



Pollution, traffic, stray dogs: the hardiness of Cairo's long-distance runners

In spite of an unforgiving climate, litter-strewn streets and verbal harassment, running is gaining popularity among the residents of Egypt's capital

Jared Malsin in Cairo

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In Cairo, the hazards of running are legion. The air is polluted. The traffic is dense. The sidewalks are uneven or nonexistent. Summer temperatures climb to 35 or 40 degrees. Women runners face catcalls, stares, or worse. Some recount harrowing stories of encounters with stray dogs.

But in spite of the litany of annoyances, runners in Cairo say their sport is growing. A number of neighbourhood groups organise weekly runs and later this week, a group called Cairo Runners is holding its third half marathon, for which 3,500 people have registered.

Part of that growth is owed to running evangelists like Mohsen Alashmoni, a development consultant who founded the Maadi Runners group in 1999. His group encourages runners to train for full or half marathons. This season, 45 of them are running the Geneva marathon.

On Friday morning, Alashmoni led his own pack of athletes on a 20-mile run that marked the most intense point in a season of marathon training. At 5.30am, the air was cool and clear. The 20-mile route looped through the leafy neighbourhood of Maadi, then shot north along the

Nile and back. It was just after dawn and there were few cars on the streets. For a moment, the only sound was the rhythm of sneakers on pavement.

“Our streets are not really at all designed for runners,” Alashmoni said during Friday morning’s run. “Either a driver will try to run you over, or there will be a big hole in the street, or some wild street dogs. And they do bite some of our runners once in a while.”

By all accounts, running in Cairo requires more commitment than it might in a European or American city. Even among Egyptian cities, the capital and its nearly 20 million inhabitants stand apart in terms of congestion alone. Alexandrians claim their city is friendlier for runners, with its miles of walkways along the Mediterranean.

Between mile 12 and 13, Alashmoni spotted two boys out for their own morning jog. He quipped his encouragement as he strode past. “Be sure to drink a lot.”

Turning back to his own runners, he called out, “The next stop is a good one,” referring to one of several organised water stops, serving cups of Gatorade, and a few with bowls of watermelon and strawberries. The runners paused for a few seconds at each before pressing on.

As the pack chalked up the miles, the city began to stir. Along the Nile corniche, kids hollered from a microbus. Peggy Stevens, a Malaysian woman who lives in Cairo because of her husband’s work in the hotel industry, flanked Alashmoni as they hustled up the Nile. She said running in Cairo has its advantages. “In Malaysia we have a park and a place for the runners, so that’s easier, but the climate here is nicer, because it’s dry,” she said. Asked about traffic and pollution, she said, “We try not to think about that, because it’s really not encouraging at all. We try to cover our eyes like horses, keep going straight forward.”

As she spoke, the whole pack was forced to slow to a walk to scramble over a pile of trash heaped on the sidewalk. “The sidewalk is never clear. It’s almost impossible to keep walking in a straight line on the same level for two minutes. You always stumble into something,” said Omar Nagati, an architect, urban planner and founder of the Cairo Lab for Urban Studies.

He said making Cairo more runner-friendly could involve adding special lanes to roads, or ensuring that sidewalks are sufficiently clear. “That should be the first priority, to encourage people even to walk,” he said.

And then there is the problem of Cairenes’ perceptions of running, and of harassment. “Most of the time I have my music playing loud enough that I don’t hear the harassment, but people are just not comfortable with a woman running,” said Nada Ramadan, a social researcher and solo runner. “This is my right to the space and I’m going to go run on it. I just have to be kind of aggressive about it.”

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