

Imagine 5,000 people going up the canyon on a windy Saturday morning. It's barely light at the moment the buses start loading, and it takes time to get everyone up, with 48 people per bus, that's about 100 bus rides up the windy canyon road adjacent to the Colorado river.

We arrived at 8 AM, with the race only starting at 10 AM. So what do you do while waiting? Nothing, just nothing at all. There are some good ways to kill time though, like going to the toilet. With an average of 30 people in line before each of the toilets, an average toilet visit takes about half an hour. Good method to kill time.

While waiting, the wind starts blowing harder and harder, and takes the sand on the shores of the river with it. If you're running a half marathon in a desert, you should at least experience the desert. With about 11 degrees and wind, it's chilly anyway. Sure, the organization has provided transport for your bag with clothes back to the finish, but you have to drop them 45 minutes before the start. Makes no sense, so I donated mine to charity. My wind jacket alone just doesn't offer enough protection.

At 9 we walk up the hill to the start line, to wait another hour until the race finally begins at 10 AM. A downhill start, at an altitude of 1,200 meters. So easy to start too fast (and regret your fast start later), so I started not too fast, about 7 miles per hour, just fast enough. The first part was tough, with the strong wind blowing sand in our faces. But desert wind isn't anything like the winds I'm used to in the Netherlands. The wind is dry, and that helps you heathen the body relatively fast.

To my own surprise, at mile 4 already I took off my wind jacket, which by the way is not too easy if your bib is pinned to it and if you don't want to lose any time stopping to take it off. But anyway, it's a nice distraction to take off your jacket with a speed of 7 miles per hour.

Another nice distraction, are the women. From some reason, at an average race in Europe, you'll see about 80% male runners, and here in the USA the male part of the racers is not more than 40%. Being a guy, it's so much nicer to run behind a woman than behind an ugly guy.

Apart from the wind, the first five miles were not too hard, with only small hills, no higher than about 5 meters. From miles five up to ten, the hills were higher with a height difference of about 40 meters as the most challenging one. Nothing too bad, but tough enough anyway.

This second part was magical anyway. Imagine 5,000 people running, almost no one at the road sides watching, no traffic, until there's this red-neck truck playing Link Park's "In Pieces", same valley, same music as I was listening with my eldest son Franck on a camping trip two years ago. The music echoing against the canyon walls gave me chills, like the drumband that was at mile 10. Still 3 miles to go.

Unfortunately, after mile 10 the race had to leave fairy land to return to the Moab valley. Still against the wind, it's not that easy to do an entire race against the wind, but now that we were running at the roadside, it was even tougher. The smell of burning diesel of the big trucks driving at no more than 2 meters distance, mixed with the dust that was blown up in the sky wasn't the nicest experience.

At mile 12 the race turned to go into town, fortunately on road again that were closed to all traffic, and this time with people. American public is amazing, cheering for every single runner, nothing like the relaxed Dutch guy who sits on the sidewalk when a race passes through his time, drinking beer without encouraging anyone.

At 50 meters from the finish line the crowds began. An amazing last 500 meters, where everyone surely feels like a hero when he passes the finish line. There's just one thing I don't like about this race: no medals. Can you imagine, traveling to the other end of the world to do a half marathon and you don't get a medal? I'll do something closer to home next year.