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Running a Marathon in the Black Forest

A unique experience.

BY JAMES L. DOTI

A visit to the Porsche Museum in Stuttgart, Germany, was high on my bucket list. Since I would be in Europe to officiate at a Chapman University MBA graduation ceremony at our Prague campus, I figured it would be only a short trip from Prague to Stuttgart to finally get to see the new museum complex that all my Porsche buddies have been raving about.

Looking at a map to confirm Stuttgart's location, I noticed the town of Baden-Baden in close proximity. Bingo! Another bucket-list entry. A number of years ago, a friend told me that Baden-Baden is one of the prettiest places in the world. He waxed eloquent as he described running along a footpath bordered by a gurgling stream on one side and a dazzling display of towering trees and wildflowers on the other. His description evoked images of the Garden of Eden.

As I was finalizing plans to include all this in an expanded trip itinerary, my associate, Ann Cameron, excitedly barged into my office to say, "Hey, there's a marathon in the Black Forest right near Baden-Baden that's being run the day before your flight home."

In the 26 years that Ann has been my associate at Chapman University, where I serve as president, not only has she made it possible for me to do my job, but she was the one who inspired me to run my first marathon 10 years ago. I'll never forget seeing her after she ran her first marathon. That look of utter joy on her face led me to conclude, "Anything that good must have something to it."

So here I am, 35 marathons later, with Ann giving me the lowdown on the Schöck 39.Hornisgrinde Marathon 2011. I had never run a marathon in Europe before, and to run one in the Black Forest of Germany was enticing, to say the least.

The hard copy Ann gave me was a Google translation (German to English) of the Hornisgrinde Marathon website. It highlighted the boutique-like nature of the race with only 300 or so entrants each year. The entry fee of €22.0 was roughly \$30, so the price was right. That included a T-shirt and what the Google translation described as follows: "The first three in each category will receive a deed."



Photo courtesy of James Doti

▲ Here I am in my "baby"—a 1965 Porsche 356C.

Where it all began

A charming addition to the usual race description and registration materials was the following Google-translated account of the marathon's early history:

1967 the gymnastics club began with the execution of people running events as part of a week of local advertising sports clubs from 24 June-2 July 1967.

To avoid large differences in height in the marathon and to get more comfortable running temperatures, moved the people responsible for the running events in the height field. Start and finish were and still are the base station of the ski left on Hundseck Buhler Valleys. Nor could the leaders of the gymnastics club does not have guessed that the Hornisgrinde Marathon would develop into one of the most popular and most beautiful marathons in Germany and neighboring foreign countries.

In 1975, the event in "Hornisgrinde Marathon" has been renamed. In this event, the 8th Hornisgrinde Marathon unmatched to this day they reached the record number of participants.

Klaus won the marathon places (Know-win) in 2:23:47 hours, as this time for the marathon Hornisgrinde almost was not possible, the route length was measured and it turned out that the distance of 1.8 km to shortly.

Before 9 Hornisgrinde Marathon on 25/26. July 1976 was measured, the new marathon course and extended by the lack of miles.

Huh? Obviously, Google translations leave something to be desired. Nonetheless, I decided to register and received an e-mail in quick response:

Hello Mr. Doti,

I must know your correct year's issues for a proper registration.

Please tell us your correct year's issues by E-mail.

Thank you,

Best sportive wishes.

Martin Fritsch

Organisationsleitung Marathon

After thinking awhile about the pleasant German closing (why don't we have something like "sportive wishes" in English?), I began to focus on the issue at hand, namely, "issues." Was Organisationsleitung Marathon referring to a magazine subscription? Then it dawned on me. I went back to the registration form to confirm my suspicion that had I missed entering my date of birth. I had, indeed, left blank the entry requesting my "vintage." I shouldn't have. After all, at 65, "vintage" is a pretty accurate description.

Thankfully, the two runner comments I found at *MarathonGuide.com* were written in English. One of them came from Joseph Sweenty in Glasgow, Scotland, who wrote:

"You will be running on cool, windy forest tracks and paths that resemble cross-country trails. The last kilometer is so steep it made last year's San Francisco Marathon look like Rotterdam the previous Easter."

Hmm . . . I've run the San Francisco Marathon, so I get that, but what in the world does the metaphor "Rotterdam the previous Easter" mean? Ah . . . I think I get it. Rotterdam is in Holland. Right? Low country. Right? Flat. Right?

Anyway, this marathon was shaping up to be a real happening. My anticipation level was high.

After the Chapman MBA graduation ceremony, held in a beautiful Benedictine monastery in Prague, I rushed to board my flight to Stuttgart. Upon landing, I picked up my rental car, entered "Porsche Museum-Stuttgart" in the GPS, and was on my way.

I found the building that houses the museum architecturally striking. It definitely produced a "wow" effect. Inside, though, I was expecting something more. Walking up a spiral display area, not unlike Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim

in New York City, I passed just about every Porsche model ever produced. It reminded me of a very fancy automobile showroom.

Even though the museum was a bit of a letdown, I couldn't help but feel some satisfaction as I checked one more item off my bucket list. Then I pointed the car toward Baden-Baden and was on my way.

Arriving there only an hour or so later, I found that Baden-Baden did not disappoint. It was all that was promised and more. Since its trailhead is at the town center, I immediately came onto the footpath my friend had described to me so long ago. Majestic trees and a magnificent array of flora, the likes of which I've never seen before, flourished along one side of the path. Beyond the silvery stream bordering the opposite side, I saw well-kept villas, castles, and even a striking Richard Meir-designed modern art museum. All in all, it was, unquestionably, the most stunning, Shangri-La-like locale I've ever experienced.

Baden-Baden is famed for its thermal waters and exceptional spa facilities. In fact, the German word "baden" translates to the English "baths." So Baden-Baden is "Baths-Baths." Among them is the historic Friedrichsbad, which opened in 1877 and hasn't changed much since. The English brochure in my hotel described it as follows:

The relaxing and enjoyable experience that is unique to the Friedrichsbad is a result of the changing sequence of warm and hot dry air baths, a soap & brush massage, steam baths of varying intensity and a selection of thermal pools along with thermal water showers. Enjoy this fascinating journey to inner harmony and total relaxation!

Let yourself float off effortlessly and experience the wonderful feeling of finding your inner peace.

I was sold. A Friedrichsbad experience would be a gift to myself after running the marathon—not a bad incentive to keep my pace up, to say the least.

Marathon day arrived cold and drizzly. Although the ski area that was the location for the marathon start was only 20 minutes away, a dense fog made the drive stressful. I would have missed the mountain road turnoff if it weren't for a large blue "Schöck" sign advertising the race sponsor, a German construction company.

A large tent sheltered the marathoners from a drizzle that was quickly becoming a downpour. Posted near the entrance was a map and elevation chart for the marathon's point-to-point course.

As I studied the elevation chart and converted meters to feet, I realized that the course drops 1,000 feet in the first half and climbs 1,000 feet in the second half. My anxiety level spiked. Having run Boston, I know from experience that long downhills followed by long uphill are tough on the hamstrings. But compared with the marathon I was about to run, Boston's 400-foot drop from the start to mile



◀ A map of the course, including an elevation chart showing the 1,000-foot drop followed by a 1,000-foot gain.

16 and 200-foot gain from mile 16 to 21 is child’s play. And unlike Boston, which mercifully drops 250 feet in the final five miles, Hornisgründe challenges runners with its steepest ascent in the last few kilometers. All this somehow got lost in the Google translation.

I quickly paid my registration fee (there was no provision for payment at the website), pinned on my bib (there were no timing chips), and headed to the start line. There were no announcements, no national anthem, and by then, thankfully, no rain. Someone shouted “Gehen,” and the bunch of us were on our way.



Photo courtesy of James Doti

▲ The race start where the sign “ziel” translates roughly to “target.”



Photo courtesy of James Doti

▲ A charming chapel in the middle of nowhere.

I stayed near the rear, and it wasn't long before I was dead last, running all alone through the Black Forest. I wouldn't ordinarily mind this position, since I like finishing strong with a negative split. But because of all I had seen so far, I didn't know what the race might have provided in the way of trail markers, and I was worried about losing my way.

So I quickened my pace, and it wasn't long before I caught up to a few stragglers—good thing, too, since we soon hit a fork in the path. In the middle of the path was a branch about two feet long, which I would have guessed was part of nature's wonder. My fellow German marathoners, though, seemed to know instinctively this was a strategic marker that marked a turn.

Plenty to keep the eyes wandering

Running along what appeared to be a logging road, we passed quaint and charming chapels, shrines, and ranger watchtowers.

Every three or four miles, I came to an aid station providing water and two other beverages that tasted more like weak tea than any kind of energy drink. The volunteers were friendly and anxious to practice their English on me.

The 1,000-foot downhill during the marathon's first half didn't strike me as all that downhill. Perhaps, spread out over 13 miles or so, it doesn't amount to much of a grade change. By the halfway point, however, the achy feeling in my legs announced that my body knew something my mind didn't.



Photo courtesy of James Doti

▲ Very friendly volunteers eager to practice their English.

The sad and funny thing is that while I didn't seem to mentally notice the downhill, the uphill in the second half of the marathon revealed itself loud and clear. There would be no negative split for me.

Ordinarily, I don't like to walk up a steep grade or even walk through an aid station. The growing heaviness in my legs, though, led me to look for excuses. How could I not stop for a great photo-op? Perhaps I should spend more time talking to the aid volunteers. And shouldn't I take a few breathers to soak up the



Photo courtesy of James Doti

► The thickness of trees on the sides explains why it's called "Black Forest."



Photo courtesy of James Dotti

▲ An example of the beautiful vistas along the way.



Photo courtesy of James Dotti

sights, sounds, and wonders of the Black Forest? Isn't this a race that begs you to stop and smell the roses?

Yes, it is, and so I did.

The Black Forest is a glorious place. Parts of it are so thick with trees that the sky is invisible. And when there are clearings, incredible vistas reveal themselves.

I began to count the cut timbers along the side of the road and tried to calculate how many of them it would take to build a house. I've discovered that mind games like this divert my

◀ How many of these timbers on the race route will be needed to build a house?

thoughts from burning, screaming muscle groups. As my fatigue grew and number games started to seem too complex, I kept myself plodding along by chanting my new mantra: Friedrichsbad, Friedrichsbad, Friedrichsbad . . .

This must have worked, because I began to notice that I was passing a few people, including an old guy who looked like he might be in my age division. Then, suddenly, out of the dark forest there was light. The trail came to an end at an asphalt road that appeared to head straight up. Maybe it was the bone tiredness of making it to kilometer 39 in a tough marathon, but this road looked like a stairway to the stars.

It could have been that I was hallucinating, for my brain was strangely telling me that a marathon is 44 kilometers long. As a result, I mistakenly concluded that I still had 5K to go before it was all over. That may not seem like much, but with the “stairway to the stars” looming ahead, the thought of an additional 5K overwhelmed me. Slowly but surely, my run begat a jog that begat a fast walk that begat a slow walk. Even the old guy I had passed earlier caught up and waved to me as he sprinted ahead.

Then, as I made it over a crest in the road, like out of a dream the “zeil” (target) appeared before me. “Is it a mirage?” I wondered. Then it dawned on me. Oh, joy of joys, a marathon is 42 kilometers—not 44! My pace quickened. My aches and pains disappeared. And as my legs flew me toward the finish line, my delirium gave way to exhilaration.

Unlike Boston, it wasn’t the crowd that fed my adrenalin. There was no crowd. There was only a guy with a stopwatch, standing beside an old folding table, matching bib numbers with finishing times. There was no customary draping of a medal around my neck. There were no medals. There was only a guy handing out an orange-colored cotton T-shirt with Schöck boldly blazoned on it. There were no bagels. There were no bananas. There were no free eats at all.

Then a tent came into my sights. It appeared to have all the earmarks of an Oktoberfest celebration. Spilling out of the tent were my fellow marathoners, seemingly in the midst of one heck of a party. Beer varieties galore were being drunk not out of steins but directly out of supersized bottles.

There was even an impressive table display of wines, brandies, and liquors ready for sampling. I was so enthralled by it all that I didn’t even think to check the race results.

Since the thick forest blocked the GPS satellites, my Garmin (the original, 4-inch-long model), was useless. I had no idea what my marathon time was. Not that I really cared much, but someone handed me a computer printout that was being passed up and down the party tables. In the number one position was Jacek Kurek, who finished in 2:54:14. I scanned down several sheets before my name popped up.



Photo courtesy of James Doti

▲ A bountiful display of brandies for sampling after the race.

My time: 4:54:39! That's the slowest I've run since Boston '07. (My excuses for that are given in "From Arusha to Fort Sill Via Boston," *Marathon & Beyond*, March/April 2011.) I placed 229 out of 244 runners but was third among four runners in my age group. That meant I would be getting the "deed" promised to the top three finishers in each age category. If I hadn't eased up at the end and let my fellow sexagenarian pass me, I might have taken second.

I noticed something else, though, as I scanned the list of finishers. There were lots of Germans, to be sure, but there were also Scots, French, Italians, Canadians, and even a runner from New Zealand—no one from the United States . . . except for me! That made me the fastest American in the race. The fact that I was the only American in the Hornisgrinde 2011 should not, I believe, diminish the value of that notable achievement.

On my way to the car, I imagined reporters with cameras and microphones crowding around, blocking my way, and shouting, "Where are you off to now?" I imagined myself answering, "I'm going to Friedrichsbad."

And how was that experience? While I hate using the vastly overused word "unique," I can only describe Friedrichsbad as unique.

How so?

That is a story to be experienced and not told. 