

Running bug

The appetite for distance running is at an all-time high, writes senior sports reporter Michael Houston, with run clubs forming in local communities around the world

For many, the marathon is the pinnacle of athletic achievement. More than 297,000 people participated in the seven World Marathon Majors, regarded as the most prestigious events on the calendar, in 2024.

With more obsessing over their heart rate and personal bests than ever before, there is an exponential demand to race. Here, we explore four of the best city marathons and their intricacies.

LONDON

The modern marathon distance we endure can be traced back to the 1908 Olympic Games in London, when organisers wished to start the race at Windsor Castle and finish in front of the royal box at White City Stadium. 26.2 miles

became the standard, and now London is the most sought-after marathon in the world, with a world-record 840,000 people applying for the 2025 edition.

Participants go past major landmarks such as Tower Bridge, the Palace of Westminster and most famously, a sprint to the line with Buckingham Palace as the backdrop. It is hard to find a more scenic city marathon than this and the numbers reflect that with 53,840 finishers in 2024. The 2025 race could break the participant world record set by the New York City Marathon.

Fast times are commonplace too. The women's world record has been broken eight times here, notably that of Britain's Paula Radcliffe, who held the record

for 12 years until four-time winner Mary Keitany broke it in 2017 on the same course. Former winners of the men's race include the late world record holder Kelvin Kiptum and marathon great Eliud Kipchoge.

And maybe you will spot someone famous – chef Gordon Ramsay has completed the race, while Formula One world champion Jenson Button broke the three-hour barrier in 2015. Even punk legend and lead singer of The Clash, Joe Strummer, ran the race back in 1983.

"The biggest temptation on the London Marathon is to run into a pub along the route," Strummer said. londonmarathonevents.co.uk



MEXICO CITY

The Mexico City Marathon is less about personal bests, and more about personal achievement. Sitting more than 2,200 metres above sea level, it is the highest-elevation marathon to receive the exclusive World Athletics Label. One of the most challenging city marathons in the world, athletes must overcome a hilly middle section, while dealing with the thin air. It's no surprise the men's

course record is held by Hector Garibay, who trains over 3,700m above sea level in Bolivia.

The route begins at one of the most iconic stadiums in history – the Estadio Olimpico Universitario. It was home to the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the Mexico City 1968 Summer Olympic Games, which also hosted athletics, equestrian and football events; and even the finish for the men's marathon. Runners also get to experience the beautiful Bosque de Chapultepec; before finishing at the city's main plaza, Zócalo, home to celebration, protest and gatherings since the Aztec era. mexicocitymarathonand-halfmarathon.com

NEW YORK CITY

New York City is synonymous with what we see in Western cinema, making the Big Apple one of the famous cities in the world. The New York City Marathon's popularity has led to organisers requiring a three-tier lottery system for locals, Americans and international participants. The course covers all five boroughs and concludes in Central Park in Manhattan, where a record

55,646 runners crossed the line last year. The race is known for its celebrity involvement too. Oprah Winfrey, comedian Kevin Hart and singer Alicia Keys, who revered the city in the song *Empire State of Mind*, are amongst those who have run. Several actors including Emmy-winning *Breaking Bad* star Bryan Cranston, *Deadpool's* Ryan Reynolds and *Wicked's* Cynthia Erivo have participated too. nyrr.org

TOKYO

A flat course will always attract the masses, but the added incentive is getting to race in one of the best cities in the world as runners pass the Tokyo Dome and the famous Tokyo Tower before the race culminates at Tokyo Station.

Some of the fastest times in history have been set here and the Tokyo Marathon consistently has the best depth globally for athletes seeking a time under three hours. marathon.tokyo ■

Bottom left: New York City Marathon famously runs through the beautiful city oasis of Central Park as it weaves through five boroughs

Left: London Marathon crosses the iconic Tower Bridge as well as passing many world-renowned landmarks

Below: Tokyo marathon is a good race to choose for those with ambition of running sub-three hours

This can partly be attributed to Japan's running culture which continues to thrive for people of all ages. In fact, of the seven World Marathon Majors, Tokyo has the oldest average age amongst its participants, with nearly 50 per cent of people over the age of 50.

It has become distance running's worst-kept secret – particularly since Tokyo held the Olympic Games in 2021. Even popstar and former One Direction member Harry Styles was on the start line this year. marathon.tokyo ■

