

Flying fish, festering sinkholes, meandering motorbikes—

The challenges of training for a race in Hanoi • Story and photos by Andrew Engelson



Oddly enough, it's easier to run on the streets than on the sidewalks of Hanoi.

At the age of 44, I ran my first race ever. In Hanoi, Vietnam.

I've been a runner since my college days at U-Dub. But I'd never been competitive about running. It's my time alone, a time to listen to music and get fit. I'd never trained for a race or tried to improve my speed and endurance.

Then, one day not long ago, a friend asked if I wanted to run in a half marathon. I thought about it for a few seconds and said, sure, why not?

But why Vietnam?

Well, I live here. Nearly four years ago my wife and I decided to move our family from Seattle to Hanoi. My wife works on vaccination infrastructure for PATH, the Seattle-based global health organization. My two daughters are in a terrific international school. And I put my journalism career on hold to write a novel. We've come to love this chaotic, beautiful and sometimes maddening city.

Living overseas challenges you to constantly try new things—whether it's tasting a strange-looking dish (with meat of uncertain origin), trekking to a remote village, or deciding to run a half marathon. I'd been running regularly in Hanoi, so I decided to start a 10-week training program and try for a race time under two hours. I figured I might be able to do it. I just had to watch out for the fish.

Running in Hanoi, a frenetic city of 6 million residents, has unique challenges.

Watch out for sidewalks

I regularly run alongside *Tay Ho*, the largest lake in the city. It's a peaceful respite from the millions of swerving and honking motorbikes. But you have to watch out for the fishermen. Wildly swinging their huge poles, these anglers will occasionally flip a live fish onto the sidewalk. Once, a perch landed right at my feet. But I was able to dodge it.

Plus, you have to watch for holes in the sidewalk. Big ones, some of them four feet deep, with a nasty broth of sewage at the bottom. And if the sidewalk isn't falling apart, then it's a parking lot for motorbikes. So I generally run in the street.

The road by the lake is usually quiet, so it actually makes for a pleasant run. As long as it's not during the full moon.

Holiday traffic

The Vietnamese plan much of their lives around the lunar calendar, and a full moon is an auspicious time to visit Buddhist temples. There's a popular ancient temple near my running route. So I can instantly tell when it's a full moon because my quiet lakeside route becomes clogged with motorcycles carrying people to the pagoda to pray and light incense. I grumble to myself, but then remember that I'm a guest here. I need to adjust to the rhythms of the culture.



The full moon brings throngs of Vietnamese to local temples, making running routes near temples highly congested.

Battling the elements

Air quality is another issue. It's pretty bad, although not as polluted as some cities in China. On the worst days—when rice fields outside the city are burned after the harvest—it smells like you're sitting beside a campfire. I don't run then. But most days are okay. It's pretty scary what you get used to.

Then there's the heat. Contrary to what you might expect, though, Hanoi does have four seasons. Spring is warm and humid. Winter is cold and drizzly, much

like Seattle. Autumn is the best season: sunny and breezy. And summer is a raging furnace.

But I actually like running in Hanoi summers.

People think I'm crazy. But running in the heat is one of my favorite challenges. Some people like to do marathons, tackle hills or run mountain trails. I like the heat. It feels like you're *earning* that workout. Yes, you've got to be careful, not pushing too hard, wearing sunscreen, and preferably doing what Hanoians do: going out when the sun is down.

One of the things I love about running in Hanoi is watching the crowds that come out at sunrise and sunset. Vietnam is a very fitness-conscious country. The lake road is most vibrant at dusk and twilight. Old men reach to the sky with tai chi-like exercises. Groups of ladies do aerobics to the beat of ABBA. Middle-class Hanoians ride western-style bicycles and deck themselves out in brightly-colored lycra.

And there are runners. Some sport shiny new athletic gear, but most run in sneakers, black shorts, and white tank tops. I once spotted a man who was probably in his late sixties running barefoot. I was sufficiently humbled.

So, I trained for my race. And avoided being hit by motorbikes or flying fish. I worked on improving my endurance and pace, using Map My Run on my smart phone to track my performance. One hot autumn day I did a 15-kilometer run around the entire lake. Hydration is actually never an issue. That's because in Vietnam you're never far from a drink lady with a little stall selling soft drinks, chewing gum, cigarettes and – most important to me – bottled water. Just be sure to bring 50,000 Vietnamese dong with you (that's about two dollars).

Often, while I'm running, I get stares from people. Sometimes a pair of teenage girls on bicycles will gather the courage to shout *Hello!* as I pass. A man in his eighties flashes me a grin and gives me a thumbs up. You don't get that running in Seattle.

The big day

Then, it was race day. It was early December and the weather was perfect. A little cloudy, about 65 degrees, and no rain. The Song Hong (Red River) Half Marathon is a small race: only 235 participants running distances of 5K, 10K and half marathon. A lot of them foreigners, but nearly a third were Vietnamese.

The route began at UNIS, the international school my girls attend. Then it wound its way through a gated community where a lot of expats live. Although the place doesn't have much character (it feels like a generic neighborhood in Bellevue) it did have the benefit of quiet streets and real sidewalks. Plus, no holes to swallow you up! Then the route headed out alongside the lake, my familiar training ground. Then it retraced itself back to the school.

It was exciting, being in my first race. The energy and smiles were abundant. There was a great feeling of camaraderie.



When pollution is the worst, it's best to take the day off from running.

I started strong and kept a good pace.

Lots of locals stopped to watch the spectacle of a bunch of foreigners running with numbers pinned to their shirts. My wife and girls came out and cheered me on—and even rode alongside me for a while on their motor scooter.

Things went well until a kilometer short of the finish line. By then I was really feeling the burn. My arches ached, my calves were tight and I began to doubt whether I'd finish in under two hours. The groups of runners had spread out and at that point I was nearly alone. It was one of the quietest moments I've experienced in this noisy city. I pushed past the pain.

I came to a last stretch of sidewalk, which the city had helpfully decided to tear up the day before. So I ran in the road, with motorcycles zipping past. And then there was the school gate, the cheers of the crowd, and finally, the finish line.

1:57:26. I'd done it!



The author (#523) finds racing is also safer on the roads than on the adjacent sidewalk.

The great thing about a small race like this is that you know a lot of the runners. We gave each other hugs and fist bumps. The biggest cheer of the day was for the last person to cross the finish line. She had a huge smile on her face.

I was pleased with the results of my race. And it was especially rewarding in a city where training means you have to watch out for flying fish, 99-degree heat, gaping holes in the sidewalk, and a gazillion motorbikes.

Maybe my next race will be in Seattle. Or some other exotic place.

I'm thinking Switzerland. •

Andrew Engelson is a writer who lives in Hanoi. Before that he lived in Seattle, where he edited *Washington Trails* magazine for six years.



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