

Sunday morning, 3.45 AM. The alarm sounds, I push it away and reprogram it for 4.45. Sunday morning, 4.45. The alarm sounds again and I reprogram it again for 5.30. Sunday morning, 5.30 AM. I don't want to wake up! This has been the first night of decent sleep, in a nice and quiet hotel in downtown Moab. I force myself out of bed and make some coffee. After the first cup of coffee I still don't want to go. I put on my running clothes, which makes me feel better. "If you're not motivated, put on your running gear. If you're still not motivated after that, better stay home", someone once told me. That is so true! Why bother going for a run in the middle of the desert? Probably because this is as beautiful a desert can get. It's John Wayne country, near the Colorado River running along the red rocks outside of Moab. This is "The Other Half" 13.1 miles run. The first half - also known as the Canyonlands half Marathon - was in March, with 5,000 lucky people allowed to run it and I was fortunate enough to be present, 8,000 miles away from back home in the Netherlands. The Canyonlands half started at takeout beach, where rafters from Moab return from their river adventures, and it finishes in downtown Moab. There are bands, people and cars alongside the run, many cars even when the run is on the roadside of busy highway 191 for the last couple of miles. It's a nice run, but it's not mythical like The Other Half. It's just another run, of which a part runs through beautiful scenery though. And there are no medals... The other half starts 30 miles away from Moab, just after sunrise, near historic Dewey Bridge. That basically is the remainders of what once was a bridge, half gone but still hanging besides modern Scenic Highway 128. The only way to get there is by bus, a yellow schoolbus, completely filled up with runners, anxious to get started in the middle of the desert. When the buses arrive, it's dawn and the sun hasn't come up yet. Fortunately it will be warm today, but the volunteers of the organization have lighted some fires as it is still chilly, to make sure the runners don't get too cold before the start. The ambiance is lightened up as well, by a DJ that plays music to get people warmed up. At the moment that dusk is blown away by sunrise, he plays "Here comes the sun", by the Beatles. A magical hippie-alike moment, with over a thousand people that have arrived already standing on the red rock, being enlightened by the sun. It's going to be a warm day, which becomes clear already when the very first rays of sunlight touch the skin of the runners. At 8 AM all buses have arrived, still half an hour until start. Many, many runners in the middle of the desert. From the top of the hill it looks like such a small group. 2,500 runners still, looking completely insignificant in the wide red rock valley. That's part of the magic around here, nature so big and man so small, even if there's 2,500 of them. At 8.15 the DJ stops his music and is replaced by the only music that really fits here: the beat of drums created by the local Moab drum band. As if the Indians that have lived here ages ago had come back, not sure whether or not to bless the small large group of approximately 2,500. The sound of drums fills the valley as the drum band very slowly moves along to the start line, followed by the anxious group of runners. Then the drums come to silence and starting time is almost there. No American Anthem for this run, just a guy looking like a cowboy that is shooting his revolver in the air. As if this is still Indian country instead of American soil. The gunshot silences the drums and they drive away in front of the runners, to arrive at the finish line before anyone else. With a 70% female population, most runners take it easy at the start. Nothing like the average runner at any half marathon in Europe, aged 40+ and running in tights. Instead of that ugly sight, most of the runners are women with an average age of 30. Most of them are beautiful, but not all of them. Some are clearly here to take the next step in their life, probably switching from an unhealthy to a healthy life style, stimulated by the so typical "I can do it" American spirit. But this race is made for them as well, anyone that is able to complete the race in 3.30 hours is allowed to and will get a medal for their efforts. Some of the wanna-be fits by mistake are all in front of the army of runners starting to move. Unfortunate for them, as the most eager of the runners all see them like some kind of obstacle. But how contrary to any Europe run, there is no pushing at all, people are here to enjoy and if by accident an elbow touches, the person that did it kindly apologizes. The first six miles are easy and hard at the same time. The road is gently going up and down, with no more than 15 feet of height difference. That makes it easy and hard at the same time, many run at a higher pace than they actually should, while everyone knows what is coming at mile 6: a long and steep hill, going up a lot and gently down a little several times, with nasty very steep parts in it. Many take it walking, only the toughest and the most stupid take it running, even in the front rows of the army of runners that are taking the hill. This hill has thought me that my maximal heart rate is not 178 - as it is supposed to be, given my age - but it is 190. Oh yeah, the heart of a thirty year old athlete, instead of a 43 years old man! No one talks while taking the hill, no one is cheering, apart from the two elderly folks with their RV and cowbell on the roadside. Just the beat of my heart and the gasping runners that are all having a hard time. Is this what suffering in hell looks like? Some of the runners sound like if they are about to die, which is probably true. The 1300 meters height and the hill together make it very hard, the muscles in my legs feel completely out of oxygen while reaching the top at the 8 mile marker where volunteers are waiting with water and Gatorade. Far, far away is again the sound of drums. Run cowboy, run, the Indians are waiting for you. On the 1300 meters summit it shows that this is not an ordinary half marathon. The lack of oxygen and dry air are sucking out all energy twice as fast as any normal run, and apart from the drums that sound far away, there is almost no one cheering the runners up and make them go faster. Understandable, because walking or staying overnight would have been the only ways to get to the half marathon track. But hey, who cares, running all alone with 2,500 other runners, in the middle of the most beautiful scenery on the planet is what makes this race so special. Thinking that after the 8-mile summit all the hard work is done would be a mistake. Four more lower ascents to take before finally near mile 11 the road goes downhill. I've never felt my muscles heavy like this, I've never experienced a lack of Oxygen like this. I've never suffered a race like this, but this is especially what I came for. I didn't even watch my GPS watch once after mile 3. Not here to break a new personal record. This run shouldn't be about personal records, it should be about nothing but enjoying it. Such a complete different from the "other" other half marathon, which seems so ordinary compared to this one. On top of the last hill there's an amazing overlook of the valley where in the middle of green pastures the finish line is waiting. Finish paradise, with cold drinks, food, water and more water and more food. The last 800 yards are on a flat road. I want to push out some more, but I can't. I'm zombie-ing towards the finish line, still running. I'm out of fuel, the wall that normally appears only at mile 20 or so in Marathons was present in the Moab half at mile 10. A half marathon that feels like a complete marathon with a finish line in paradise. Sorell river resort paradise, so nice and peaceful with lodges overlooking the Colorado river in the middle of the green fields where water is flowing abundantly in the middle of the red rocks, just downhill from Arches national park. What an amazing PR stunt from the Sorell people, I immediately booked a couple of nights for my next summer holiday.

Sander van Vugt, www.sandervanvugt.org