

A Banana on The Ice: Marathoning in Antarctica



by Allison Lee



People don't normally end up in Antarctica running a marathon with only four days notice and no official training dressed as a human banana, but then life as an oceanographic research scientist is never really considered "normal" by conventional standards.

There I was, the only banana, hopping up and down amongst a mob of 20 other marathon runners, trying to keep the Antarctic chill from stealing my body warmth before the race gun went off. I was decked out in pretty nontraditional running attire: Nike running shoes, thick hiking socks, and red fleece-lined tights over a pair of capris. On top I wore a tank top, long-sleeve tech shirt, fleece pullover, balaclava, hat, turquoise hipster sunglasses, glove liners, and, of course, the all-important banana costume.

Business brought me to Antarctica. Three months prior, my boss came to me with the news that I would be going to the bottom of the world, or "The Ice" as it's known locally by our friends in the Southern Hemisphere. This was surprising and exciting news for a laboratory technician studying algae at a nonprofit research institute in Seattle. I was to fly to the U.S. Antarctic McMurdo Research Station, board an icebreaker ship called the Nathaniel B. Palmer, and spend 53 days cruising around the Ross Sea collecting water samples. Twenty-five oceanographers were interested in tracing the fate of carbon released from a giant algal bloom, and I was a member of that expedition.

During the cruise preparation process, my soon-to-be-shipmates and I digressed onto the topic of hobbies and realized there would be a couple of run-

ners on board. We were told there would be some sort of gym and perhaps even a working treadmill, though rumor had it the treadmill could only go two miles before overheating.

Creating a running event

As a regular runner, the treadmill news worried and depressed me. Would I go crazy if I couldn't run? Would my resulting restlessness make others go crazy? Would I lose my running endurance? I prepared myself for that possibility and in January promptly signed up for what I thought would be my last "official" race until mid-April: a half marathon.

Then it dawned on me – January didn't have to be the last time I got in a good run; we would have five days to kill at McMurdo Station before the icebreaker arrived. Together with my colleagues, we decided to organize our



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own 5K fun run around McMurdo. We chose a simple route that went from the American station to the New Zealand station, Scott Base, with a killer hill and sweeping views of the Ross Ice Shelf and Mount Erebus, a volcano looming up 12,448 feet. To make it even more fun, we added the option of wearing costumes.

I have a large box of costumes at home. Okay, I have many large boxes of costumes. Some time ago, I decided a banana costume would be a priceless addition to my collection. I didn't know what I needed it for at the time, but while packing for the Antarctica 5K, it became clear exactly what I'd use it for.

Shortly after my long-anticipated arrival to McMurdo Station, I was told that a marathon had been organized, incidentally on the same day our ship was set to arrive. I was immediately aflutter with excitement but also very conflicted: we had only that one day, the day of the planned marathon, to find all of our research gear and set up the labs aboard the ship before taking off to the sea. But the opportunity to run a marathon on the most remote continent in the world was a "once in a lifetime" chance!

Last-minute marathon dilemma

I went back and forth: Do I run this you-only-live-once race, risking days of sore muscles, possible injury and embarrassment amongst my colleagues if I'm not able to walk properly around deck for days afterward? Or do I pass up the opportunity so that I can make sure I have all of my science ducks in a row? Would it be possible to be a responsible scientist

and run a marathon all in a single day? We had a lot of prep work to do before leaving the station, and there was no time for resting any potential running injuries.

My only other experience running a marathon was the Nike Women's Full in San Francisco in October 2012. San Francisco is full of evil hills, but I had finished strong at four hours and 14 minutes. For three days afterward, I couldn't walk without my muscles randomly spasming and throwing me to the ground. I'll admit, I lost a little dignity having to use my hands to lower and elevate myself onto seats – including the toilet – because my quads were useless for anything. As I would be spending two months on a boat starting the next day after the race, losing the use of my quads was not an option.

It was a risk I had to take. When would I ever find myself in this position again? I had to do it. Science would have to wait! With the blessings of my boss and the chief scientist, I signed up. And, conveniently, I happened to already have a costume with me. Who knew that running a 5K as a banana would turn into running 26.2 miles as a banana?

Running The Ice

The day of the race, the weather was calm, with temperatures of 18°F (-7 C). Adding a mild wind speed of 15 mph, temperatures felt more like 4°F (-16 C). Those numbers didn't really make sense in my head – all I could tell was that it was frostbite cold. My skin was already feeling tight, my lips chapped, my hair full of static. Antarctica is a desert and



Since Antarctica is a desert (based on annual rainfall), there isn't enough moisture to create slippery, icy running conditions.



Aid stations grilled up Dixie cups of water and protein bars to keep them from being frozen blocks.

I was feeling every drop of water escape from my pores, eyes and breath. It was an out-and-back course on the Willy Field, part of the Ross Ice Shelf, and I hoped it would be smooth sailing. The gun went off, and we all started out the race together. I made sure to pace myself extra slow.

At the start of the race, the ear piece of my hipster sunglasses snapped off. I was surrounded by 360 degrees of stark whiteness and incredible glare. My eyes would have to endure this extreme albedo for the next 4-6 hours, so going without shades was not an option. Kattywampus glasses would have to do! Enduring 26.2 miles on a flat course in the cold is hard enough. Imagine also the face hole of your banana costume constantly knocking your asymmetric sunglasses even more askew and having to fiddle with your hat, balaclava and fleece bundle to keep warm.

The run as a constant battle to regulate my body temperature. For the first 13.1 miles, I ran with the wind at my back, so it didn't feel too cold. At times, I removed my hat and scarf and unzipped my fleece because I was getting too hot. Then my breath would slowly form ice crystals in my hair and the wind would chill the bones in my chest. I was forced to zip back up and refashion everything back around my face.

In the desert of Antarctica, drinking adequate amounts of water is actually such an important health concern that each toilet stall is equipped with a urine color chart to indicate your hydration level. Brown is bad. For the first three days I was on The Ice, my pee was brown. Aware that hydration would be an issue during the marathon, I made sure to bring my own handheld water bottles: one for electrolyte lemonade and the other for water. Within 30 minutes, both were frozen solid and I was running with blocks of ice.

In my effort to avoid dehydration, I actually overhydrated before the race and had to pee at the first aid station. This was not a simple pull-off-the-road-and-use-a-port-a-potty situation. We weren't allowed to excrete any human waste on to the snow, so our only option was to pee into Nalgene bottles. Given my female anatomy and the added complication of the banana costume, this was a particularly tricky endeavor. I learned quickly how to fashion the specialized funnel called a "Freshette" to my unmentionables and relieve a full bladder in full view of all the other runners.

At the second aid station, I was irritated to find I had to pee

again. I grabbed a Freshette and headed into a seemingly private warming hut. It wasn't private. Three other people were inside warming themselves and here I was, the banana in the corner trying to pee into a bottle with a makeshift funnel. I opened the Freshette only to find it had already been used. My first reaction of, "Gross!" quickly turned to thoughts of, "Pee is sterile, right? Let's just get this over with!"

Volunteers pulled out trucks at miles 3, 7.5, and 12, which doubled as return stations heading back to the finish line. My favorite stop was hosted by gruff, bearded men at mile 7.5. They had a



The moisture from runners' breath creates ice crystals.

The makeshift finish line is a sight for sore eyes – and legs!



barbecue and were grilling up Dixie cups of water and protein bars. They also had beer and brats and free rides to the finish line. What an evil thing to offer someone who is trying to bat away self-defeating thoughts while trying to do something crazy.

With each aid station stop it became harder and harder to start up again as my joints were starting to stiffen. The course was flat, flat and more flat. I al-

most think the monotony of flatness was more painful than the dynamic hills of San Francisco. I was expecting the compact snowy road to be slippery, but the thing about Antarctica that most people don't realize is that it doesn't get much precipitation, so there's no fluffy snow accumulation; and it never gets warm enough to melt or refreeze, so slippery ice wasn't a problem. Without music to accompany me, I just soaked in the stark

white scenery contrasted against a blue mountain backdrop.

The entire race I was grinning with the excitement that it was actually a reality. Four hours and 57 minutes later, I crossed the finish line at what felt like maximum sprint but in reality was probably nothing more than a slow shuffle. Surprisingly, I wasn't even sore the next day, and I walked around the ship like any other scientist on board.

Everyone on that expedition took away the incredible otherworldly experience of being on the seventh continent, and I am lucky to have taken away an extra something special: the accomplishment of running a full Antarctic marathon, dressed as a human banana. As irritating as the banana costume was at times, it was absolutely worth every moment of sheer joy and hilarity. Added bonus: the tip of the banana turned out to be an excellent stash area for snacks. •

Allison Lee is a 30-year-old Seattle native who thrives on dissipating her high energy through traveling, cycling running and adventuring. Her new goal is to run a marathon on all seven continents dressed as a different fruit in each one.

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