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ULTRA RUNNING

Turkey style

FANCY AN ULTRA RACE WITH A CULTURAL FEEL? LOOK NO FURTHER THAN TURKEY'S IZNIK ULTRA. OUR MAN (AND EXPERIENCED ULTRA RUNNER) IAN CORLESS REPORTS FROM THE COUNTRY'S LONGEST STAGE RACE

Steeped in history, Iznik, formerly known as Nicea, is in the province of Bursa some two-and-a-half hours from Istanbul. It is a quiet place, situated on a beautiful lake. Founded in 4BC by the Macedonian King Antigonus I Monophthalmus, it has a rich past and has been an important centre since Roman and Byzantine times.

From a tourist perspective it has lots to offer: peace and tranquillity, a real insight into local culture and of course some significant monuments. The city was once surrounded by a stone wall some 14,520ft in circumference. Although this wall remains it has been punctured to allow road access. It has the Yenise Gate, St Sophia Cathedral (Orhan Ghazi Mosque) and the Green Mosque (Yesil Camii) named after its wonderful green tiles. Iznik also has an archaeological museum that contains mostly glass and Roman objects. In addition to this history, Iznik is also famous for tile manufacturer and olives.

So Iznik is a great holiday destination... add to this the Iznik Ultra and you have the perfect long weekend combination!

Turkey is not known for running and therefore ultra running is a rarity. Caner Odebasoglu and his MCR Racester team are at the forefront of ultra running in Turkey and with the creation of a 60k and 126k event they hope to fulfill the needs of the Turkish ultra runners - but also attract runners from the rest of the world.

The 126k event is now the longest single stage race in Turkey. Using the lake as a backdrop, the 60k and 126k Iznik Ultra races basically cover half or the whole of the lake. The first 60k included all the elevation of the route with climbing several times to 700 plus metres. It's a great course with demanding terrain, stunning views and quiet, small and unspoilt villages.

The entire run route was marked every 30-100m with red/white tape making following it a breeze. Terrain underfoot was rutted, rocky, muddy

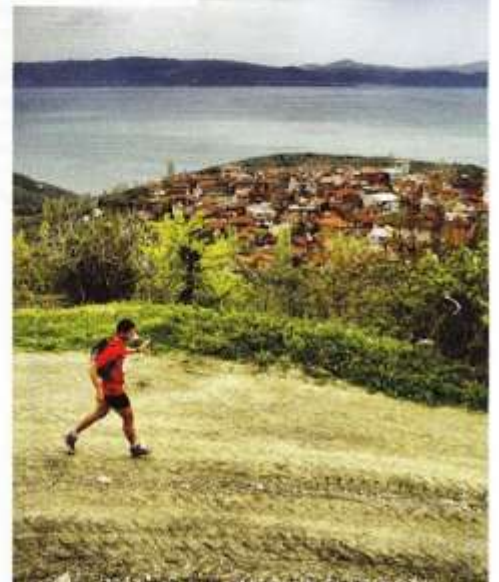
● **Pics: Ian Corless**



and at times slippery. The climbs were tough and demanded that you control your effort, particularly if running the longer 126k event. With over 80 per cent of the course being trail it is a route that provides many a stunning view.

The race begins

I was taking part in the 60k event. The pre-race buzz was great as the runners congregated in the square prior to the start for a briefing and then the race start at 7:30am. On leaving Iznik, the initial section was neutralised to allow for a run procession through the town; a nice touch! After 5k or so we left the road and started on a rutted trail that climbs 580m with sections of farmland, rocks, mud and then the first checkpoint at the village of Darbent.





Traveler's advice

Travel from the UK is to Istanbul so why not combine your trip with a short break in the city? It provides a stunning contrast to Iznik. Noisy, loud, brash and diverse it is an attack on the senses. Stay in the Old Town and you are close to a whole series of monuments all within walking distance. The Fire Tower stands 85m tall on the skyline near the Grand Bazaar and was built in 1028 by Mahmud II. The Hippodrome, known better as Sultanahmet Square, was built in 203AD and served as a meeting place for politicians, chariot races, and other athletic activities.

But Istanbul really comes to life at night. The falling sun leaves a deep blue sky illuminated by streetlights, car lights and illuminated Mosques. It is never quiet; it is never still. Find a local restaurant and sample some local food, wine and enjoy the atmosphere.

Turkey will develop as a destination for ultra running, no doubt, particularly when you also consider the other possibilities on offer. I have travelled to many a destination to run and race. Turkey and in particular Istanbul fulfilled the tourist within me. Iznik provided a welcome calm, an insight into local traditions and also fulfilled my running desires, making Turkey and the Iznik Ultra a perfect holiday and running experience.



Leaving Derbent and heading west the trail now started to climb offering great views of the Iznik Lake and the Yenisehr plains. At 28.5k the Suleymanie checkpoint gave all the runners an opportunity to resupply dwindling stocks of liquid and food. Some 8k away was checkpoint three in a remote village called Muskule. Local villagers sat in a quiet square drinking Turkish coffee, playing backgammon and looking on at what they must have thought was some crazy bunch of individuals dressed in funny clothes running with rucksacks. Despite what reservations they may have had, they cheered, clapped and encouraged everyone.

The memory of the applause was short-lived: we hit a short steep climb and then a long descent. This section removed all the altitude gained in the early part of the race and finally dropped us on a road section that was parallel to the lake. The village of Narlica awaited ahead, at 42k (marathon distance), hosting the final station and an excellent opportunity to restock before the final push and the finish-line for the 60k event.

For the 126k runners, it was merely an early stepping-stone. The village, however, had been mobilized and the support was superb. It was possible to feel a genuine respect from all the locals for what we were undertaking. They may have not fully appreciated why we did it but they certainly could appreciate how difficult it was.

Quad-bursting descent

Leaving the village via a small road that wound its way up, we soon found ourselves on the toughest climb of the day - a long, muddy, rutted and steep climb that lasted for some 7k in total and rose to 750m. At the top, there was a flat section and then a long, long descent that beat the quads into submission for the 60k finish at Saloz. I was fortunate to have pushed early in the race and won the 60k event in a time of 6hrs 1min.

The 126k runners had an opportunity for a bag drop here and, if required, they could

change clothes and prepare for the second half of the race. In theory, the bulk of the climbing was now done. The remaining 67k hugged the lake with the odd deviation. It did offer sections of beach running but mostly the runners had to contend with muddy olive fields. With a checkpoint at 76k and 81k, Ilicia at 95k offered a welcome break before a road section from 100 to 107k.

Running into the night the darkness, the mud and the dropping temperatures tested everyone. From the Kurukpro checkpoint at 119k just 8k remained and the finish at Iznik awaited. The winning time was 15hrs 45mins.

MCR racesetter had really put on a stunning event with superb planning and attention to detail. This was reflected in the course marking, the team of helpers, the feed stations and importantly the presentations the next day. Each runner received a hand-made Iznik tile made into a medal shape and the first three males and females also received hand made plaques in a wooden frame.

A 10k race had been created to help encourage the locals and in addition to this the whole town had been closed down. Marching bands, a stage, local VIPs and a prize presentation that was worthy of a race 10 times the size of this were all thrown into the melting pot. What Caner and his team had produced really was quite remarkable. I have memories of this race experience that will last forever. 🏆

THE IZNIK ULTRA WILL TAKE PLACE ON THE 20TH APRIL 2013. PLEASE GO TO WWW.IZNIKULTRA.COM FOR DETAILS.

