

A Walk on the Wild Side

The Coastal Challenge in Costa Rica - 2005

I have wanted to travel to Costa Rica since the age of twenty-five, when I chose this destination as a lecture topic in my college Spanish-language class. It's a land of diversity, both in climate and animal inhabitants. And it seemed to be an adventure-seekers Paradise, offering everything from kayaking to mountain-biking as modes of exploration. So early in 2004, when Nic and I found the website for the Coastal Challenge 7 day Expedition Race, we were elated to find a way to travel on foot, without the burden of carrying a heavy backpack or planning for food. The concept was simple : a 7 day running stage race along the Pacific coastline of Costa Rica, starting up North in the Nicoya Peninsula near *Tamarindo*, making our way South along pristine beaches, coastal rainforest and jungle pathways to *Carate*, a town in the Osa Peninsula. Our journey would end just 8 degrees North of the equator. Nic and I had no false expectations that we would be actually able to run every mile of every day. But given the fact that the web site stated that cutoff times would allow even the slowest racers to finish, we figured we would be able to at least power-walk or hike the course when our running muscles gave out. So we signed up. And what we experienced in return was far more than what we paid for.

To say the course was difficult would merely minimize its content. It was grueling. And it was glorious. The theme of the Coastal Challenge race is "Take on the distance, Take on the Challenge, Take on the Elements" - and this was truly tested in every aspect. We covered over 140 miles of sparkling white and black sand beaches, densely foliated and wild jungle pathways, and rolling farmland with hills steeper than anything I have yet seen in any footrace in the United States. We ran, we walked, we hiked and even came close to crawling a few times, as we battled 90+ degree temperatures and humidity that starkly contrasted the Winter weather in Boise, Idaho where we lived and had trained. We saw exotic wildlife and bird types that I had previously only seen in a zoo or pet shop : Scarlet McCaws, Toucans, emerald-green Quetzals, crocodiles, iguanas and 3 species of monkey, including the infamous Howlers, who should be more aptly named "Growlers" for their eerie, menacing, deep-throated call which makes them sound much larger than they really are! We crossed dozens of rivers, coasted our way over exposed reefs, and crawled over and under fallen trees, muddy trails and rocky outcroppings. We cursed when the course mileage was always much longer than what was stated for the day, and laughed as we finally gave up on any hope of ever keeping our feet dry. We stretched ourselves physically and mentally further than anytime we had experienced up until that point, but never lost sight of the uniqueness of what we were doing. But we saw more of Costa Rica than most travelers ever will, and more of ourselves than we really ever wanted - the elements truly testing us and forcing both Nic and I several times to assess how much each of us could tolerate, and how much we were willing to endure in order to continue on towards our goal.

Our company for this adventure was a group of 80 other racers from around the world, hailing from as far as South Africa, Britain, Canada, Ecuador and including a few local Costa Ricans and a large contingent of Southern Californians. The group was a mix of ages ranging from 20 to 67 and all with varying experience levels. Many had only run marathons before they took on this event. Some were avid trekkers looking for new territory to explore.

Some were adventure-racers like Nic and I, looking to challenge themselves in a single-sport event, and hoping to rely on their ability to 'go long' and their mental toughness to get them through the week. But many were experienced expedition racers, enlightening us on the huge sub-culture of endurance events of this nature that exist all over the world : week long races in Morocco, the Himalayas and Brazil - self-supported races across deserts and through jungles where racers carried all their food and camp supplies with them for 7-10 days. We were adolescents amongst the elders of endurance racing, ignorant of what we were about to get ourselves into, but open to learning as much as possible from these amazing athletes who surrounded us. At times, it felt as if we had tapped into some secret fraternity or brotherhood of physical pain. Little did I know we were about to get the hazing of a lifetime.

The Day Before: We arrived in San Jose the night before we were to meet the race staff at the Best Western *Irazu*. As we checked in and got our initial racer briefing, we could sense the mix of excitement and dread, as racers mingled with each other, swapping verbal resumes of what led them to this event and what in Gods name made them want to run for 7 days in a row. Everyone was social and friendly, and for the most part looked as if they had stepped right off the cover of *Runner's World* magazine. Nic and I silently sucked in our 'holiday guts'. We boarded 3 buses, which were to transport us to a beach camp near *Marbella*, 20 miles outside of *Tamarindo*. Today, we were to have our first lesson in what was commonly called 'Tico Time'. The Costa Rican people are affectionately referred to as *Ticos*, which is short for *Simpatico* - 'friendly' or 'nice' in Spanish. And they truly were friendly people. Always smiling, always willing to offer you their services, these dark-skinned locals won our hearts instantly upon arrival. However....they also have a phrase which they live by: *Pura Vida* - which in English translates to 'the Simple Life'. Not only is this an outwardly expressed attitude, but a day by day way of life. Which means, these people were all about enjoying the moment, enjoying where you were, and who you were with and.....never being in a big hurry to get anywhere in particular. So, we learned this first day when the 4 hour estimated bus ride turned into a six hour bumpy road excursion that time was a relative term and pretty much always a *mas o menos* 'rough estimate'. In other words, don't hold your breath on a certain time of arrival. So despite a longer than anticipated transport time, we arrived to our Welcome celebration dinner at *Cala Luna* hotel, where we were greeted by *ticos* dancing in colorful, ceremonial costumes, a traditional dinner buffet and a Costa Rican bullfight as entertainment. By the time we were finished and loaded back on our buses to head towards the campsite, it was 1130 PM and it would be 2 more hours before we pitched our tent under a starry sky and our heads hit the pillow.

Day 1 - Getting Into the Groove

Marbella to Garza, 31k (~20 miles)

Our start time this morning, would be the only one this late, 10am. And this was a 1 hour delay due to our late arrival the night before. Breakfast was always served 2 hours before the start and always consisted of scrambled eggs, rice and beans, and sometimes potatoes. In addition, we had fresh Costa Rican coffee! Mmmm. Now, let me take a moment to tell you true Java Junkies out there what a real treat this was. Costa Rican coffee is one of the best I have ever tasted in my life! Dark, rich, smooth....I had very little problem getting up early in the dark each morning, knowing I had this waiting for me. And to its testament, we smuggled 14 pounds

of *Cafe Brit* back home with us in our luggage. If you ever go to Costa Rica? Bring back the coffee as your souvenir! It's cheap (\$3-\$4 a pound) and will have you reminiscing about your trip for months to come.

Ok, so back to the start of the first day. Everyone was excited and chatting about different strategies they would use for the day, and making their guesses as to who the first male and female runners in would be. To start us off, instead of the firing of a pistol, we had the abrupt cessation of beating bongo drums mark the beginning of our journey. And then the racers were off! As in any race, a good number of people bolted off at an energetic pace right from the start. Nic and I simply started to jog - we knew what we were in for, and pacing would be the key to our success. That first day was really very enjoyable. We started out beachside, coasting over a rocky, low-tide reef, and then worked our way through the countryside, crossing several shallow riverbeds, and getting our first glimpse of the tropical birds, iguanas and monkeys that lived here! As the first 2 hours passed, we also had our first introduction to the Costa Rica sun. Thankfully, this area was experiencing one of the windiest weeks it had seen in years. The sun here was BLAZING! Intense and unrelenting, we were very aware of how much the breeze was keeping our white Idaho skin from overheating, even with SPF 40 sunblock on. And we were sweating like crazy! Our bodies, undergoing its first, forced adaptation to running in tropical weather, was struggling to stay hydrated, stay cool and keep our legs turning over. We were aware, but kept moving, drinking every 10 minutes from our hydration packs. We were surprised and slightly proud of ourselves as we slowly 'roadkilled' 20 racers one by one, referencing each one of them quietly under our breath (like 'the Count' from Sesame Street), "15 sweaty monkeys, ah, ah aaaah ! ". We would have our confidence 'checked' later when these experienced 'sweaty monkeys' kicked our butts and passed us later in the week.:O But we finished the course in 4 hours and 10 minutes, got some food, set up tent and tended to our feet and legs. This was to be our routine for the next 6 days. One day down, so far, so good.

Day 2 - A Day of Adjustment

Garza to San Miguel, 52k (~33 miles)

Boom! They hit us with the first long day right of the bat. Yesterday was simply a warmup! Because of the sun's intensity, long days would start early. Today we were to start at 6am, which meant getting up around 4:30am to eat, get ready and pack up our tent and belongings into the 24 gallon Rubbermaid bin they allowed as luggage. Today was going to be tough, not only due to mileage but due to the many Costa Rican 'rollers' we were to encounter. Here, this term signified long stretches of uphill AND downhill, both of which hurt due to an on average >7% incline. Our strategy was to get as far as we could in the first 4 hours, to avoid the high sun as much as possible. We had done well the day before, but definitely felt drained from the heat. We worked together side by side, taking in as much of the scenery as we could, and reminding each other to eat and drink consistently. We were traveling mostly on gravel roads today, all of which were extremely hilly. I knew my legs would be sore from the downhill tonight. The oddest creature we saw today was these white, floppy-eared Brahma cows dotting the pastures in groups of 3 or 4. These were similar to cows found in India and survived well here in this hot, arid climate. They had large humps on their backs, droopy skin folds under their chins, and loooong ears that hung down like a rabbit to almost the level of their mouth. Weird! Our halfway point today was the small town of *Isleta*, famous for its colorful buildings that a

local artist had hand-painted. Each one was unique and gave us a great reason to stop for a while and rest, taking in the local culture and taking advantage of a small cafe to purchase a cold Coke! Aaah, *Coca-Cola* - fruit of the Gods.

Nic and I felt the heat again today. We drank and ate as we had done before in previous long races, but in this climate, and in 90 degree temperatures, that still wasn't enough. We packpushed and towed each other up the last 10 k of hills and arrived at our beachside finish line in 8 hours and 10minutes. We were beat. Charlie Bedley, a young Canadian runner who had the foresight to train in Miami for a week before his arrival in Central America, won today's stage in 4 hours flat. Our jaws dropped. He had also won the 1st days race, again, completing the course in half the time we did. We would use him as a gauge for future days asking, "Hey Charlie, how long is it going to take us today? ". He'd smile, tell us HIS proposed time, and then we'd double it for ours. 😊

Today's campsite was beautiful San Miguel beach, and we were lucky enough to pitch our tent with a full-on view of the ocean. Absolutely beautiful. Today, we also decided to treat ourselves to a massage. The race director had wisely hired a crew of local Physiotherapists to travel with us for the week, each setting up a table to give massages to weary legs and feet. So for only \$15, you got 45 minutes of bliss and a sense of rejuvenation. But tonight, even after his rubdown and cooling off, Nic was still feeling the affects of the days heat. Nauseated and feeling restless and feverish, Nic was experiencing heat exhaustion and could barely get any food down at dinner. He lay down a while in the tent, attempting to cool his body. Finally, we had the medic check him out, worried he may have a virus. His pulse and blood pressure were fine and he was hydrated. But he still was burning up, and had vomited up the little food in had in his stomach. All that the medic could recommend was to take some Tylenol and try to cool down, and indirectly hinted that we should assess whether he should go on the next day. That night was rough for both Nic and I. Nic felt miserable. There was nothing I could do. I couldn't even be close to him, he was so hot. We both knew that we wanted to complete this race and run all 7 days, but how far do you push yourself? We had never gotten to this point before, that point where you feel so poorly that you feel like giving up, but felt compelled to push through it. But sometimes that's what you have to do, if you want something badly enough. Now, before you label me as a hard-assed, non-feeling taskmaster, let me explain to you part of what we came to Costa Rica to experience. Nic and I and our other teammate Brad Acker are hoping to do an expedition length adventure race this year. This means, 5-7 days of continuous racing, round the clock, with only 2-3 hours a sleep a day. To do this, you must acknowledge that the odds are high that ONE member of your team is going to experience extremes of fatigue, weakness, illness, and exhaustion during that event. It's just inevitable. The key is, how do you and your other teammates respond to it? Do you shut down in the middle of BFE and give up? Do you push through? And if so, how? What do your teammates need to do to help get you through it? What mental strategies to you utilize to get yourself through it? No one can tell you how to do it, and no amount of training can ever simulate it. But this week, this Coastal Challenge we took on with little to no training, was bound to provide this intrinsic look at our psyches. So, we had agreed before leaving Boise, that aside from a physical injury or picking up a virus, we were going to help each other push through days when we were feeling poorly, so we could get 'real-life' practice on how to handle it, and an honest look at how much we were willing to endure to complete a race. I knew I could get him through the next day if he got himself to the start line. I knew he would feel differently (even if not much better) in the morning. But at that moment, I saw what was crossing his mind in his eyes. "Just give me one checkpoint tomorrow", I asked.

"Then we'll decide as a team". He agreed.

Day 3 - Beautiful Beaches and Inner Pain

San Miguel to Montezuma, 43k (~26 miles)

Oh joy! We only had to run a marathon today! :O Obviously, our sense of reality (and distance) was slowly starting to warp. Nic and I got up in the morning, and packed up as usual, but he still couldn't eat and was battling nausea again. We quietly got on the bus that was to drive us 30 minutes up the beach to the start line for the day. The bumpy ride was the last straw for Nic. He took one look at me, stood up, and silently 'hurled' out the window of the moving bus. He sat down and surprisingly, said he felt a little bit better. Other racers in the bus were quick to offer condolences about his malaise, and suggestions as to how to cope, citing personal stories of nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and other body ailments they had experienced with long endurance races. I didn't know whether to feel relieved that what Nic was experiencing was not so 'out of the norm' for this type event, or mortified that we were surrounded by some really twisted, masochistic people! But we arrived at the start line anyway. My legs were feeling sore from yesterday's downhill, and in order to get the most out of Nic's body and avoid overheating, we opted to power-walk to the first CP. Remarkably, by the time we got there, Nic was feeling stable and was willing to keep going. RFM - Relentless forward motion - this was a mantra I learned when I first started running. And it was our mantra today. But now came the long stretch on the beach again. And the sun was already beating down with intensity. It was ironic that this day, Day 3, was to be our most difficult day, yet it was by far the most scenic beachscape I have ever seen -even more beautiful than Hawaii. The same sun that scorched our skin and heated the air, causing gusts of sand to blow up in our face and stick to our wet arms, was shining ever so brilliantly on this teal-blue water, making it look as it were sprinkled with diamonds. The beaches of *Playa Hermosa*, *Santa Teresa*, and *Playa del Carmen* were the most stunning. Each was a cut-out, semi-circular cove with long fingers of black, cragged rock forming its borders. I pointed this out to Nic to try and keep his mind on our surroundings and off his ailing stomach. But he was feeling like crap. The sun and the heat were stirring up his stomach again. But still, he kept moving. I kept feeding him bits of white bread and Saltines, trying to get something into him, even if it was bland. But our pace was dropping. I felt a switch trip inside me. It's interesting how a type of 'caregiver response' is triggered within yourself when someone you care about is hurting. I took one look at Nic and suddenly, I wasn't as hot and as tired anymore. I found new vitality in my legs. I had to get him off this beach and out of this sun. No one else was there to do it. So I resorted to our 'Secret Weapon' - one we had hoped to save to day 5, but which was obviously in need now. Nic and I had prerecorded 2 sets of the same techno-mix for our mini-disc players. It was time to pull them out. We needed distraction, we needed rhythm and all I needed was some music and a double-caffeine Powergel and I turn into Mighty Mouse. So we slapped on our headphones, hooked up a tow-system between us and set off at an aggressive power-walk pace, each listening to the same music mix simultaneously. It worked! We cranked out that beach section, stopping at every adjunct to take a break in the shade of a palm tree and wipe down our heads with cool water. When we arrived at CP3, we just about collapsed. But we were only 2/3 of the way through the course! I had decided in my head that I would let Nic make the call whether to continue or not. We still had an estimated 3 hours to go, and it was to be an extremely hilly section. He had to decide for himself if he could do it or not. We stayed at that checkpoint for 30 minutes, eating, drinking, airing out our feet and

taking advantage of a fresh water hose to cool down our over-heated bodies. And when the staff came by and asked if we wanted to continue or quit, I wasn't really surprised to hear Nic reply promptly and with determination in his voice, "Nope! We'll be on our way here in just a few minutes!". I fell in love with him again at that moment. This man of mine was so tough. Not just physically, but mentally. He saw that he could produce something even from a heat exhausted body, and unless they dragged him off the course, he wasn't about to let this course beat him. I felt renewed energy in my core. I was going to need it. The worst was yet to come.

We set off with the advisement that the next section would have a long, steep climb to confirm that we were on the correct course. We saw it, looked at each other and shook our heads. And then began to ascend what I'd have to honestly call the steepest, cement double track driveway I have ever seen. By now, we had turned inland and were far away from the pleasant, cool ocean breezes that had given us some relief in the first six hours. Now, we were just sweating, plain and simple, and our only relief was the shade of any tree we could find along the way. Up we went, on this never-ending climb up to who-knows-where for miles, counting our steps aloud, pushing on our quads with our hands to give support. We stopped frequently, resting when we needed to, taking packs from each other to give a chance for the others back to air out, but still taking notice of all the white-faced monkeys swinging through the trees above us. We hiked through villages where children were playing in streams and farmers were herding their cows across the road we were traveling on. We got some pretty strange looks that day. Not too many locals understood what we were doing. To tell you the truth, a few times I asked myself the same question! But we went on like this for 3 more hours until we finally saw the finish. It took us 10 hours and 15 minutes to complete 26 miles. That should give you an indication of the terrain difficulty, as well how much the heat had affected us.

The day ended with a fun addition by the race director – a canopy ride! This was a series of 9 platforms setup in trees throughout the jungle. In groups of 15, guides would attach you via harness to a zipline where you traversed high across the jungle floor to get a birds-eye view of the foliage and wildlife below. You controlled your speed by braking with a gloved hand on the rope above you. What fun! Nic opted to skip this section in order to rest and get some food, but I decided to give it a try. I had some regret partway through it, as my stomach got a little queasy from going so long without real food. Gels and Powerbars only get you so far! But overall, it was an amazing way to see the jungle. And as the sun set and the moon came out, we were not surprised to look down and see the pale blue light reflecting off several pairs of eyes looking back up at us as we zipped along quietly through the trees. Eerie! I arrived back at the bus to find that Nic had vomited again and finally succumb to getting an IV, to see if it would help him feel any better. I felt so badly for him at that moment. It was at that point that both of us decided that tomorrow may need to be a recovery day – both mentally and physically. We'd decide for sure in the morning, but we were leaning more towards taking a day-tour instead of battling the heat again.

Day 4 – A Needed Break

Punta Dominical (Los Cambos) to Ventanas (22k scheduled, changed to 7k)

So today, or last night I should say, had a few logistical problems that had us arriving too late to our original day 4 start location. The night before, we were scheduled to be tendered around 8pm to a ferry which was anchored offshore. Here we were to spend the night sleeping on deck and arrive at Punta Dominical in the early morning, where we would start our run. However, the winds had kicked up so ferociously that 8 foot waves prevented safe portage of the

racers from the beach to the offshore ferry, so an alternate plan had to be made. Instead, we would bus to a port further South and the ferry would meet us there. The craziest part of this scene was the local *tico* race assistant who jumped into these waves and SWAM to the anchored ferry to deliver this message to the captain because they had no radios for communication! Ha! *Ticos* were very service-oriented as I mentioned earlier, but this was definitely over the top! Anyway, we spend the night on the ferry deck, trying to get some solid sleep, all the while clutching my Thermarest pad to prevent my sleeping bag from sliding off it as we tossed and turned in the wind and ocean waters churning beneath us! But thanks to Dramamine, we awoke fairly refreshed but to find that...we were not in the town we had scheduled to stop at! Hmm. I guess we were on to Plan C now. The race staff really didn't even bat an eye and always did an excellent job at modifying the day's goals as needed and creating a backup plan when necessary. So today, the group was to enjoy a nice lunch in the seaside town of Cambos, and then get bused along the coast to within 7k of our original finish point. Today, our run would be a sunset 'fun run', where all the staff and family members who accompanied the racers to Costa Rica would be included. Very cool! Nic and I could not have planned it better ourselves! So, what looked like a day we would have to skip in order to recover, ended up being a recovery day with an easy course at the end of it! That was fine by us. We walked the distance casually along the beach, enjoying the sunset and the breeze, stretching out our legs and agreeing to give tomorrows scheduled long run a try. Funny how our things change when you least expect it. We were back in the game!

Day 5 – Cool Mountains and Big Climbs

Coronado to Palmar Sur – 38k scheduled (ended up closer to 44k!)

Today we would learn a new term to measure mileage called the 'Rodrigo kilometer', more commonly referred to by the racers as the 'RK'. ☺ Rodrigo Caraso was a young Costa Rica environmentalist and adventure racer who was hired by the The Coastal Challenge race director to design the run course for each day. His familiarity with the country was invaluable and to describe the course most accurately with its variety in terrain, difficulty and success at showcasing the country in all its beauty, you could only use the word 'Epic'. A dark-skinned, impressively bilingual and effervescent young man, Rodrigo was impossible to dislike. Even though I doubt he could measure his way accurately out of a paper bag! ☺ Most days, racers just went with the flow, chuckling among themselves as checkpoints became anywhere from 45-60 minutes further apart than described in the morning race briefing. But today? About 80 people were ready to throttle him by 4 o'clock!

To his credit, today's course was by FAR, the most beautiful I had ever run on. We knew we'd be out there at least 8-10 hours, as our course today was to ascend over 7500 feet, leading us inland - up and through overgrown, jungle single-track, down into rolling farmlands with endless fields of green pasture, and finally back to the river town of *Palmar Sur*. Today, we were definitely bringing the trekking poles! But we were ready. Well, as ready as one can be on day 5. But this was more like the territory Nic and I were used to! Long stretches of steep hills, descending into endless green valleys...cool air and cloudy skies....and best of all - no beach!! So off we went. And UP we went, taking on about ½ the elevation gain in about the first 2 hours! Today, we were actually on single-track trail in the jungle, and despite our luck with the cloud-cover, we were absolutely drenched with sweat from the humidity. This was actually to our benefit, as the higher up we got on the *Retinto* ridgeline, the cooler the air got, ventilating our wet, slimy skin. I felt like a lizard for the first time in my life. :O

We continued on from checkpoint to checkpoint, aggressively hiking the hills that were too steep to run and letting gravity assist us in jogging on the way down. Today, Nic was in his element. A new man from the one who cursed the beaches, the long hills and the hot sun 2 days ago, he had transformed into an enthusiastic, slightly comedic mountain-climber again. And man, did I need it today. Today, my legs felt like lead. Today, my shoulders were aching from my pack. Today, I was sick and tired of eating gels and electrolyte drink! Fuels of necessity for endurance athletes of any kind, today they sickened me just to look at them. The feel of a gel in my mouth felt similar to a warm, raw oyster – I almost gagged every time I tried to choke one down. But Nic kept our spirits up, staying just enough ahead to keep my pace up and coaxing me into eating and drinking by describing it like a gourmet luncheon. “Mmmm, ya know what I could really go for right now??” “The image of a cheeseburger pops into my head. “A Vanilla Gu!” I winced, but chuckled, gulping down the slimy blob and ‘chasing’ it quickly with a Saltine cracker. But it was this kind of positive humor that saved me that day, and most likely prevented me from bonking on the course. We continued on....going straight down or straight UP from hillside to hillside along the Costa Rican countryside, stopping briefly at each high point to take in the view and drink in the cool breezes through our salty, wet skin. We passed through farmlands and cow pastures and came to the conclusion that the concept of a ‘switchback’ to get up to a higher elevation - must be an American term. As there was no ‘switching’ and no ‘backing’ to getting up these hills! Roads were simply cut from A straight up to B, and God help you if you didn’t own 4-wheel drive.

We arrived finally to our last descent towards the finish. We could see the town, but had a long way to go – and all of it was on an extremely steep, toe-jamming, root-entangled and rock laden single-track. There was going to be very little running on this kind of terrain! We picked our way down as quickly as we could, but our quads had just been hammered with 8 hours of climbing, so going DOWNhill was not that great of a relief as we thought, even if it was in the opposite direction. We came across Rodrigo a few times towards the last part of the course, smiling as usual, and trying to encourage us with an enthusiastic, “only about 4k more!”. Over and over later, when we saw him again and he repeated, “only 4k more!”, I had to grab Nic as he lunged for his throat. For the next 2 days, we would simply learn to add 5 miles to whatever Rodrigo told us, and planned our food and water this way.

The most interesting part of today’s course was our mode of transportation from the race finish to our campsite in Drakes Bay – a speedboat down the *Sierpe* river! I was exhausted, and shivering from the breeze off the water but still wanted to see everything! Strange flocks of birds, an occasional crocodile floating in the water, more monkeys, it was all so strange and wildly beautiful, I didn’t even notice the huge, black storm cloud that was following us. We arrived at our campsite at Drakes Bay and had just waded up to shore and spotted our gear boxes, when the rain came. An annoying drizzle at first, and then it hit hard. Really hard. 80 racers and their families rushed into the dining area for shelter! Today, we were glad we had been one of the last racers to finish, as we had not yet set up camp. Others were frantically trying to rescue their sleeping bags as torrential waves of rain and floodwaters threatened to wash their tents away! Nic scrambled out a few times into the downpour to grab our Rubbermaid bins so we could put on some dry, clean clothes (which were getting harder to find) and to rescue our pads and sleeping bags. No tent camping for us tonight! We were sleeping in the dining area with a nice, solid roof over our heads!

The rest of the night was fairly uneventful, people scurried around getting massages, eating dinner, reading, trying to set up their bed or hammock and socializing a bit. We were

pretty much one big family now, drawn together by sweat, unpredictable weather, and this crazy experience called The Coastal Challenge. We had one more long day to go, tomorrow's course was 55k (~33 miles), and 23k of it was on the beach again. Nic and I looked at each other with determination. It was going to hurt. But we knew without saying that we were in it for the long haul now.

Day 6 - A Jungle Hash Run !

San Pedrillo Ranger Station to Carate - 47k (~30 miles)

We awoke this morning to learn that last night's downpour left our transport buses stranded on the opposite side of a swollen, now impassable river. So instead, the same fastboats that brought us to Drakes Bay the night before, would now transport racers to the start line beach near *San Pedrillo*. This was not too much of a concern, as our gear would arrive at our destination long before we did, even with a late start. But this meant we wouldn't be running until almost 8:30 AM. Nic and I started to wonder how much of this long day, would be spent in the dark. Today, we had the unique opportunity of being allowed to run through Corcovado National Park. A very protected and usually restricted area of the jungle, Corcovado has banned motorized vehicles, only allowing the foot traffic of hikers for the past 16 years. Today, Rodrigo had gotten special permission to run part of the racecourse through this magnificent area, allowing us to see a very wild part of Costa Rica, very rarely seen by tourists. We were stoked! And wild it was! The path was narrow, muddy and entangled in huge roots and overgrown trees. It was obvious that not too many bipedal creatures had been through here recently. We made our way, slipping and sliding down, up and over every obstacle in our path, wading through several small rivers and wondering what kind of animals were watching us. The area was so dense that not much sunlight came through its canopy. We had to really stay focused to avoid tripping or sliding into some undesirable quagmire of goo. And the dyne around us was deafening! Howler monkeys screaming their disgruntlement at our presence, squawking birds and giant clusters of incredibly loud insects! We could barely hear each other talk in some sections where the crescendo of this strange jungle chorus made our heads ring! But then it would fade again just as quickly, once we passed through its center. So strange! We finally exited out onto the beach. Ahh...cool breezes again. But along with it was the sun again, waiting like a predator for its pale-skinned victims. And we were going to be out there awhile. Today's run had 23k of beach running scheduled. Covered in bug spray and SPF 40 sunblock, I felt like a piece of human fly-paper, but was prepared for battle. We were loaded with water, salt and determination. Pretty much all you need as a runner, wouldn't you say? ☺

But what made today's long hours pass by in manageable pieces was the variety of the course. Today, Rodrigo had us running on beach, climbing over exposed rock and reef, stumbling back onto jungle path, and crossing a dozen or more knee-deep rivers as they opened up and joined the ocean waters. I felt like I was on some crazy Hash run! – my running group back home, famous for its non-traditional and obstacle-laden courses. Of the areas of river where salt water blended with fresh water, three of them were known to attract both sharks from the ocean and crocodiles from the rivers into its murky shadows. It was here that racers had to actually stop and wait to be individually paddled across a 40-50 foot section of semi-shallow water in an inflatable kayak! I became a little impatient at the 2nd one of these crossings, not wanting to lose time as we bottle-necked with other racers on the edge of the river. "Can't we just wade through this? Its not really that deep!" I just wanted to keep moving. "Sure, go ahead

if you want", one of the paddle crew pointed down the shore to a grayish-brown 8 foot croc sliding into the water. "But I'd get a ride if I were you." I shut up and got in the boat.

Today, I also came the closest I have ever come to losing my mind due to a physical stress. Last night I had gone to bed with insatiable itching all over my ankles and feet. Even under my socks, where the skin had not been exposed to the sunlight, my feet were speckled with tiny red dots - a heat rash of some kind - and the more I scratched, the more it itched. I wanted to rip my flesh off by 10pm! I finally covered them with cortizone creme, and some liquid antibiotic in case it was some weird jungle 'scurvy' I had picked up in a river crossing. Then I took a sleeping pill and an 800mg Ibuprofen and crawled into my bag. I felt like I was racing on a pharmaceutical sponsorship. Today, my feet were feeling better, but the skin on my legs was on fire! By 3PM, even with my legs caked with globs of white sunscreen lotion, each contact with the sun's rays, felt like a match being lit on my skin. It wasn't sun burn. I had been pretty faithful all week protecting my skin. It was this weird skin reaction to the constant heat, and the prolonged, repeated exposure to the sun's intensity. This Irish skin has always been fair, but usually tans well in the tropics. But today, it was at its limit. I tried to keep my mind on other things. Anything except my searing flesh. Nic tried to help me, walking slightly behind me to cast shadow on my legs, telling me jokes, and talking about fun times and our plans for the future. He knew I was in a 'dark place', as he calls it. I was completely silenced by this discomfort, and the few words I spoke were not very pleasant. "Mind over matter, Jen", I kept telling myself, as I broke into this awkward cadence alternating between a jog and a power-stride. I was desperately trying to escape the source of my pain. But there was nowhere to go! Nowhere but back into the jungle. I was almost in tears and ready to either strip the next local *tico* we saw of his pants or insist we sit in the jungle shadows until sunset. Then we turned a corner and suddenly found shade. There in front of us like a mirage, were several small pools of water nestled between 3-4 large boulders. Whether it was stroke of luck or divine intervention, I didn't care. This girl was sitting down. We stayed there only about 15 minutes, long enough to cool my legs with the water and shake the sand out of our shoes - for what seemed like the 20th time. Now, here was a true exercise in futility. We were wearing quick-dry trail shoes with ankle gaiters designed to decrease small pebbles and debris from getting to your feet. Yah, right. Not when you are up to your knees in water every 30 minutes! And even at their best, gaiters can't stop loose sand from being back-kicked into the top of them, and working its way down into your shoe. And every time we stopped to shake out our shoes, it cost us 5 minutes time. So we decided, we would just ignore it today. We had very few blisters up until this day due to meticulous footcare. Today, we decided to take our chances. Even if our feet ended up a shredded, bloody mess, tomorrow was the last day. We'd hobble it if we had to.

We ended today in the dark, taking about 10 hours and 40 minutes to complete the course. We had traversed back and forth from beach to jungle for the last few hours, making our own path to escape the sun. We had forgotten to bring headlamps and as the jungle trail got darker, we found a strange urgency welling up inside us: jungle motivation - that compelling need to get away from areas where you can't see things, but things can see you. We were back on the beach as soon as the sun was down. We arrived at camp exhausted, and starving. All we could think about was food and showering off all the grime, sand and sweat from our bodies. We were wishing for a hotel room tonight. We were fantasizing about hot baths, pizza and beer. One more night and we would have it. Patience. I took a deep breath and walked towards our gear boxes to search for any semblance of clean clothes. Nic, on the other hand...well, I'd have to let him describe to you what actually occurred over the next few hours. But as an observer,

looking from the outside in, at a scene I was too tired and too overwhelmed by to truly comprehend...I can only describe it... as a meltdown. We women have had them. We know what they are like. Different things trigger it in everyone. Stress is defined in so many ways, both mentally and physically. But today, it took a hold of Nic by the throat, and consumed him. I knew where it was coming from. I understood at a gut level what he was going through. But there was nothing I could do but stand clear, stay present and let it pass. Ask him for more details. I can't speak for his experience much past that.

Six days down. ONE more to go. So far.....well, we made it at least.

Day 7 - Party Time!

Carate Loop - 10 "RK's" - (actually about 12-14k)

I couldn't believe this day was really here! The last day! We did it! Or we were about to do it. Nic and I stumbled out of our tent, the legs were REALLY stiff today. And I finally had some good blisters on my toes - the result of my stubborn refusal to tend to them yesterday. But I didn't care. Today was the last day of this friggin', crazy, incredible journey! I was hardly going to stop now. We drained our wounds and slapped some antibiotic and duct tape on them and we were good to go. We knew that once we were running, other more major body aches and pains would draw our attention away from our feet. And so we did it. But in all honesty, we weren't exactly in the best spirits when we started. We simply wanted to knock out the distance to complete our goal. But when we finally saw the home stretch within reach, and the race director waiting to personally hug us and give us his congratulations, we finally realized.....I mean REALLY, FULLY realized, what we had done. I hugged Nic tightly. We couldn't have done it without each other, and we knew it. We had just completed an incredible physical feat, had seen growth in our stamina and mental tolerance that we never even knew we had. And even better, we had seen each other at our worst, and came out of it with a stronger relationship than the one we started with. That's good stuff.

The rest of the day was spent showering, packing up, enjoying Snickers bars and drinking our first beer in 10 days. I can't EVEN begin to describe to you how incredible that tasted. Our destination tonight, where we would have the awards ceremony and celebration party was at an amazing area called *Playa Ventana*. We had passed through here a few days earlier, but never got to appreciate its beauty due to our late night arrival. The property was privately owned by Rodrigo's father, *Senor Caraso* - he was the ex-president of Costa Rica. He owed 2-3 miles of beachfront and jungle property along the Pacific coastline. But this area in particular was made unique by its crescent-shaped private beach, white sands dotted with overgrown palm trees, and 2 long, natural tubes of rock that stretched out from the sides of the beach to the ocean waters. Over one hundred feet long and 30 feet in diameter, these long rocky tunnels provided telescopic views of the ocean from the beach, and during low tide, an exciting swim for a daring traveler. *Playa Ventana*, "Window Beach" - we could see how it got its name.

The race staff had set up our celebration party right out on this beautiful beach, under the palm trees. The perimeter was lit with tiki torches, although we hardly needed them - it was close to a full moon night tonite. They prepared a fantastic dinner and had hired a Jamaican DJ to entertain us with music and an amazing oildrum performance. We were knackered, and over-stimulated from the entire week of constant interaction with so many people. So we were content to wander the moonlit beach and watch the festivities from the side. The prizes that were given to the winning places in each gender were large Costa Rican Spheres of smooth, carved

granite, mounted on a wooden base. A legacy that continues to leave archaeologists scratching their heads in wonder, these hand-carved, pre-Columbian stone spheres have been left by ancient residents all over the country since about 500 A.D. The orbs, ranging from grapefruit size to more than 6.5 feet in diameter, can weigh anywhere from 10 pounds to 10 tons - but all have near spherical perfection. There are many theories as to how they were made and why they were made, but their exact significance remains a mystery. What a cool 'trophy' to bring home from an Expedition race in Costa Rica! There were 60 other runners who completed the entire course and we were also given a unique gift. For us, each segment of the race was printed in old-cartography style on 5x7 sized, laminated cards. With the look of an old, weathered map, each card showed what we had accomplished. Nic and I knew instantly that these were frame-worthy, and excitedly planned our layout with select pictures that best depicted our quest. We ended the night with a pleasant surprise. Most racers by now were fairly drunk and content to sleep in a tent again. We had heard that there were bungalows somewhere on the property and simply asked if they were available, even if we had to pay for them. Not only were they available free of charge, but *Senor Caraso* himself drove us to them personally and picked us up early in the morning to return us to the group! Somehow I don't ever see Bill Clinton doing this for anyone staying near his place in Arkansas. :) He was truly a *gentile* man, soft-spoken, never in a hurry....he carried himself as if he were simply used to getting things done in an efficient manner, and his only concern? Was the comfort of his guests. He escorted us to one of his private bungalows nestled in the jungle behind his family's home. With enough beds for 5 people and a ceiling fan and shower, we felt like we had just arrived on Fantasy Island, courtesy of Ricardo Montalban. We chuckled when he apologized for not having hot water running this late. HOT water? We were thrilled to simply have FRESH water! Who cared if it was cold! We thanked him repeatedly and lay down in the comfort of clean sheets and a soft mattress for the first time in seven days. Heaven.

Tabacon Resort – Our Reward

We spent the next day heading back to San Jose, and back to the Best Western *Irazu* where our journey began. It seemed so long ago, that we were first here meeting people and getting our gear checked in. Now, all we wanted was to get RID of these stinky, dirty bins, which were now chock full of wet, dirty running clothes and overused camping equipment. Airport security was sure going to have fun rifling through them, if they had the guts to remove the lids! Soon after we arrived in San Jose, we picked up another shuttle and headed off mid-country, this time to the cloud-forest and a town named *La Fortuna*. Here, we would spend the next few days recovering at Tabacon - a beautiful hotsprings resort, which got its warm waters from an underground spring and a large volcano named *Arenal*. And here, we truly were in Paradise. Built entirely around a natural warmspring river, with its abundance of free-falling water and gigantic leafy, green palm trees, this resort provides tranquility, cool mountain air, and body indulgences you'd be hard pressed to match at any spa in the world. And Nic and I were ready. We were ready to indulge. We were ready to be pampered. And we were ready to spend 2 days letting the warm waters of *Arenal* cascade over our shoulders like a hydraulic massage, as we sat beneath its powerful waterfalls. We treated ourselves to luxury - a suite with a private Jacuzzi on the patio, and 4 course dinners each night. We fell in love with *Izkandria*, the on-site spa where we both got swedish massages and I enjoyed a warm, volcanic mud, body wrap. I felt like Eve as I bathed in my own private hot pool, surrounded by exotic flowers and dewy ferns. What a contrast to how we had spent the last 7 days!

We were a bit sad as we boarded our plane the next morning. We felt we had only just seen a portion of what this incredible country had to offer, despite the vast area we had seen in the last 10 days. We hadn't even discovered the Caribbean coastline, or its snorkeling coves, or the white-water rafting that made this country's rivers famous. There were cloud-forests to mountain-bike through and beaches where sea-turtles could be found. How could a country so small, offer so much? I guess people say the same thing about Idaho.:) Oh well, I guess we'll have to go back there someday. But today? My bed back in Boise sounded pretty good to me.