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Lonley Planet - Epic Runs
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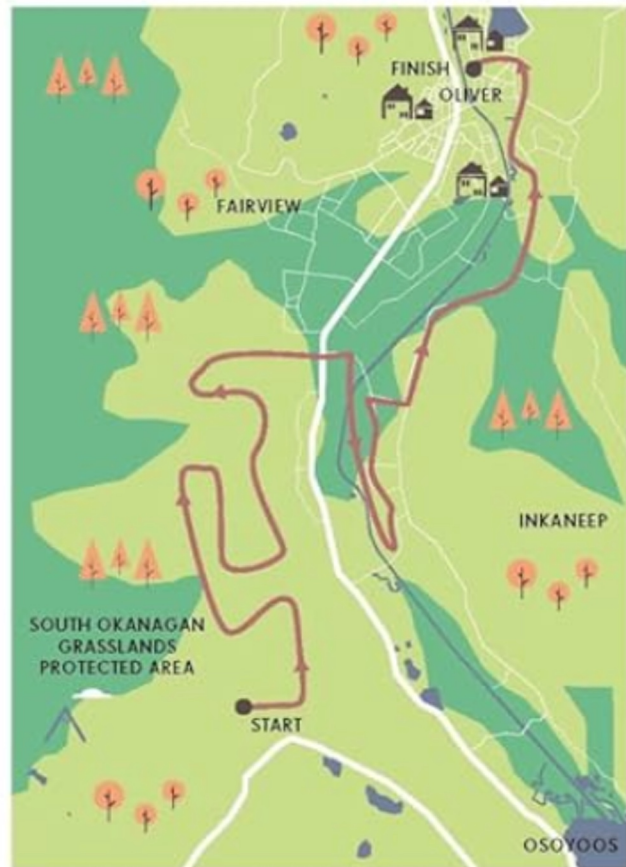
VINEYARD-HOPPING ON THE HALF CORKED MARATHON

This wine-themed BC run has nothing to do with achieving personal bests – unless it's how many Pinots you can sample before noon, says Tamara Elliott.

If you come in first, you've actually lost.' So goes the joke at the start line of the Half Corked Marathon, which is more about showcasing creative costumes and the sun-soaked Okanagan vineyards than any racing. Every May, more than a dozen wineries in British Columbia's Oliver Osoyoos Wine Country serve as co-hosts for the event, in which participants run a course through the leafy vines and stunning scenery of the Golden Mile and Black Sage Benches. Hydration looks a little different here than at typical water-and-Gatorade stations; participants make a pit stop at each vineyard along the route, sipping on concoctions such as wine cocktails and 'frosé' slushies before jogging off to the next one.

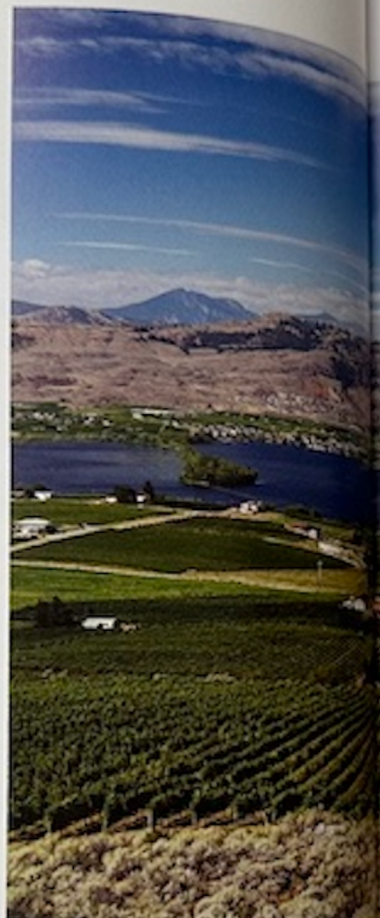
'It's so much fun,' laughs Jennifer Busmann, executive director of Oliver Osoyoos Winery Association, who helped launch the first race back in 2008. 'It's just old-fashioned fun all day.' The BC race is inspired by the Marathon du Médoc in Bordeaux, France, where participants don crazy outfits while running through that region's vineyards. The Half Corked Marathon has grown popular since its humble beginnings; the first edition hosted just 75 runners, but today a ticket lottery allocates between 1200 and 1600 entries. Each year has a distinct theme (examples: Back to the Future or 'That's the '90s') and participants up the ante further by creating outrageous costumes.

When I did the race with a group of friends, entries included a pair of wine barrels dubbed 'The Grape Gatsby' and, my personal favorite, the 'Malibooze Barbies', complete with hot-pink Mattel-box costumes that didn't look easy to run in. For our part, we decided to channel our inner Jane Fonda or



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Richard Simmons and run as '80s fitness gurus. Opting for head bands, shorts, and neon-hued sunglasses, our costumes had the benefit of being actual workout attire, and thus suitable for a half-marathon. At least until the arrival of my friend and co-runner, Ryan, who showed up in a thrift-shop wedding dress he'd somehow managed to tug over his 6.5ft/2m (and 300lb/136kg) frame. Racing with another similarly styled friend, Jasmine, this pair of 'runaway brides' made for quite a sight, with Ryan's long veil flowing behind him in the wind.

To beat the heat of the arid Osoyoos desert, buses had brought us to the start line bright and early (we arrived to find wine samples waiting, naturally). After a reminder from an upbeat emcee that none of us should aim to cross the finish line first, the race got underway faster than you can say 'Cabernet Sauvignon'. The course varies each year, taking in between 12 and 16 vineyards. Our course had the full complement of 16 stops, an opportunity for local producers to showcase their best bottles in a highly competitive market.

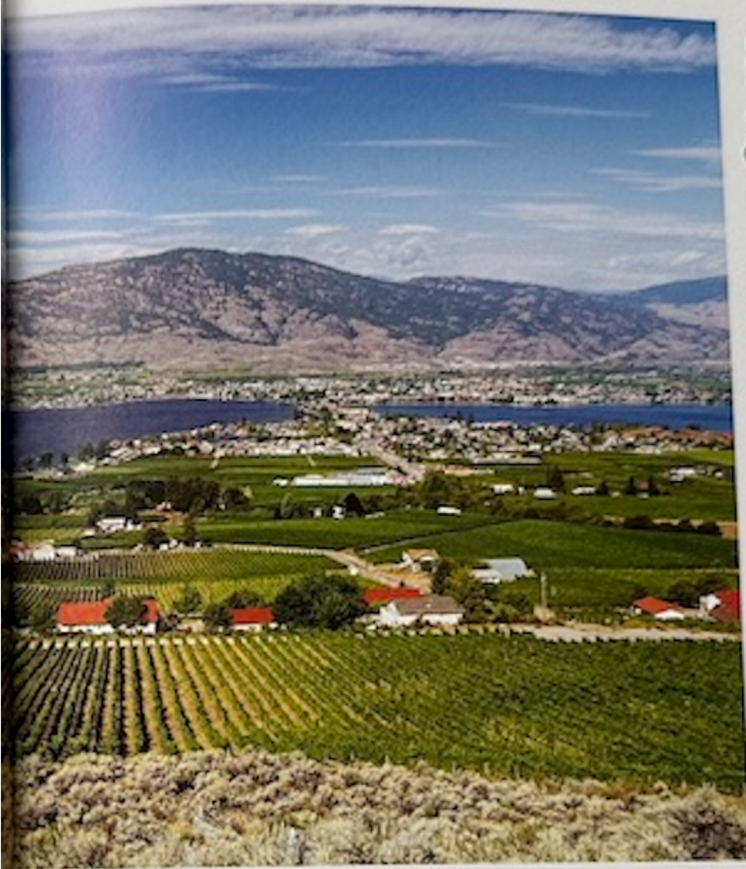
Offering the chance to impress new visitors in the hope they might become long-standing customers, 'the vineyards like to put their best foot forward,' Busmann explained, presumably with pun intended. 'The more memorable your space, the more likely it is that people will visit you again after the race.'

"The underwire in Ryan's dress started poking through the fabric – he might have found it painful were it not for the numbing effects of alcohol"

As the mid-morning sun rose high in the sky, we ran between wine stations at a decent speed, choosing a slightly faster pace so we could spend more time lingering at each vineyard, chatting with winemakers and asking for seconds when a particularly fantastic vintage was poured. Given its nature, it's hardly surprising the race isn't timed, although participants are given a cut-off of 3.5 hours to complete it. This makes the Half Corked accessible to those who aren't regular runners, with plenty of opportunity to stop and catch their breath along the way.

Each winery is free to serve whatever it pleases, so every tasting is a surprise. Some stick to a handful of varietals, while others go all out, pairing their wines with anything from a Thai barbecue to organic energy bars and even full-buffet lunches, which the Silver Sage Winery generously did during our run. With show-stopping spreads such as these (and the fact that

CANADA & ALASKA



WINE COUNTRY

With dozens of microclimates and terroir pockets, Oliver-Osoyoos Wine Country is a 20-mile (33km) stretch between southern Osoyoos and McIntyre Bluff, north of Oliver. Its 50-odd wineries produce over 60% of BC's wine grapes: Cabernet, Syrah, and Malbec all do well in Osoyoos; Oliver is known for Chardonnay and Pinot Gris; and the cooler areas are ideal for Riesling and Pinot Noir.

Left to right: Jasmine and Ryan, the 'runaway brides'; Osoyoos and its lake are surrounded by vineyards. Previous spread: completing the Half Corked

wine pours are only an ounce), most runners are in surprisingly good shape when they eventually cross the finish line – unless you're wearing a wedding dress, that is.

With about 3 miles (5km) to go, the underwire in Ryan's dress started poking through the fabric and straight into his skin, a wardrobe malfunction he might have found painful were it not for the numbing effects of alcohol. Bringing up the rear, the rest of our group were there to cheer on both Ryan and Jasmine as they waltzed across the finish line. With the Malibooze Barbies close behind them, we were primed and ready to pose for a group photo.

Sporting a bib for the Half Corked Marathon is to do so on one of the more unusual runs out there, but our fun didn't end once the last racer had crossed the finish line. Food trucks and other wineries were there waiting for a post-race party, including live entertainment and, of course, a best-dressed costume contest. Previous winners for best costume have included a KISS tribute band in full make-up and another crew dressed as characters from *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* – complete with a giant 'rock' that they rolled over the entire course. With its unique blend of fun, sun, and unforgettable characters, the Half Corked Marathon has to be one of the most memorable runs in North America. **TE**



Start/Finish // Route differs each year
Distance // 12-15 miles (19km-24km)

Getting there // Transport is included both to the start line and from the finish; from/to Oliver, Osoyoos, and Penticton.

When to go // The race takes place on the final Saturday of May, with special dinners the night before and post-race.

What to wear // The craziest costume possible

Where to stay // Watermark Beach Resort in Osoyoos has condo-style suites and beachfront townhomes just steps away from Osoyoos Lake.

Things to know // The ticket lottery for the Half Corked Marathon opens in mid-November. Race-weekend events include the Primavera Party – a long-table dinner with live music the night before the race – and an intimate multi-course feast at a winery the evening following the run.

More info // oliverosoyoos.com/half-corked-marathon