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DEBUNKED

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# the route of **fire**

Words by Jacqueline Windh

**T**here's just something special about being around like-minded people.

My friends back home think I'm a strange sort - wanting to spend six days pushing myself to run through jungle and desert.

And now here I was, crowded into The Coastal Challenge starters' corral in the small town of La Fortuna, along with 43 others who think just like me.

We paced and stretched nervously, some jogging on the spot, some stretching. The day was only just beginning to heat up and I worried about the Costa Rican sun, wondering about the gear I had chosen. Only two other people were wearing tights - the rest were in light synthetic shorts.

I knew I was sorely lacking in first-hand experience - I had only been running for just over two years - but my strategy was to make up for that with my second-hand experience. I had been reporting on adventure races around the world for four years, and had learned a lot about strategy, gear, nutrition, and foot care, from some of the world's top racers - both by watching them in competition, and by asking them. I knew that, no matter how well you have trained, issues like sunburn or blisters can still keep you from getting to the finish line.

So, my strategy was to take it easy, use my head and make the right decisions, and take really good care of my body, in order to have the best chance to make it the 200-plus kilometres to the finish line.

Hence the tights. Not only would they protect my Canadian skin from the

sun, but these CW-X compression tights also had bands sewn in to support my knees and hamstrings, and would help to keep my legs from swelling over the course of the week.

Suddenly a voice broke my thoughts. "Is everyone ready?," called out race director Tim Holmstrom, and then we were off - pounding down the few kilometres of paved road to get us out of La Fortuna, and then on to the gravel roads and trails. A pack of town dogs loped enthusiastically along beside us, tongues lolling.

Four and a half hours later, I was slip-sliding my way down a muddy hill to the day's finish. I had made it through my first day of racing, and I was exhilarated. I ran straight to my gear box, and downed a tin of sardines. Nutrition for multi-day races is so different from that of one-day events; so many of my elite AR friends had cau-

tioned me about making sure I get my protein as soon as I get in that I took this piece of advice very seriously.

The route had been spectacular, a muddy 1000 m ascent up Cerro Chato, a small extinct volcano shrouded with mist and covered in lush dripping cloud forest. The terrain was far more technical than I had expected - steep and slippery trails criss-crossed by roots. Most of it was far too rugged to run, which suited me just fine. We skirted just south of Arenal Volcano, one of the most active volcanoes in the world. Although we couldn't see Arenal, the constant rumbling and booming that came rolling through the fog never let us forget just how close it was.

I had arrived just behind the middle of the pack, and felt really good about that; I had paced myself well and never pushed really hard. The fastest runners had arrived nearly two hours before.

Negotiating one of the many rocky, sodden trails.  
PHOTO. Andres Vargas

Author Jacqueline Windh negotiating the fast-flowing water of the first channel.  
PHOTO. Tim Holmstrom



## I ran straight to my gear box, and downed a tin of sardines.



I joined them, busying myself in cleaning myself up, putting up my tent, and getting as much food into me as possible. Around dinner, I started to get to know some of my fellow racers. Connie was also running her first multi-day race; her husband and two young children had joined the group on the Coastal Challenge's guest program, to support her on her quest. Stephanie and Thea had only met yesterday, but had run together today and already seemed like old friends. Jean was a Frenchman living in California and very serious - he'd won today's stage.

As I got into bed, I evaluated my gear. The tights had worked great for me, and I would definitely be wearing them again tomorrow. They wicked moisture well, so I had not got too hot in them. I inspected my feet - they were in perfect condition, in spite of having been wet all day. This was thanks to my Injinji toe-socks - the only socks I would ever wear in these conditions.

Day 2 was the most critical day of the race. We broke camp in the dark, and were all gathered at the starting line by 5:30. Sunrise comes quickly in the tropics, and the organizers held us there, waiting for enough light to allow us to see the trail.

The full day today would be 57 kilometres - with a time cut-off at CP2, the 31 kilometre mark. Those who did not make it to CP2 on time would be down-graded from the full Expedition category (total distance 207 kilometres) to the Adventure category (total distance 142 kilometres). This meant we would need to maintain an average speed of just 4 kilometres per hour. Sounds easy... but nearly half the field would not make it.

The terrain was even tougher than the day before. We started with three crossings of a rushing river. As I stepped into the fast-flowing water of the first channel, the water was deeper than I had expected, and I found myself

being tipped backwards. Steve, behind me, picked me up by the scruff of my pack and tipped me upright. I smiled my thanks, and continued to the second channel, where organizers had strung a rope across.

They warned us that there would be no ropes at the next two crossings. I kept an eye out as we hiked up-river, and found myself the perfect hiking stick. It was light but sturdy, smooth on my hands, and already just the right length - as if it had been made for me. At the next crossing, I used it to stabilize myself midstream and extend a hand to Steve and his buddies as they crossed - returning the favour.

As I continued on I reflected on the interesting atmosphere of this race. Sure, at the front of the pack, the competition was pretty fierce. But by mid-pack, where we all were, it was a different story. We were all in competition with one another - but at the same time, we were all out there, on our own in the Costa Rican jungle *for* each other. We were all pushing our very own limits in different ways - some perhaps more physically while others more mentally or emotionally - all of us on a fine edge, struggling to survive this challenge. So, as much as we were theoretically competing against one another, we had a very strange bond as well - we were in this together, and we were looking out for one another.

After the third river crossing, the trail took us back into the jungle, ascending a trail that made yesterday's slog in the mud seem like a stroll in the park. The trail, incised into the jungle floor, was like a mud-canyon. Each footstep had to be placed with care to keep from wasting energy sliding back-

Top. The wind farms. PHOTO. Andres Vargas. Right. Putting the Hennessy Hammock to good use. PHOTO. Jacqueline Windh. Left. A curious monkey showing off for the racers on Day 5, at the town square in Cañas Dulces. PHOTO. Jacqueline Windh.





Left. A local fisherman with the day's catch. PHOTO. Jacqueline Windh. Right. Foot care is key for a good race. PHOTO. Jacqueline Windh.

wards. I was so grateful for my wonderful walking stick - it stabilized me and, by putting my weight on it, it helped save my quads and glutes on this grueling ascent. I was climbing well, and for the next few hours I found myself alone.

The trail finally opened up on a ridgeline high above Lake Arenal. I hadn't realized it while in the jungle, but the day had cleared. The sky was turquoise blue, and we had sweeping views northward, of Arenal Volcano and of the lush agricultural landscape surrounding the lake. I kept pushing ahead, glad to be out of the deep mud and now in much more manageable mud. I jogged the flats but hiked the uphill, remembering Jen Segger-Gigg's wise advice to me: "Just keep moving forward ALWAYS".

CP1 was supposed to be at the 15 kilometre mark (turns out it was more like 17 kilometres) and I knew I had to be there within three and a half hours to have any hope at all of making the CP2 cut-off. I arrived there in 4 hours, 15 minutes. I hadn't seen anyone for hours, but Brigid, an experienced racer from Germany, and then Stephanie and Thea, all came into the CP just minutes behind me. We all knew what our time here meant, and we shared the disappointment of being down-graded. I tried to look for a bright side. At first I couldn't see any, but then I realized that at least it meant I could change into the dry socks that I had been saving for CP2. Then Brigid, Stephanie, Thea and I set out on the trail together.

Day 3 dawned and I felt excited! By now I had got used to the idea of being in the Adventure category - there were 24 of us, between the 9 who had registered in Adventure and the 15 who

had been down-graded. I felt strong, all of my foot-care and leg-care and nutrition strategies were working for me, and I realized that I even had a chance of placing in the top three in my category.

This stage would be easy compared to other days - a total of 24 kilometres, but on easier terrain, with only a short jungle climb. The second half was nearly all downhill on roads. I made a navigational error early on that cost me half an hour, but I was feeling so strong that I just pushed hard until I had caught up with my usual crowd: Brigid, Stephanie and Thea. Stephanie was having a good day too, and at the halfway point she suddenly broke from us, bounded up a hill, and was gone. I pushed too, to try to stick with her. Although I caught glimpses of her ahead, on that long two-hour downhill run, I just couldn't catch her. I made it into camp eight minutes behind her.

And here's where things started to go wrong. I had felt a little twinge in my

knee as I pushed on those downhills - nothing that seemed worrisome, just some new little ache that I had never felt before. But over that afternoon in camp, my knee started to stiffen and swell. I tried not to think the worst; I strung up my Hennessy Hammock (which naturally elevates your legs), took some ibuprofen, and went to bed early, hoping for the best.

But the next morning, I could barely walk. I hobbled to the breakfast table, and Stephanie and Brigid asked how I was feeling. I burst into tears; I knew that there was no possibility of me setting out on the course. They left up and gave me a hug. "We'll miss you out there," Brigid whispered.

So that was the end of the race for me. I watched at the start line as my companions set out, the darkness hiding from them the tears of disappointment streaming down my face. I felt I had done everything right - my feet were in great shape, my body was raring to go. But one little thing, one



Running the long dirt road outside of the Costa Rican forests. PHOTO. Andres Vargas.

**We were all in competition with one another - but at the same time, we were all out there, on our own in the Costa Rican jungle for each other.**

tiny little thing in my knee, was holding me back.

By the next day I had reverted to the role I know so well, as race reporter. On Day 6 I was there to greet my buddies at the finish line - Brigid, Stephanie, Thea, Steve, and all the rest - with a much better appreciation of what the competitors actually go through in an event like this.

I hadn't finished, but I had learned so much. I had gained experience and wisdom. Reflecting on what happened, I realize that I cannot blame my injury only on bad luck. I had gone against what I had originally set out to do: my plan was to go easy, to better my chance of making it to the finish line. Instead, I had suddenly got competitive, tried to push, and had injured myself.

So, I come out of this both wiser and stronger. And so totally ready to go again.

### 2008 winners

#### Expedition category (207 km)

1. Javier Montero (CR) 22:50:49
2. Jean Pommier (FRA/USA) 23:00:05
3. Dave James (USA) 23:23:47

#### Adventure category (142 km)

1. Chris Hacker (USA) 21:45:00
2. Kristi Battalini (USA) 23:08:03
3. Tim Meyer (USA) 23:17:21

The Coastal Challenge is a 200+ km, 6-day staged running race that takes place each year in Costa Rica. The route takes racers through some of Costa Rica's most remote regions. Campsites are rustic, but always have showers and toilets. All meals are included with the entry fee, and they are delicious, abundant, and entirely appropriate to athletes' needs. Day-tour programs are available to friends and family who want to accompany competitors.

The 2009 route will take place on Costa Rica's south Pacific coast, near the border with Panama, February 1 to 6. The competition is open to both teams and individuals.

[www.thecoastalchallenge.com](http://www.thecoastalchallenge.com)

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	<b>Aug 23</b> Whistler Blackcomb	<b>Aug 23</b> Nakiska/Delta
	<b>Sept 13</b> Buntzen Lake	<b>Sept 13</b> Canmore Nordic Centre
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