

Well it certainly didn't come easy, but out of all the mishaps, foul ups and weird happenings, our trip to Costa Rica will go down as one of the more meaningful and satisfying of our trips so far.

Here's the plan. Seven days of running down the Pacific coast of Costa Rica. 250 km. The race organizers provide all food and transport and we camp out each night at national parks along the shore. Absolutely compelling idea for a race and one that Joany and I saw as a perfect fit for our purposeful travel view of vacations. We were in.

So we get on the plane to Washington DC. First leg of the trip. The plane heads for the runway and stops because it turns out that there is something wrong with the brakes. We head back. This flight aint going anywhere. US Air then takes 3 hours to get our luggage off the disabled aircraft. We barely catch an Air Canada flight to Phoenix, of all places, in an attempt to catch the 3:30 flight from Phoenix to San Jose. If you look at a map you'll see that our relatively direct approach has now become an equilateral triangle. Lots of extra miles. We get into Phoenix with 45 minutes to hit the connection. By cutting lines and running like crazy people, we made our flight out, but our luggage most certainly did not. Hard experience has taught us to take the full race kit as carry on, so we weren't too fussed about the bags. Our arrival in San Jose was at about 10pm, 8 hours late. We check in and get a good night's sleep. The next day, Saturday, we met up with Jim and Ken, folks we knew from the Marathon des Sable race we had done the previous April and headed into registration to ask for help with our lost luggage. Turns out we weren't the only ones with issues. Two other races were without luggage as was my brother Ben.

Ben had decided to come to the race as a volunteer. He had arrived a few days earlier and had already been sent to the coast to help set up camp. Through some horrible airline confusion, Ben ended up with someone else's backpack. So Joany and I went to the airport to pick up his backpack while the wrong one was retrieved and sent on to its hapless owner.

On returning from the airport with Ben's bag we boarded buses for the long ride to Tamarindo and the beginning of stage 1. What was to be a 4 hour bus ride became an 8 hour bus endurance test because of the roads, the need to stop for food, washroom breaks and just plain bad timing estimates that we came to know as Tico time.

We arrive at 10pm, eat and watch some very weird bullfighting that involved a group of grown men running around a really annoyed bull. Every now and then the bull would take a run at one of the guys, who would just roll under the fence to get away. Eventually the bull would tire or get bored and go back to its pen. The end.

Late as it was, we had another hour on the bus before camp and the start of stage one. We finally set up at 1am using a borrowed pup tent, sleeping bag and mattress (for me—Joany slept on the ground because she's just so much tougher than I am. I am not proud of this, but it is what happened and must be reported).

Day 1 of the Coastal Challenge had arrived. We packed up our few belongings and watched the other racers disassemble their camps and load their boxes on to the waiting army truck.

Race start was at 9am. Joany and I kissed, hugged and off we went, 80 or so of us down the most pristine beach imaginable. For the next 31 km we would run down gravel roads and dirt roads, alongside reefs and over miles and miles of marvelous hard pack sand.

The weather was mercifully overcast for our initiation run, but Joany and I still found it hard going to make the transition from a frozen southern Ontario to toasty Costa Rican tropics. Joany was also running under the additional load of a serious cold that made running a bit of slog for the first few days. But run we did and finish we did, at a little school in the town of Garza where food and refreshments were set out and waiting for us.

**Stage 1: Mark, 3 hours 5 minutes; Joany, 3:30.**

The camp assembled slowly over the afternoon as runners came in, grabbed their gear and tended to their appetites or feet, whichever was more urgent. Our luggage finally arrived at about 7pm

allowing us to finally get at our thermarest mattresses and our other gear—like lights...except that there were no lights. Whoever had custody of our bags for two days had gone through them and removed only our precious headlamps. Everything else was left intact. Go figure. But at least we had our stuff and were able to get a good night's sleep. Which we would need because the next day was a 52 km stage along back country roads and small stretches of beach.

With a 6am start we were roused at 4 to pack up and choke down enough food to fuel us for a full day of running. The cooks had been at it since 3 and had put together the full Tico breakfast of eggs, rice, beans, yoghurt and coffee. Tasty as can be and prepared expertly, which is what happens when you go a race that comes with its own professional nutritionist and a crew of feverishly hardworking Costa Rican chefs. Certainly the grub was ideal for the long stage coming our way.

Day 2 was a runner's day. Flat reliable surface, gravel roads and a few hard pack beach sections. The tough bit, apart from the sheer length of the run, was the steady, whipping head wind. But not much compares with running on isolated stretches of pristine unspoiled parts of a wonderful country. We ran kilometer and kilometer without seeing a soul. A very sweet and contemplative day, punctuated every 10-15 km by a well-place aid station stocked with water, Powerade and sometimes cookies and nuts. I finished Stage 2 in 5:16 (cumulative 8:22) and snapped this photo of Joany coming across the line at 6:25 (cumulative 9:57).

The draw of a fully supported stage race on the beach is that, theoretically, we could finish a stage and then relax on the beach. Theoretically. We still had to set up camp, tend to feet, tend to the feet of others, eat and go over the race with our fellow runners. Not a lot of down time, especially because the next day, a 43 km beach run, was looking to be as long as stage 2. So to bed early and up an hour before dawn for another 6am start.

By the third day, we had begun to hit our stride and Joany had pretty much shaken her cold. We had both pretty much adapted to the humid heat.

I walked the blow off and caught up with Anne, one of the lead women runners. The wind had begun to whip up again and so Anne tucked in behind and drafted in my shadow for an hour or two. Nice to have the company, particularly for a croc infested river crossing half way through the run. The organizers had thoughtfully arranged a boat for the crossing,

About 10k from the finish we turned inland and sharply uphill to get to the other side of the peninsula we were getting to the bottom of. Anne decided to slow up a bit (she had broken her back 9 months ago and here she was 3rd amongst the women and running beautifully, but being very careful about it) and so I headed off to eventually catch up with Roger, a Costa Rican runner who had run with the first group for two days, but had begun to struggle a bit. So we ran together for an hour, at one point having to pass through a herd of highly agitated and nasty looking cattle that Roger, who knew about these things, assured me could do us plenty of harm. We edged our way past the beasts, which seemed to give Roger a bit of a boost. So he took off and I finished alone at the canopy zip lines above the town of Montezuma.

This was a treat the organizers worked out for us. To get to the ocean from where we finished, we had to harness up and zing down these cables strung through the jungle canopy. A thrilling way to end a stage. Joany finished about an hour after I did and took a ride down, arriving at the bottom just as I was pulling the harness off. It was a sweet reunion.

**Times for stage 3: Mark 4:17 (cumulative 12:39), Joany 5:34 (cumulative 15:31).**

So far the race was going roughly according to plan. Starts and finishes were working out and food and camping was well organized, but things were about to get complicated.

Montezuma was wonderful. There was a dazzling waterfall emptying into town that had these dreamy pools we could dangle our weary legs in. No spa could have been finer. But from Montezuma we had to get across the Golfo Dulce so that we could continue the race in the southern part of Costa Rica. The big plan was to get us across on a ferry the organizers had booked. We would get to the ferry by boarding a

small motor launch that could carry 10 at a time and then transfer to the big boat a mile off shore.

Seemed innocent enough. Except that that stage finished later than the organizers figured and we didn't get to the launch until 8pm—well after dark. Strike one. Joany and I, because we were amongst the first to the beach, decided to get to the boat early and got to the launch with the first group of runners. We knew something was a bit off as we struggled to board the speedboat in the pounding surf. Strike 2. Once aboard and heading to the ferry, we grew increasingly alarmed as we left the protection of the little Montezuma bay and the swells began to grow. By the time we got to the ferry the waves were easily 6 to 10 feet and the launch pilot was struggling to maintain control of his boat. Strike 3. This whole launch ride out to the ferry idea was a bust in the face of the worst seas this part of the Pacific had seen in 15 years. And we were right in the middle of it. No lights. No life jackets.

Twenty feet from the ferry, Rodrigo, the race course designer and one of the unhappy passengers aboard our launch, admitted defeat and decided to get us out of there, except that we first had to get word to the ferry so that Plan B could be worked out.

The only thing to do was send the pilot's trusty little buddy into the water to swim through the huge rollers to the ferry, board via the precarious ladder off the side and tell them to head to a real ferry landing four hours by boat to the north. This guy dives off the boat swims like Joany and I have never seen before and arrives winded on the big boat. 15 minutes of intense discussion pass as we get tossed around on the angry waves. Finally, our new best friend dives off the ferry and swims miraculously back to our launch. We made it back to the beach shaken to our cores. Undaunted, the organizers somehow found buses for all 100 of us (70 runners and 30 volunteers and race staff) and we headed off for the ferry terminal, 2 hours by road north of where we were. We set up camp at the abandoned terminal and waited for our boat to arrive, which it did at about 1am.

Then followed the wildest ferry ride of our lives. The boat was tossed around all night long as Joany and I tried to sleep on the top deck. Because of the heavy seas, we were forced to shore further north than we had planned. We finally got off the boat at 9am. We ate a hastily prepared breakfast (some runners not having eaten in 18 hours), and got back on the buses with a view to trying to salvage what we could of Stage 4—originally scheduled to be 25k along the beach. But it was not to be. We didn't get to the stage 4 start until 4pm. Too late to run an official stage. Racers were given the option of walking/jogging a 7k section of the original course just to keep their legs going. Joany and I passed and rode in with Rodrigo's father Mario, a wonderfully civilized man, to their family spread (420 hectares of exquisite beach front), which doubled as our camping ground for the night. This was easily the most beautiful bivouac of the trip and it was a truly welcome place to collapse after a day that took a lot out of people.

Nonetheless, the mood was remarkably upbeat. This was a group that was not easily discouraged. And besides we had another big stage coming up on day 5. Into the coastal mountains. 6000 feet of climbing on jungle trail. Even knowing it would be tough we were anxious to get started, especially given the difficulties of the previous day.

A kilometer into the run, the four racers at the front missed a turn and went an hour out of their way before finding the trail again, effectively knocking them out of the running for this stage, which opened the day up to some of us second wave runners.

At the 6k checkpoint, we were directed off the crude road we were on and sent up a very narrow, very steep jungle trail into the cloud forest—terrain dense with undergrowth. At points of the climb the insect noise was almost overwhelming. Once at the top, and after way the heck more than 3000 feet of climbing in the first 10k of the stage, we were to follow a stunning ridge top trail to checkpoint 2, staffed by none other than my brother, Ben—he of the unnatural ability to stuff an army truck full of the standard issue Rubbermaid Action Packers we had each brought for our gear. This was his day to be checkpoint dude.

What a thing it is to see one's own brother in the middle of something so intense and awe inspiring, particularly given that, because the front-runners had dashed off into the unknown, I was now running in 3rd place for the stage. Ben did all the appropriate jumping up and down and cheering as he saw me approach up yet one more bizarrely steep road, filled my camelback with two liters of precious water and sent me on my way. I could not have pictured a more personally satisfying moment in a race. It was to be topped two days later, but for now I was one happy guy, running the race of his life.

The rest of the stage was a blur of climbing and ridge running, culminating in a brutal and sparsely marked descent from 4000 feet to sea level in no more than 3-4 km. I made some lucky guesses and got down unscathed, but runners behind me later reported no end of trouble with the route. A lot of toenails were lost this day. I finished in 3rd place. The usual speedsters had recovered most of their lost time and came in soon after me. What was so cool about the finish is that these runners had passed most of the other runners along the way and were able to report to me that Joany was on her way down and was doing wonderfully well.

### **Stage 5: Mark 6:04 (cumulative: 18:44); Joany 7:35 (cumulative 23:06)**

She finished at about the same time Ben came in from the field. Ben, not having had enough adventure for the day, went up the crazy ascent in a bid to bolster the trail markings to help lost runners come down. He spent 4 hours on that nasty trail and saved more than a few races and racers that day. As Joany and I were revisiting the day from the comfort of our tent, we realized that to many of our fellow racers we weren't Joany and Mark so much as we were Ben's brother and sister (which is way better than being the homeless couple, which was our status the first few days). We were pretty proud of the role he was playing and admiration he had sparked in some of the finest endurance athletes out there.

Getting to the comfort of our tents was another organizationally ambitious maneuver, one that would have been terrific if things had gone the race's way, but they didn't and by now there was no reason to think they would. We were loaded onto speed boats, which blasted us down a jungle river and out into the Pacific, then south 10-15k along the shore to an isolated campground at Drakes Bay. The 1st two boats (20 racers) made it just fine, the 3rd boat, coming in an hour later was rained on for a full hour and the rest of the runners had to take a 4 hour bus ride in because the stage ended for them too close to dark to safely send them out on the water.

Those people finally arrived after 10pm—right in the middle of one of the most intense downpours we have ever seen. The amount of water coming down was simply astonishing. About half the tents were simply flooded out. Ours held together, but with the late arrival of runners, the continuing rain and the awful road conditions for transport to the next stage, the race organizers decided the next stage would have to be revised. It was scheduled to be a 55k killer through an uninhabited national park. A final decision would wait until morning.

Looking at things from the fresh perspective of a new day (a bright sunny one as it turned out), it was decided that we would start later and further down the coast than originally planned. The 55k second to last stage was now to be a 38k. Back into the motorboats we went for a ride down to a small ranger station in the Corcovado National Park. We would run a few kilometers down the beach then cut onto a jungle trail for a bit and then back onto the beach for what was promised to be the hardest beach running yet.

I set off with the front group and got far enough ahead to miss the turnoff onto the jungle trail along with 3 others. It took 15 minutes to realize our mistake and find the right way in. Which meant running like we had time to make up. The best part for me was the chance to see Joany on the jungle trail in mid run. We generally kiss at the beginning and end of a stage and run our own race, but it was way cool to see each other out there and exchange some quick mid-stage encouragement.

The rains from the night before had firmed up the sand for the first few hours, but as it dried, man, did it get soft. Each footfall sank deeply into the beach as the incoming tide pushed us further and further upshore and the steeply angled beach. This was, for many, the toughest section of the whole race.

The beach running was punctuated by three challenging river crossings that required, for safety reasons (crocodiles to the left, bull sharks to the right) that we take little boats one at a time across. About half way through the stage the front-runners realized that the overall race finishing order was pretty much locked up. Charlie and Bev, both in the money in the men's and women's categories, basically let up and I caught up with them just as we got to a fourth unannounced crossing. There was no obvious way across but to wade through. Turns out the water was up to my neck and fast moving, forcing me into a full swim. Exciting.

From there the run was straightforward, but long and slow. Getting to the finish, knowing the next day was the last stage, and a short one at that was particularly, satisfying. Joany came in at a good pace not long after and we set up our final camp.

### **Stage 6: Mark 5:58 (cumulative 24:43); Joany 7:08 (cumulative 30:14)**

The 7th and final stage was a circuit through the small town we were in, around the countryside a bit and then back along the beach, this time running north and having the ocean eerily to our left for the first time in a week. Joany and I kissed as we always do and I headed off.

3k in I glance back and there's brother Ben! Running along as comfortably as can be and closing in on me. Well how cool is that? We ran the next 7-8 (or 10-15k—it seemed like an enormously long 10k to everybody), talking about a host of brotherly things, running, races, big life events and what a privilege it is to be able to do wondrous things like this with such good people. 5k in Ben just hands his full water bottle over to a struggling runner without any regard to his own thirst. Such is the way of Ben. Fortunately, I had enough water for both of us, but he didn't know that. We finished in a blur of emotion, accomplishment, satisfaction and warmth, arm in arm. A superb feeling made all the sweeter by the arrival of Joany a few minutes later to complete the picture.

### **Stage 7: Mark (and Ben) 1:24 (cumulative 26:10); Joany 1:39 (cumulative 31:54)**

That was it. Done. Now we had to get back to life as we know it.

To avoid the 12 hour bone crushing bus ride back to San Jose Joany and I had booked a flight on a small plane. We got on and were treated to a stunningly beautiful flight low over the coastal mountains and along the very shore line we had just spent 7 days running down. What an astounding thing it is to fly along such marvelous terrain, to wing over in 20 minutes what had taken us 7 hard, hard days to run down. To see the rivers we had crossed, the wondrous beaches we had made our way along, the rock outcroppings we encountered. It was like rewinding the whole event at some crazy speed. Stunning.

Returning to San Jose was disorienting, but we welcomed the comforts of a hot shower and good food. We had a terrific final meal with Ken and Jim, who had flown back with us (an option taken by about a dozen runners. The rest bused it back, but only after another fabulous night out on the beach and a race end party that we understand was a pretty rockin' affair.) Ken and Jim both had withdrawn because of feet problems, but were still pretty jazzed by the whole event. It was a quieter version of the wrap party we were missing, but we were content to be a bit more contemplative and slowly prepare ourselves for our return.

Sunday morning we get up, have a fine breakfast and head to the airport for our 2pm flight. We board on time and then get word that Philadelphia is digging itself out of a furious snow storm. We were still going to take a run at it, but the entire New England air traffic system was in a shambles. It seemed to us like a fitting way to end the trip. In any case, we stopped in Florida to load more fuel and landed in Philly pretty much on time, about 8pm, only to spend the next 3 hours on the tarmac as we waited for a gate to open.

We miss our 9pm connection to Toronto, which was inevitable because the flight had been cancelled in any event. So we double missed it. Then it took until 1am to get our luggage off the plane. Then all US Air personnel seeing the plight of hundreds of passenger stuck with nowhere to go and no clue as to what to do next just went home. It was a masterful customer relations maneuver.

Joany, ever the resourceful get us out of a jam kinda person that she is, just walks over to a white

phone hanging on a wall and simply says "US Air ticketing please" and, dang it all, don't they just patch her through. She hands me the phone and I make the arrangements. The best we could do was a confirmed booked on a flight at 1pm the next day, with a standby option at 9am. The other hundred or so hapless passengers that see this suddenly line up behind me and we hand the phone over to the next person. That call from that phone must have lasted for hours.

So now what? Not a hotel open for miles around. It's -10C out and we have no winter clothes. BUT we have our camping stuff. Perfect. Roll out the Thermarest, pull out the sleeping bags, circle the wagons, put wallets in the bags, take half a sleeping pill each (a race secret: Ambian, something Jim turned us on to. Non addictive, very effective in half pill doses and you go to sleep in the most ornery of circumstances) and we were out cold on the airport floor until 5am. An excellent night's sleep.

Of course, we don't get on the 9am flight, but we do board the 1pm plane and finally get home without further incident at 6pm Monday night. And that, dear friends, is what we did on our vacation.