

# This Land

by John Farrow

It didn't take very long on my 50-state tour to come to appreciate the many different types of races around the country. They come in all shapes and sizes, altitudes and attitudes.

From costumed revelry in San Francisco to small, laid-back local races at county fairs, from the top of the Rockies to the sands of the Gulf of Mexico, we are blessed with an infinite variety from which to choose.

You like people? We got people out the wazoo. Just try the Bay to Breakers in San Francisco, one of the largest races in the world. Expect Mardi Gras but at a somewhat faster pace. That is, unless you get stuck towards the back. Then you might as well take time to admire all the costumes runners are wearing -- or not. A fair number of nudists run the race, too.

And the San Francisco hills? Surprisingly, the race avoids all but one. That one, however, the Hayes Street Hill in the third mile, is straight up and straight down.

Do take time to notice the denizens of the city's neighborhoods. Just past the Hayes Street Hill is the Castro District, where alternative lifestyles are the rule. Expect lots of leather, chains, pink chiffon and combat boots.

Once in Golden Gate Park, the bands proliferate, from rock to blues to alternative to country to reggae. And with so many refugees from the '60s around, you almost expect to hear Janis Joplin with Big Brother and the Holding Company somewhere along the way to the beach.

For something a little more down home and down to earth, try a local fair like the Fall Festival 5k in Girard, Kansas. Just being there is a trip back into time as you drive by corn and wheat fields and pick up your race packet in front of the staid brick courthouse that dominates the town square. Lots of "Yes, Sirs" and "No, Ma'ams" can be heard,

and

these from the clean-cut high school kids handing out race numbers.

It's probably been a long time since you've been to a race that was preceded by both the National Anthem and a prayer, but this is as good a place for them as they come. And then shortly after the start, as the field wound through the quiet neighborhoods of the town, we seemed to go by almost as many churches as there were runners. People sat in lawn chairs out in their yards and clapped politely as we went by, occasionally cheering when they saw a friend or neighbor.

After the finish back on the square, while drinking a real, honest-to-goodness home-made lemonade, I noticed the cake walk wheel painted on the street. I hadn't seen one of those since junior high, but could almost taste the tart lemon pies and rich chocolate cakes that would shortly be up for grabs.

If altitude is your forté, here in the West we have a wonderful assortment of mountain races from which to choose. Certainly the La Luz Trail Run up the west face of the Sandias is as tough as they come, but for a race that starts where La Luz finishes, at least in terms of altitude, try one in Leadville, Colorado.

At 10,430' above sea level, Leadville is the highest incorporated city in the country. Its name is synonymous with the 100-mile Race Across the Sky, but if you are looking for something a bit shorter, try the aptly-named No Oxygen 10k. This race starts in town and goes up from there. Of course, given Leadville's location in the middle of Fourteener Country, it's hard not to head up whenever you leave downtown.

The course follows mining roads through the mountains and past various "diggings" before mercifully heading back down into town. There, your gasps for air are somewhat more rewarded than up above.

At the other end of the altitude spectrum is the multitude of races at sea level on our various coasts. For scenery, you can't beat Nantucket with its Columbus Day Half-Marathon, and yes, it is a big enough place for a race of that length. The start is out in the weathered village of Siasconset ('Sconset to the locals) on the eastern edge of the island. From there, the course goes out to the red and white-striped Sankaty Head Lighthouse before turning westward through the heather and cranberry bogs back towards the town of Nantucket. The whalers are long gone, but keep an eye to seaward for the tell-tale spout.

Another possibility is the Hemingway Days Sunset 5k in Key West, Florida. This race begins at Southernmost Point and follows the shore (what doesn't in Key West?) to the Navy Pier and back. Plus, if you happen to resemble Papa Hemingway, you could enter the look-alike contest. Just remember to ask for your *mojito* shaken, not stirred. (Whups! Wrong character!)

Wherever you go, there's a beautiful country full of races out there. To paraphrase Woodie Guthrie,

Start chasin' your shadow  
out across this roadmap  
To the wheat fields waving,  
and the cornfield dancing  
As you go runnin'  
this wind keeps talkin'  
This land is made for you and me.□

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