

THE COASTAL CHALLENGE
7 DAY STAGE RACE
Jan. 22-28, 2006
Pacific Coast-Costa Rica

What follows is a highly condensed version of a 170 mi (+/- 10 or so) 7 day stage running race in the jungles, mountains and beaches of pacific Costa Rica. 55 starters.

Day 1

Four hours bus from San Jose to Quepos. Race start 10:00 am. Temp. 85F, 90% RH,

Stated stage distance: 33 km

Actual stage distance: 40 km

Quepos to Santo Domingo de Savegre.

I timed it, we were sweating 4 min and 26 seconds into this 7 day race. Scorching sun welcomed us as we traveled north(the only time the race went north) for 1 mi. before turning east into African Palm plantations for about 7 miles. This is a mixture of dry red dirt and swampy muck that sucked off a few pairs of shoes. Got the legs ready for what they called "*sizeable mountain*" trails. These were not unlike the hills of Main Divide from 4 corners to Sierra Peak, cept really hot and humid.

Lots of jungle critters, but I think 99% of the population is those ants you see on National Geographic that carry green leaves all over. Those leaves actually have another, smaller ant, whose "job" it is to clean the leaf of any ant parasites. There were trails of these all over. Non poisonous or venomous.

After 17 miles of what made our legs feel like jelly and our bodies sweating mechanism taxed, we had to cross a river on a ANDARIVEL, which is basically a pull cart on acableabove a river that you pull yourself over (see Pic. 1-Couresy of SergioPucciPhotography) courtesy of Sergio Pucci Photography and The Coastal Challenge



This took anywhere from 1 to 10 min. depending on upper body strength.
We then had one mile to go of muddy trail, finishing on a large soccer field for the local village.

We set up the tents, carried there by race management and had a fine catered dinner, where all the tired racers started to co-miserate and bond.

Men 1 st : Renaldo	Women 1 st : Claire Johnson
2 nd : Adam Chase	2 nd : Ligia
3 rd : Ben Natrieb	3 rd : Isabella Delahousey

Day 2-

4:00 am wake up to “Welcome to the Jungle”

“....*Welcome to the jungle, it gets worse here every day...*

.....learn to live like an animal, in the jungle where we play....” How True!

Usually I’m sippin’ a beer when I hear that song, but now it’s the signature race tune.

Breaky was good coffee, rice, beans and eggs

Race start: 6:00 am

Temp: 80F up to nearly 100F, 10% shade, 90% very sunny

RH: about 90

Staged stage distance: 45 km

Actual stage distance: 60 km (the day from hell)

Santo Domingo to Dominicalito

2 aid stations

We immediately hit steep, muddy, technical single track for a climb of 2,000 feet. At many areas the trail disappeared into tall grass and we “groped” in several directions until finding signage again. This was for only about 5 miles and really the only shade all day. The next 15 or so mi. was on a flat dirt road. Everyone ran out of water, even the people carrying “Hundy” packs, as the aid station was placed further down the road than announced. A few of us resourceful ones went to homes and small stores “Tiene usted agua bueno por favor?”(Pic. 2)



After this death march, we climbed AGAIN into the jungle and a mountainous range for about 8-9 miles, then descended again and followed a river bed for about 4 miles, all the time thinking “I ve got to be lost”. Then, in the middle of nowhere sitting in the River Bed was a Red Bull sponsor truck, with ice cold Red Bull.



(Pic3) What a site!! We weren't lost but no one had any idea of what place they were in from all the DNF's.

Four more miles on an awesome beach (not that many wanted to appreciate scenery) and finish at a small camp ground. We were treated to a cold river flowing from the mountains that did wonders for the legs.

The combination of the tough tech trails, the heat, sun, humidity and not knowing if/where the aid was, not to mention the finish, took it's toll and there was a 50% DNF rate. This is significant as there were diehard veterans of Western States, Badwater, Gobi desert etc. No one imagined one day of running could be so rugged, and tough and hot, plus the mental challenge of not knowing where you were and how long you had left.

It was one of those days when you just either climb inside yourself and slog it out or detach yourself from the entire ordeal and “go to a happy place”. The average finish time for those that did not drop was about 10 hours.

That night at dinner there were more than just a few gripes. One of the Badwater veterans said the day was tougher than the entire Badwater race, just from the heat. To make a long story short, we found out that night that the course designer had used solely GPS for the race distance and had not realized GPS cannot calculate distance under canopy or take into account the vertical. So, all the switch backs we ran were “extra credit” on day 1 and 2.

Two of the California race directors(names released upon request) did not even show up in San Jose to help with the event so Tim Holmstrom was left holding the bag and did an excellent job in turning everything around at this point in the race.

That night the balance of race organization stayed up to the wee hours “fixing” the rest of the course, getting distances as accurate as possible and changing a few routes.

Men

1st: Renaldo
2nd: Juan Carlos
3rd: Adam Chase

Women

1st: Claire Johnson
2nd: Ligia
3rd: Isabella Delahousey

Day 3

4:00 am wake up, same Breaky

6:00 am Start

Temp: 75F in the shade, 90F in the sun, 80-90% RH

Dominicalito to Playa Ventanas

Stage distance: 50k

Purposely shortened to accurate 33K

WooHoo! A short day! Only 20 miles!

...and it started with a 3000 ft climb up a dirt road to a remote communications tower. We then entered what seemed like a cave but really heavy canopied jungle and a steep technical descent



(Pic 4 Photo Courtesy SergioPucci Photography and The Coastal Challenge) through really lush, green, very musty smelling foliage, which lead to a 200 meter waterfall and wide river we had to swim across. Very refreshing after the climb and jungle descent!!

We then had the pleasure of climbing about 2000 feet out of the river valley, through more canopy (lots of scramble on mud and slimy rocks) and onto a plateau of farm lands complete with ornery livestock (note: walk, don't run, past a Bull when a calf is present. Yelling NO! doesn't persuade them from giving a nudge with nasty horns).



(pic5, Courtesy of Sergio Pucci Photography and The Coastal Challenge). Then it was 8 miles on a plateau with the ocean on your right and jungle for as many miles as you could see on your left, inclusive of a 250 meter high waterfall. Day 3 ended with a steep and open road 5 miles. You could really move!

That evening we camped 100 meters from the shore and heard Howler Monkeys all night long. Truly spectacular

Men:

1st: Juan Carlos

2nd: Renaldo

3rd: Mark Matyazic

Women:

1st: Claire Johnson

2nd: Isabella Delahousey

3rd: Ligia

Day 4

Temp 80F, 80% RH

Stage: accurate 12 K-easy day

Due to the abnormal seasonal heat and lots of problems with dehydration, day 4 was completely changed from the originally planned 45 K to a fun run which turned out to be a blazing race.

We had 4km on the beach, 6 km on a paved road (asphalt—what a concept!) and then extremely technical 2 km on a precarious cliff over the ocean.

Men

1st: Renaldo

2nd: Juan Carlos

3rd: Adam Chase

Women

1st: Claire Johnson

2nd: Ligia

3rd: Isabella Delahousey

Day 5

Wake up: 2:00 am! (4 hrs “sleep” in a boisterous jungle)

Transfer to race start: 3:00 am

Race start: 5:30 am (ferry across Sierpe River)

Temp: Canopy, 75F

No Canopy 90F+

RH off the charts

Sierpe river to Drake Bay (90% dense, uninhabited(by people) jungle)

Stage distance: 51 km

“This day is not to be taken lightly” said the race management on 4 separate occasions prior to the stage(like the previous days were merely a jog through a nature trail). Why? As quoted by Rodrigo, the course designer “***The 4:00 PM cutoff will be highly enforced today. NO exceptions. This part of the jungle contains one of the highest concentrations in the world of large and poisonous snakes. They are nocturnal so you ‘should’ be safe during the day, however, we cannot extract you after dark for the safety of race volunteers, therefore you have to make it to checkpoint 2 by 4:00 PM or you will be extracted via boat at that point***”. Since this would be a difficult extraction in itself, they asked that those that did not feel confident in getting to CP 2 by 4:00, not even start the days stage. Hmmm, a real confidence builder!!...but MOTIVATING just the same!

Up until this point, I thought the first 4 days of racing exposed us to some of the finest scenery on the planet...and usually when racing, I'm not a "scenery guy" as I'm just focused on getting through it. Well, what we got to see the final 3 days made the first 4 look like a run through Cleveland.

We embarked on this 50k day starting with roller coaster hills on a wide dirt road that rapidly turned to single track in the shape of a "V" which had water in it in several places. We were basically running in a dry or not so dry jungle stream.

I could write pages here on scenery and animals seen, but I won't.

Firstly, the aid boat that was to bring water to the 17k mark got stuck in a mangrove swamp, so, no water at 10 miles. We, or at least I, started using jungle waterfalls for water. Race management said this was ok and indeed I had no tummy problems. I probably drank 100 oz from such falls that day. They were very abundant (about every 2 km) as were stream crossings. The place looked and sounded like Jurassic Park. Weird plants, trees, flowers, insects, birds....This wasn't Irvine anymore.



(photo courtesy of Sergio Pucci Photography and The Coastal Challenge)—Sierpe River

A few "wildlife" highlights: Long about ¼ of the way into the run, around 8 miles and by this time having sensory overload from the birds, plants, weird frogs, lizards (every inch of the jungle has something moving—someone even saw a 3 toed Sloth) I saw quick movement ahead and to the left. Something big was getting out of my way.

Wisdom suggested I slow down; perhaps I'll see a neat animal up close, like a cute baby monkey or something. Wrong. What wasn't buried under leaves was black, scaly, shiny and about 10 inches in diameter, moving rapidly trying to get up the side of the "V" shaped trail. Leaves about 4 feet in front and 4 feet in back were moving parallel to the little cross-section I saw. My brain realized: ***One animal, large, reptile, never saw before, no one else running with "us"***, and quickly dumped about a pint of adrenaline into my system. Went from about 9 min miles to maybe 6:15's for the next 4-5 miles.

My buddies "*Al Natural*"

and Ben Nachtrieb were probably 200 yds behind me at this time, but the sudden urge to "get up n' go" probably put about 30 min spread by the time the jolt wore off.

Hit the 34k water stop. The aid had just arrived, meaning the 3 runners in front of me got nothing. This is just the nature of trying to put a water stop in the middle of one of the most primitive areas in the jungle.

Back into canopied semi-darkness. Here's the second "wildlife" encounter: Stopped at a nice, serene jungle pool fed by a crystal clear water fall. Waded in, drank about a quart and filled my 2 x 22 oz bottles. I noted there was no noise, but could not even comprehend the magnitude of the beauty of my surroundings. Someplace Mr. Rogers or maybe Barnaby would have a picnic at.

As I went to exit the stream, I heard a loud and most discernable growl from about 20 feet into the jungle, perpendicular to the trail. Brain says: *Bears don't live here. Puma or Panther. Leave NOW!* Ah, a nice 1,000 cc's of pure adrenaline injected intra-cardial. At the EXACT SAME TIME, I slipped, fell and my hand landed in some mulch. Upon pulling said hand from underbrush, I noted there was a large, blackish/grey spider, with a bit of weight to it, scampering across the top of my hand. Just what I needed. Brain also chose to dig up Van Halens "Runnin' with the Devil" to help me along and it was another 4-5 mi. adrenaline fueled hammer-fest, with the hair on the back of my neck quite perky. Exited the jungle at 42K like a bullet out of a gun into bright, hot, sunshine. Pretty much spent at this time. Last 5 miles was an uneventful slog to the finish, with fond thoughts of "cool, I'm still alive" and "what about the people behind me?"

Day 5 camp was on a cliff above a fine ocean beach so the afternoon was spent on one of the nicest shores in the world, after propelling oneself through 30 miles of jungle that probably has seen very few people in the past 100 years. Quite a high.

For the day 5 experience alone, this event is a must for anyone that wants to live a little.

Men

1st: Juan Carlos

2nd: Renaldo

3rd: Mark Matyazic

women:

1st: Clair Johnson

2nd: Ligia

3rd: Isabella Delahousey



(Jungle above canopy-Photo courtesy of Sergio Pucci Photography and The Coastal Challenge)

Day 6

6:30 am start

Temp: jungle: 75F, beach: over 100F RH, about 85%

Stage distance: accurate 40km

Drake Bay to Sirena (Corcovado National Park)

Change of scenery day: 80% beach, only 20% jungle. This is what they made sunscreen for. We started on what most thought to be one of the most beautiful beaches they'd ever seen and it just got better (scenery speaking).

It started with three miles of beach and some mild single track in the adjacent jungle, then about 5 more miles beach. Aid station and then into the National Park and more canopied jungle. Picture falling into a plasma TV during a Discovery Channel or National Geographic show and becoming part of the show. More mind blowing, sensory overload "stuff". Toucans, Macaws, parrots, monkeys, funky lookin' insects. We're all getting somewhat chronically low on water now over the past 5 days and it's hard to keep up w/ hydration. The jungle was relatively cool but it abruptly ended and we had 20k of "nothin' but beach" ahead of us. No shade and the sun just blazing away.



(Beach-photo courtesy of Sergio Pucci Photography and The Coastal Challenge)

White, fluffy sand (and sometimes wet, deep sand) for as many miles as you could see in front of you, ocean to the right and dense jungle to the left. The only choice was sand, sand and more sand.

A "mini" wildlife encounter to start the sand run: They said not to cross a river without one of the volunteer boats to use as there were Crocs and Bull sharks in these estuaries. They like it there for "feeding" we were told. There were 3 such crossings. Ben was 200 meters in front of me for the first one, gets to the crossing: No boat. We and the 3 in front of us actually beat the boat. "How did the people in front cross? What is Ben going to do?" As I was contemplating waiting for the boat, Ben plunges into the estuary and powers across it (about 5 feet deep). #%^&!! He's out the other side but attracted who knows what. Nice!

I wade in, immediately lose footing and start swirling in a counter clockwise motion towards the ocean. It was actually kind of a neat feeling, but I have to race. I swim to the other side and feet can't get a grip on the soft sand shore. Something rough bumps my right calf. I walk on water and running on dry sand in no time!

The heat is hell and the sun is getting hotter. I drain my last bottle. "only" 7 mi. till the next water station, if it's even there.

Weird things happen now. A second wind comes but I'm also very dehydrated. It doesn't make sense. I feel really good and start moving across the sand quite rapidly. Adrenaline again? Who knows? I start to "think" I'm running with my high school buddies from Cross-Country team. Yep, there's Rich and Shaun. I know I'm moving quite well but at the same time I'm feeling something weird, like life, drain out of me

rapidly. I try to do math. Not happenin'. I pass the 5th, 4th and 3rd place person. I feel like I have 4 jet afterburners propelling me. I'm not wearing an I-pod but the 80's tune "Love is like a rock" by Donny Iris cranks in my head. I look back and I see 4th place way back there. I feel like a rocket. More music. *Who's choosing the tunes?* Ine Kamozi's "Hot Stepper" comes on like I've got front row seats.

"Where's water?" I see 2 images ahead. The 2 Tico guys, Juan and Renaldo. 1st and 2nd place!! I actually start gaining. Now it's "Walk away Renee" by The Association(or Herman's Hermits?), a 60's hit. I spend 10 min trying to figure who the song is by. I don't really like it cuz it's too slow, but my head is going to a kind of soft and sleepy place. I'm ¼ mi away from 1 and 2 now. They see me and accelerate. So much for a grand finish---they leave me in the dust.

I see aid. A white umbrella and 2 orange Gatorade containers are about ½ mi. ahead. At ¼ mi I note it is driftwood shaped like an umbrella.

The tunes are fading but I distinctly hear ELO's "Strange Magic", then nothing but the ocean. Giant flocks of giant Pelicans are floating in droves over head? This is prehistoric!

I'm not feeling well at all now and my pace has slowed. My high speed burn across 8 miles of beach is over. There's a boat ahead. The last river crossing (there was a second one, in a raft, but I have no recollection). I'm in the boat. The volunteer keeps asking if I'm alright. "Ready to Rock" I lie. He says "only 1 more km to the finish" my mind sharply calculates that as 1.2 miles, so I'm quite stoked when I see Sirena research station after about 6 minutes. Day 6 is done. I turn the corner and see a Tapir (confirmed later that it really was a Tapir and not a log or something). # 1 and 2 have also just finished. What a day. I drink *some* "Sport-T" the local "rehyde" drink. "Some" is about 160 oz in about 30 min...till I had a nice pot belly full of liquid.

Places are the same as last 2-3 days

We're informed that this remote outpost is rarely visited and ½ the annual visitors are researchers, on, well, research projects.

No roving caravan today with our gear so we sleep on whatever we could carry. I'm on a comfy emergency Space bag on a wood floor.

At 2 am I wake and flick something kinda large off my face. I hear "it" land about 20 feet away(I hit it hard). I don't want to ever know what it was, but it had 6 or 8 legs.

Ben is 3 feet away and had the forethought to bring mosquito netting. If Ben were smaller than I, then we would have traded places right then.

We sleep in to 5 am! Quick Breaky of eggs, rice, beans and good coffee and it's.....

Day 7:

Start: 6:30 am

Temp, ditto of yesterday

Stage distance: 16 km

Sirena to Carate

So, we gather at the end of a grassy runway used by single engine prop planes to bring in researchers. As a group we run down the runway to the beach and its wheels up and a heading of south.

We're all pretty brain numb now from running so much and experiencing maximum sensory overload. We just want to get the 10 miles on the beach over with. It seems like a year since that initial run in Quepos.

Most use this as a fun run. Eight or so of us decide to "burn" it as fast as possible so away we go. Renaldo and Juan are up front and then Claire, "Al Natural" and myself. After 5 mi. Claire and "Al Natural" decide their legs can't take any more beach, so head into a trail paralleling the sand. I carry on, following the only 2 pairs of prints, hoping the end is soon (finish). Then, ahead... in the distance, like a mirage after a long journey, FINISH LINE. But it's not a mirage. The trail was longer than the beach so I get third place and the first cold thing all week. A Coke. Wow. Refrigeration! How cool to have that again. That Coke was the best tasting thing of my life to date. What a week! What memories! What an awesome experience. What a learning expedition about oneself!! After applauding all the remaining finishers we piled into cattle trucks and headed north.



No other vehicle can travel on the beaten up roads, so it was a rough 3 hours back to Jimenez where we caught a "tour bus" (1950 era school bus) to Playa Ventanas for our last night in the Jungle. We couldn't go further south as the road runs out, plus we'd be in Panama. That night we drank Beer!

