

# The Coastal Challenge Expedition

*Costa Rica Boasts One Hot and Heavy Stage Race.*

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BY STEFANI JACKENTHAL

At 10:00 A.M. on Saturday, February 4, 2007, with a cooling breeze and cloudy skies, 68 hydration-pack-clad racers (from 12 countries) sprinted off the starting line in the northern volcanic region of Costa Rica. Under the shadow of Arenal Volcano—one of the world’s most active volcanoes—runners hoofed a celebratory lap around La Fortuna’s town square.

A short stretch of road led them to a swampy jungle that quickly turned into a slick, muddy trail. Within an hour of the start, the leaders were thigh high in mud, navigating big, slippery steps over the shoulder of Cerro Chato Volcano. “I was crawling in the mud and grabbing branches to pull myself up the thick, slimy steps,” said Beverly Anderson Abbs, 42, on Team Sunsweet, winner of the inaugural event in 2005. “But the payoff was a fabulous stump-hopping downhill.” Local runners Juan Carlos Zuniga, 43, an agricultural farmer from Chirripo, and Javier Montero pushed the pace at the front, while Anderson Abbs, from Red Bluff, California, and Kurt Lindermeier, from Bavaria, Germany, charged on their heels.

The 21K route shifted among jungle, asphalt, and gravel roads, for the first stage of the third annual six-day, 120-mile Coastal Challenge Route of Fire Expedition Run. Attracting a melting pot of ultrarunners, adventure racers, marathoners, and newbie endurance athletes, the staged ultra—from La Fortuna to Bahia Salinas—promised jagged volcanoes, lush jungle, steep gravel roads, and uninhabited beaches.

## NO BEAST OF BURDEN FOR THIS RACE

Unlike self-supported races such as the 153-mile Augrabies Kalahari Extreme Marathon, in South Africa, where runners carry their own food and gear, this was a speed race. Staff transported belongings to each day’s finish and offered water, energy drinks, and snacks at checkpoints peppering the course.

► Caption to come.

“It’s nice to go so light,” quipped Jim Mandelli, 46, an adventure racer from North Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. “I’m used to trudging mountains with a loaded pack.” Mandelli, like 17 other competitors, was back for his second time at the race—some were on their third go-round. “The first year was fun, and it was great spending quality time with like-minded people,” he said. “Since it was in a new location, I was eager to return.”

He finished the day in 3 hours, 7 minutes, 45 seconds behind the leader, Zuniga, a competitive runner for nearly 20

years, who blazed across the line in Rancho Margot in 2:22. Smiling and raising his hand in victory, he said, “Finishing first today is important to me and to Costa Rica.” Local runner Ronald Torres, last year’s winner, was second in 2:36 and Lindermeier was third in 2:37. Anderson Abbs won the women’s field in 2:50.

Most racers competed in the standard 200K “expedition” category. This was the main event for racers competing for prize money. Most of the expedition competitors are seasoned runners who have participated in one or more marathons or ultras.

The 100K “adventure” category was created (new this year) for newbie racers who typically had not run beyond a 5K or 10K. It evolved as a way for less-experienced or less-fit runners to ease into ultrarunning and get a feel for multiday racing, while being able to finish a long course and receive their coveted finisher’s medal. Most ran, but some walked. Those racers in the expedition class who did not make the time cutoffs were reassigned to the shorter adventure course for the remainder of the race.

Dubbed “the day of extremes,” the 60K-plus stage on day two started at 5:45 A.M. The remaining 61 racers navigated a football field-size stretch of rushing





◀ Caption to come.

water before sloshing through puddle-peppered jungle trails surrounded by marshy wetlands. Bright yellow-and-black birds and howler monkeys squawked overhead. The runners crossed a wooden bridge to checkpoint 1 (PC 1), where they refueled with fluids. When the route then turned upward, drizzle and wind increased with the altitude.

“The footing was pretty steep and slick,” Anderson Abbs said of the thick grass leading to PC 2, overlooking Lake Arenal. “And the gusty wind and fog were a recipe for a nasty spill.”

The fog obscured the spectacular view of the lake and volcano, but the competitors had no time for disappointment as they grabbed sandwiches, nuts, and energy drink. The pressure was on. All needed to reach PC 3 at 42K within seven hours of starting or be reassigned to the 100K adventure category.

## THROUGH THE FIELDS OF CHILDHOOD

Greyson Quarles, 59, a triathlete from Duck Key, Florida, an admitted roadie, was among eight racers registered for the adventure category. “We never get to run in wild grassy fields like that,” he said, smiling like a schoolboy. “But every once in a while, the grass grabbed my ankles, and I was sure I was going to fall.” His wife, Georganna, 52, a marathoner and Ironman triathlete who was racing the expedition category, thought the “grassy track was awesome!”

Weaving among dirt, gravel, and paved roads, the adventure-category route ended at PC 3, in the bustling town of Cuce Adentro Tejones. */QQ: is this town name cq? XQQ/* Expedition runners continued on rolling hills into PC 4 and then past mammoth, humming windmills powered by brutal 30K-an-hour winds before reaching camp in Tierra Morenas. “The ‘whaa, whaa’ of the windmills was mesmerizing,” said Mark Hartinger, 50, from Shoreline, Washington, who has run over 100 ultras, including 10 100-mile trail runs. “But that wind was wicked and knocked me all over the road.” He swapped war stories with other racers while refueling at the finish in Tierra Morenas with chicken soft tacos, pasta, and fresh

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fruit. Forty-three remained in the expedition category by day's end. Anderson Abbs was first woman in 6:52, while Zuniga crossed the line for the overall win in 5:57. The 18K "recovery" stage came the next day. It rolled along a gently undulating dirt road with shallow climbs and sweeping descents past farmlands and windmills. "It was a chance for racers to rest up for tomorrow's superhard stage," course designer Rodrigo Carazo said with a sinister smile.

On day four's 50K stage from Guayabo to Rincon de la Vieja, Zuniga and Montero led the chase up the treacherous, rocky, mountain climb on Miravelles Volcano—the first of two volcanoes they would ascend. While the leaders stepped fast and deliberate, many of the middle- and back-of-the-pack runners reported feeling "rested but heavy legged." Some used trekking poles for assistance.

"The view was fantastic, and we stopped to take pictures," noted Jamie Capiscolto, 30, who was racing in the adventure category with his girlfriend, Marlo Tadashore, 29, both from Peterborough, Ontario. "We went at our own pace but could feel the fatigue from the second day."

The slick scree-strewn descent was "hard on my legs," noted Mandelli, who trains on steep, rocky trails at home but still found it difficult to "really open it up on the downhill." He welcomed moving on to the next volcano.



▲ Caption to come.

## EVERYTHING FROM WHITE SAND TO DRAINPIPES

Later, racers zipped along white sand-packed roads with tight switchbacks and spotty tree covering offering momentary solace from the searing sun. Many walked steep hills and leapt across unexpected, bulging drainpipes before reaching the final volcano. “It was a lot like mountain biking,” said Ligia Madrigal, 34, a Costa Rican adventure racer who was in second place for the women.

The day ended with a bushwhacking section to the river and cascading waterfall. “I hooked my bottle into my waist belt and had a ball scrambling over the rocks,” reported Anderson Abbs of navigating upriver to the falls. “The cool water felt so good, and I just wanted to sit in it all day.” No time for that. Again, she was the lead woman. Anderson Abbs held first and Madrigal second. Montero took the men’s win, with Zuniga in second. Overall positions stayed the same.

The 32K day started in Junquillal, a quaint town near the Pacific Coast, following an hour’s bus ride. At 7:00 A.M., under cloudless, sunny skies, 58 racers trotted out of town along a pocked, sandy road. The wind was calm and sun hot.

The course shifted onto an undulating dirt mountain-bike trail filled with flora and wildlife. White-faced monkeys and green parrots screeched from treetops as runners passed rolling farmland. “It illustrated the heat and desert dryness of the northwest well,” said Mandelli. “While the trees and vegetation were beautiful, it was hot—but once I saw the beach, it was incentive to keep going.”

The beach in Punta Descartes was a refreshing treat for competitors, who jumped in the water fully clothed. With positions set, all enjoyed a leisurely beach day.

Relieved and ready to party at Bahia Salinas Bay, runners had a final 18K to demand of their weary legs. Casually trudging off the start at 9:00



► Caption to come.

A.M., racers headed north along soft, white sand. The sun was strong and bright. As the route shifted inland, the temperature soared 20 degrees, and “it felt like an oven,” said Madrigal.

## GETTING GIMPY ON THE FINAL DAY

The beach melded into a steep, muddy road that later turned gravelly and dusty. While the leaders held a steady pace at the front, those with blisters and strained muscles compromised with a walk–run dance. “It did the trick,” said the oldest competitor, Jay Norman, 69, from Dallas, Texas. “I’m just happy to be here doing what I love.”

The rocky outcropping was the highlight of the day. “I loved hopping from boulder to boulder,” said Anderson Abbs, wearing a festive blue and orange running skirt. Hartinger agreed, “It was an excellent way to end the race and just a remarkably beautiful area.”

Anderson Abbs won her sixth consecutive stage in 1:48, and in so doing won the race; she crossed the finish line hand in hand with the men’s second-place overall finisher, Lindermeyer. Madrigal and Meghan Hicks, from Yellowstone Park, Wyoming, were second and third women, respectively. Zuniga won the overall competition, with Montero placing third. Anderson Abbs and Zuniga each received \$1,500.

“This was our best race yet, and next year promises even more,” the race director, Tim Holmstrom, said as he watched racers cross the line at Bollara Resort. “We had an exceptional field of competitors, staff, and volunteers.”

Fifty-five of the 68 racers officially finished each stage: 41 runners in the expedition category and 14 in the adventure category. Next year’s race will be held on a revamped route in the north ([www.thecoastalchallenge.com](http://www.thecoastalchallenge.com)).

## Top Three Finishers

### Women

1. Beverly Anderson Abbs, Team Sunsweet, Red Bluff, California
2. Ligia Madrigal, Costa Rica
3. Meghan Hicks, Yellowstone Park, Wyoming

### Men

1. Juan Carlos Zuniga, Costa Rica
2. Kurt Lindermeyer, Bavaria, Germany
3. Javier Montero, Costa Rica

