bands that will participate in the Verizon Wireless American Music Festival.

Just south of the boardwalk, the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center features everything from sand tiger sharks and stingrays to tomistomas, the world's most endangered crocodile. It also offers interactive displays, an outdoor aviary and a salt marsh walk with a 30-foot observation tower.

Rest:

Virginia Beach is one of the pricier destination runs, with most hotels requiring a three-night stay for this event. Check the race Web site for half-marathon rates and reserve *early*. Many hotels fill up.

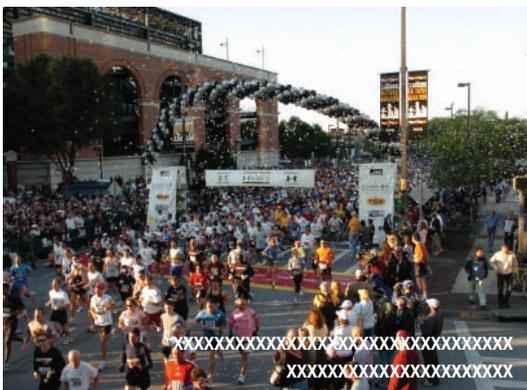
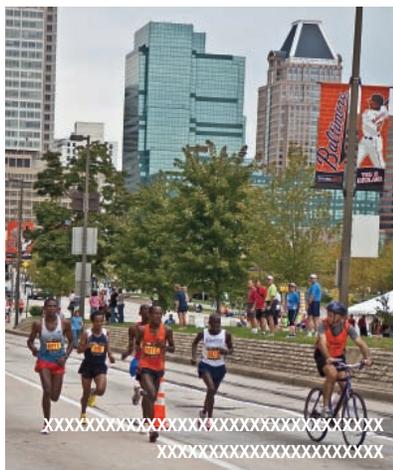
The **Doubletree Hotel Virginia Beach**

(doubletree1.hilton.com, 757-422-8900, \$189 per night) is race headquarters, with newly renovated rooms, an indoor pool and complimentary shuttle service to the boardwalk eight blocks away. The **Cavalier on the Hill Hotel** is farther from the start—2.8 miles—but is a sophisticated, grand hotel on the beach and the best place to spot elite racers (757-425-8555, www.cavalierhotel.com, rates start at \$239 per night; group rates available for Team in Training participants). Best bet for being in the middle of it all is the **Courtyard by Marriott Oceanfront South** (www.courtyardoceanfront.com, 757-491-6222, \$259 per night), which offers oceanfront rooms with balconies, a pool, hot tub and proximity to both the start and finish of the race (just over a mile for each).



COURTESY ROCK 'N' ROLL MARATHON SERIES (2)

DRIVING range



Participant Perks:

Each entrant receives a T-shirt and a free pass to the concerts (past headliners have included INXS, the B-52s, Journey and Counting Crows). The 2010 lineup will be announced early in the summer. Finishers receive a Rock 'n' Roll Half Marathon medal.

Details:

Sign up by May 31 for the \$85 race fee (the price increases to \$110 on June 1). Check the Facebook fan page for coupons that take up to \$10 off the fee. There is no race day registration.

The 13.1-mile course must be completed in four hours. Friends and family can receive real-time updates on your location via text message for \$2 per person. Or runners can purchase tracking for up to five people for \$5. Sign up at www.competitorwireless.com. Race information and registration: www.virginia-beach.competitor.com; 800-311-1255.



COURTESY DAVE GELL/BALTIMORE RUNNING FESTIVAL (3)

BALTIMORE

October 16

Baltimore Running Festival
Marathon, Half Marathon,
5-K, Four-Person Relay,
Kids' Fun Run

The Run:

The Baltimore Running Festival shows what a running event can do for a city. In addition to the publicity and a \$25 million boost for the economy, last year's race raised more than \$830,000 for local and national charities. The festival has become the largest running event in Maryland, with more than 20,000 participants arriving from 44 countries and all 50 states.

Well-organized and environmentally friendly, the event offers an assortment of distances, entertainment and an awe-inspiring home stretch to the finish line between Oriole Park at Camden Yards, home of the Baltimore Orioles, and M&T Bank Stadium, home of the Baltimore Ravens. Bryan Callaghan of Bethesda chose Baltimore as his first half marathon because of the hilly run through the city's beautiful parks and neighborhoods. "It

was very motivating to see all the neighborhood folks out with their kids cheering us on," he says.

Those who arrive early on the Friday before Saturday's race can take in the free concert at Inner Harbor and special carbo-loading dinners in Baltimore's Little Italy. At the end of the race, there will be an assortment of snacks, including Phillips' crab soup, in a special runners-only area. The adjacent Celebration Village includes a Kids Fun Zone with games, magicians and mascots.

The Destination:

Baltimore's many charms include the Inner Harbor, lively bars, quaint neighborhoods and more museums than there are miles in the half marathon. Among them: the National Museum of Dentistry, the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Museum, the Maryland Science Center, the National Aquarium and the American Visionary Art Museum, which offers works by self-taught artists. Getting to and from it all is much easier now, thanks to Baltimore's Charm City Circulator, a fleet of 21 eco-friendly buses that provide free transportation to attractions and historic neighborhoods.

Rest:

The Baltimore Marriott Inner Harbor at Camden Yards (www.marriott.com, 410-962-0202, \$209 per night with a special rate for participants in the Baltimore Running Festival) has a well-equipped fitness center with treadmills, an indoor pool and is at a great location—about a half mile to the Health & Fitness Expo, where runners pick up their race packets, as well as race starts. Runners who sign up with Baltimore's Run for Bears (www.umpscure.com) get a special \$119 Marriott rate. **The Hampton Inn & Suites Baltimore Inner Harbor** (www.hamptoninn.com, 410-539-7888, \$189 per night for race participants) offers a pool and complimentary breakfast. It's less than a mile from the race starts and two blocks from the Inner Harbor.

Participant Perks:

Though many races offer the opportunity to run for a cause, the Baltimore Running Festival has partnered with 11 different charitable programs, listed in the "Run for a Cause" section of its Web site. I participated with UMPS CARE's Run for Bears (a children's hospital program) last year and appreciated the team camaraderie and fulfillment I felt in raising money.

Most festival participants will receive an Under Armour "Catalyst" shirt made from recycled bottles, a finisher's medal and a free beer at the finish. The 5-K finishers receive all but the medal, and kids' run participants receive a T-shirt and medal.

Details:

Race fees: marathon, \$95; half marathon, \$85; 5-K, \$35 (add \$10 if registering after July 31); Kids Fun Run, \$15 per child. Most distances sell out before the weekend of the race, and some by August. Half marathon course must be completed in five hours. Race information and registration: www.thebaltimoremarathon.com; 410-605-9381.



COURTESY ROCK 'N' ROLL MARATHON SERIES

PHILADELPHIA

September 19

ING Rock 'n' Roll Philadelphia Half Marathon

The Run:

The ING Rock 'n' Roll Philadelphia Half Marathon—formerly known as the Philadelphia Distance Run—has been the premier half marathon in the country for 31 years, attracting everyone from elite runners (Olympian Ryan Hall won last year) to back-of-the-pack joggers.

Runners start at Eakins Oval by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, run toward Center City on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, continue past gorgeous fountains, Independence Hall, picturesque Fairmount Park, then alongside the Schuylkill River on shaded pathways before finishing back near the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Though the race has included a few bands in previous years, this marks its first year as a Rock 'n' Roll race (branded by the Competitor Group), which will mean more music along the route.

Runners can pick up race numbers, T-shirts and goodie bags at the Health & Fitness Expo at the Pennsylvania Convention Center and see the latest running shoes and health and nutrition products. The Expo Clinic Schedule lists talks by notable runners (last year, Ryan Hall and *Runner's World* columnist John Bingham both spoke) during expo hours. After the expo, runners head to nearby Maggiano's Little Italy to carbo-load.

The event's post-race party includes live music in front of the Philadelphia

LOCAL TRAINING PROGRAMS

The following local training programs can help you get started, increase your distance or prepare you to set a new personal best before you set out on a destination run.

Montgomery County Road Runners Club (MCRRC) offers several programs, including a 15-week, half-marathon training program that begins in June. The program is geared for those new to distance training, but not new to running, and includes speed, hill, tempo and long runs to develop strength. Most speed and hill workouts are at Montgomery College in Rockville. Long runs include Rock Creek Trail, the Capital Crescent Trail and even a run to the National Zoo. New runners or those training for shorter distances can enroll in one of MCRRC's "Best Foot Forward" summer training programs. More information: www.mcrrc.org; 301-353-0200.

The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's Team In Training program is the world's largest endurance sports training program, having trained nearly 400,000 athletes across the country in the last 22 years. It helps first-timers and experienced athletes achieve their best as they walk or run to benefit blood cancer patients and survivors. Participants typically travel and participate in destination races together. More information: www.teamintraining.org; 703-399-2942.

Pacers Running Stores, Silver Spring, has novice and intermediate/advanced distance training programs. Six-month sessions may be started at any time and include individualized coaching in a group setting. Cost: \$300 for a six-month session, or \$75 per month. More information: www.runpacers.com; 301-495-7811.

Fleet Feet Sports, Gaithersburg, offers "No Boundaries Beginning Runner 5-K Programs." New runners receive a training plan, coached runs and a moisture-wicking shirt. The co-ed summer program meets at the store at 6:30 Monday evenings, June 28 to Sept. 4. Cost: \$95. More information: www.fleetfeetgaithersburg.com; 301-926-6442.

—CHRISTINE KOUBEK

DRIVING range

Museum of Art. Runners can pose with their finisher's medal in front of the museum's statue of Rocky Balboa.

The Destination:

A Philadelphia CityPass (www.citypass.com/city/philadelphia; \$59, adults; \$39, kids 3-12) saves 46 percent on admission to six of the city's most famous attractions: The Franklin Institute, Phila Trolley & The Big Bus Company (a tour of the city with 20 on-off stops), the Philadelphia Zoo, Adventure Aquarium, The Academy of Natural Sciences or National Constitution Center and the Please Touch Museum or Eastern State Penitentiary.

Families on a short visit can let little ones burn off energy at the Please Touch Museum, the nation's first museum (opened in 1976 and relocated in 2008) for children 7 and under, in Memorial Hall in Fairmount Park, a National His-

toric Landmark and the last major building remaining from the 1876 Centennial Exhibition. The building has been restored to its original architectural grandeur and includes exhibits such as Wonderland, with a rabbit hole and a circular maze, and the restored, century-old Woodside Park Dentzel Carousel.

Rest:

The Hampton Inn Philadelphia Center City (www.hamptoninn.com, 215-665-9100, \$145 per night) offers free breakfast, an indoor pool and a convenient location (across the street from the race expo and 1.2 miles to the start/finish lines). Runners traveling with families will appreciate the spacious two-room suites with balconies at the **Embassy Suites Philadelphia-Center City** (www.embassysuites.com, 215-561-1776, \$255 per night), just over a mile from the start/finish lines.



Ryan Hall???
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COURTESY ROCK 'N' ROLL MARATHON SERIES

Details:

Race registration is \$80 through June 14, \$90 from June 15 through Sept. 12 and \$105 at the expo if space is available. The course must be completed in four hours. Race information and registration: www.philadelphia.competitor.com; 800-311-1255.

Christine Koubek is a freelance writer living in Gaithersburg.