

Running the Jungfrau

By Joanne Klinke

If the Jungfrau Marathon is just another marathon you've never heard of, I for one vote this race one of the toughest and one of the most beautiful marathons you can run. While not quite an "ultra" by distance, it makes up for it by its incredible steepness and exposure.

Starting in the lovely resort town of Interlaken, Switzerland at 2,000 feet, it winds itself through the beautiful Lauterbrunnen Valley along picturesque waterfalls and alpine glaciers. The finish line is at 7,500 feet in front of the Eiger, famous for its many mountaineering tragedies and Clint Eastwood's *Eiger Sanction* movie.

Having lived and worked in a Swiss hospital for two years, it was here that I met my husband Uli recovering from a 500-foot fall while ice climbing. Needless to say, I got hooked on climbing and attended several rock and ice climbing courses at the International School of Mountaineering in Leysin, Switzerland. Uli went on to climb Mt. Cho-Oyu and Mt. Gasherbrum II in the Himalayas and returned to Switzerland to traverse the Eiger, Monch and Jungfrau mountains.

Only in its 16th year of running, the Jungfrau Marathon is immensely popular in Europe. You need to apply early as the total field is limited to 4,500 runners. However, preference is given to females as the marathon is named after a Jungfrau (German for maiden). Most of the runners are Europeans who have the advantage of training on the many Swiss, Austrian and Bavarian alpine trails and are highly competitive in all age groups.

The Kenyans who have dominated most of the international marathons have yet to win a Jungfrau. To change that, a 2:07 African marathoner promised to go out fast and build a big lead so nobody could catch him on the high slopes and fast he was, all the way up to 35 kms where a volunteer found him laying in the grass, chalk white and out of gas. He recovered though and after eating four bananas and with some encouragement from the crowds, he finished 33rd.

The second part of the marathon is run entirely on alpine trails and it is here that the race gets serious. People drop the small talk and start breathing hard. Lungs and legs are at their limit as the trail gets steeper as it goes higher. The last part of the trail is so narrow that passing is impossible, causing people to stop, wait and then walk at the pace of the person in front.

This was so frustrating and at times I would sneak through an opening to the obvious annoyance of the person I passed. Time gained by this effort was negligible so that everybody who tried gave up and fell back in line.

Cheering you up for all of this were the local Swiss rattling their huge cowbells and shouting your name (indicated on your bib). Once you made it to the top elevation at 41 kms it's all downhill to the finish line which most runners sprint with a smile on their faces.

Top male finisher was 3:03 by a Tyrolean runner and 3:40 by a Hungarian girl. Having been stuck on the trails in two 10 minute human traffic jams, I crossed the finish line in 5:40 to a huge supporting crowd of Swiss flags and alpine horn blowers with volunteers handing out all the Swiss chocolate you could eat.

Will I do another one? In a heartbeat!



Joanne Klinke in the Jungfrau Marathon.

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