



## Jungle Marathon: A Personal Journey

[The Jungle Marathon](#) is a 200km unsupported stage race through the hilly terrain and the hot and humid conditions of the Amazon Jungle. Each competitor carries their own food and equipment on their back and receives 12 liters of water a day from the organizers. Distances covered each day range from 16 to 87 kilometers, depending on the nature of the stage.

Approximately 80 competitors from around 20 different countries participated in this race between 16-24 September 2004. Each has their own story to tell. My experience, and the photos I took, are described in the following pages.

To see an 8 minute movie I filmed during the race, please go to <http://dari.shalon.com>



## Velcom to ze Jungle

After finishing the Sand Marathon, one would think that I had completed the world's toughest footrace. One would be wrong. Enter Robert Polhammer. Robert is considered the best adventure race director in the world, and last year he created an even tougher race, truly "ze hardest race in ze world." Robert is German and he takes his work very seriously. Need I say more?

So here I am in the jungle, tempting fate one more time. Robert smiles as he welcomes the group: "Velcom to ze jungle. Ve have a vonderful race for you." It was a cruel and somewhat cryptic smile, one that tells us that he knows something we don't. That's the moment I realize that we're in for a very tough week.



Robert



My number: Lucky 22

To get a feeling for the atmospherics, consider the elements that make up this event. The competitors are all hard-core and highly driven to push themselves to (or beyond) the edge. The common elements are a love of pain, a hunger for adventure, and a belief that each is unbreakable. In another time and place, these people would be mercenaries in the French Foreign Legion.

Banjo Banon is one tough Irish cookie. He climbed Mt. Everest a few years ago, but that still hasn't calmed him down. Banjo doesn't like fancy gadgets or foods. He preferred to use the high-tech Hammer Energy Gel we gave him as a blister pad.



Banjo



Banjo using Energy Gel

Luke Cunliffe, a proper British explorer, has trekked 550 km unsupported across the Yukon wilderness, dragging a 100 kilo sled behind him.

Jay Batchen has run dozens of ultra-marathons and was a top finisher in the Sand Marathon.



Luke



Jay

Karim Mosta is from France and was last year's winner. He's tough as nails.

Kevin Lin is from Taiwan and is a state-sponsored athlete sent around the world to races like this. He placed second in a race in the Gobi desert last year and runs a street marathon just a dozen or so minutes away from the world record. His business card lists him as a professional Ultra Marathon Runner. I didn't even know that the profession existed. Have I missed my calling in life?



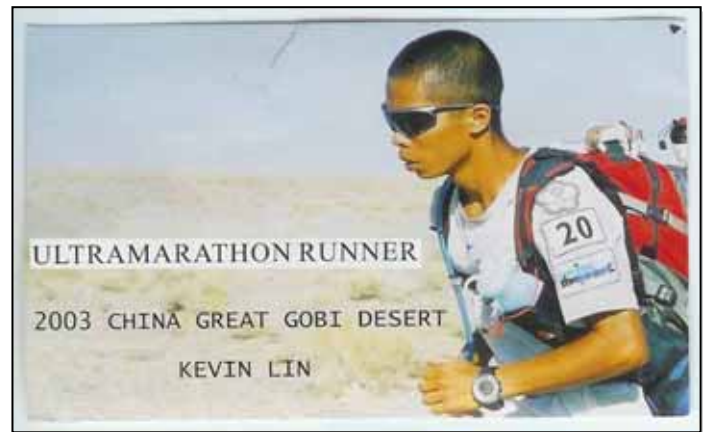
Karim



Kevin

Charlie Engle is a semi-pro adventure racer with around 25 survival events in every corner of the globe under his belt. He won the Jungle Marathon this year.

Ray Zahab is a professional adventure racer from Canada. When he's not racing, he's on the lecture circuit talking about his races.



Ray



Charlie



Ana



Simon

Ana MacPherson, a relative novice from the UK, put in a very strong performance this year. Simon Bowden, a Sean Connery look-alike, has run 50km up South Africa's tallest mountain several times and is rumored to eat broken glass for breakfast.



Andrea Estevam is an adventure racer from Brazil and won the women's category of the Jungle Marathon last year. Brazil entered some their best long distance runners and triathlon champions into this event. They were out to show us Gringos who's the boss in the jungle.

There was even a blind runner from Korea who was led by one of Korea's top athletes. They managed to finish the first day together, which was incredible given that around 15 normal runners didn't finish. The blind runner had plenty of the stamina, but kept falling due to the difficult terrain. It was truly inspirational to see them finish the hardest stage of the race.

Take the energy, ego and testosterone levels above (yes, even Ana and Andrea have testosterone) and combine them with a somewhat sadistic race director who has vowed to break these athletes, and add as a backdrop to this macabre drama the extreme terrain, vegetation, heat and humidity of the Amazon Jungle, and there you have it: a true "Pain Fest". Everybody gets what they're looking for.



## Life is Killing Me



A moment of grace before the storm. Sunrise on the day before the race begins. This is the boat that transported us 150km up the Tapajos river from the village of Alter do Chao to some of the most remote jungle areas in all of South America.

Day 1 is a real shocker for everybody. Just a few hundred meters from the starting line, we're forced to swim across a wide creek (this wets our feet, which makes it easier to damage them). Robert sends us up and down endless hills and along vicious side slopes.

On the uphill, my heart beats so strongly, I feel it pounding in my chest. My lungs are burning and my breathing is deep. There is so much humidity in the air, there isn't enough room left for oxygen. I feel like I am drowning, yet I'm on dry land. Sweat pours out of us with the intensity of a rain shower. People find themselves dehydrating within minutes.

On the downhill and sideslopes, the feet slide violently to the fronts and sides of the shoe, bashing toes and rubbing skin. Blisters form within the first few hours. By the time the week is over, Jay's altimeter watch had registered 5,000 meters of cumulative altitude gain and loss. That's the equivalent of running up and down half of Mt. Everest in one week, with wet feet and 10 kilos on our backs, all in extreme tropical heat and humidity.



Anke from Germany drinking water at a checkpoint.



But hills aren't our only problem. Thorns and branches jab and slice our skin. I remember our jungle survival training the day before the race where Gershon, our Brazilian army instructor, took a blade of jungle grass and cut a piece of raw meat with it. Well, we are running through that grass today. The jungle is brutal and everything out here is out to get us. "Velcom to ze jungle," I think to myself. Velcom indeed!

Left: Competitors being shown how jungle grass can cut through meat.

Base camp that evening is a sorry sight, though spirits remain remarkably high. Competitors dress their wounds, proudly comparing who has bigger blisters and bloodier gashes. Let's call it a form of masochistic camaraderie. Flies linger on open sores, but once shooed away they don't return. There is plenty of fresh meat around.

Around 15 people drop out on day 1. Take Karl for example. He was so proud of finishing the Sand Marathon that he had the race logo tattooed on his neck, right above the word "Jack", the name of this first born son. Karl was taken out of the race today due to severe dehydration. Karl's Sand Marathon tattoo is pictured at left. Karl attached to an IV at the end of day 1 is on the right. The Jungle Marathon tattoo will have to wait.



As opposed to the desert where the only real enemy is passive heat, the jungle is a much more complex and deceiving environment. Despite the tranquil sounds of chirping birds, rustling leaves and babbling brooks, the jungle actively wants to kill me. First, the vegetation is designed to slow me down and impede escape. Roots trip me up, stumps stub my toes, vines entangle my body and thorny leaves and branches snarl my clothes and rip my skin. The jungle holds me in its grasp and invites me to linger.

In addition to hostile vegetation, anything that moves in the jungle wants to eat me. If I sit on the jungle floor for more than a minute, an entire ecosystem of insects appears out of nowhere and starts to devour me. We are bitten by ants, bled by leaches, infested by ticks, covered by funguses, stung by mosquitoes, and potentially eaten by jaguars. Every form of life in the jungle has but one goal: to recycle me to the bottom of the food chain. Life itself is trying to kill me. Even the chickens at camp start to eat my food.



## Up the Creek

The start of the stage was delayed an hour or so until a part of the course could be remarked. It turns out that ants ate the plastic tape used to mark the course. So you thought that jaguars were Lords of the Jungle? Nope...it's the ants. They decide what stays and what goes.

On the second day of the race, I discover that I have only one true friend in the jungle: the creek. At first I hated water crossings since running with wet shoes destroys my feet. But once I accept that my feet will be destroyed anyway, I have nothing left to lose and actually start to enjoy being in the water. I linger an extra few minutes in every creek and let the water cool my body and restore my energy. Usually I only leave the creek when I feel something start to nip at me. The last thing I want is to trigger a piranha attack. We're told that piranhas only attack open wounds or rotting flesh. But after two days of running in the jungle, we have some of both. It all comes back to jungle basics. If it's alive, it's trying to kill me. If it's not alive, it's also trying to kill me. Except for the creek; the creek is my friend.



A brief stop in the jungle.

Despite soaking in three creeks today, I still severely dehydrate towards the end of the second stage. I see the trees moving, yet I think that I am standing still. I'm on the verge of passing out and stumble ahead, one step at a time, trying desperately to finish the stage before I collapse. I force myself to drink water, one tiny sip at a time, but extreme nausea prevents me from drinking more. My body screams at me to stop and lie down for a rest, but that could be fatal, as the jungle will eat me alive.



Crossing a creek.



Taking 2 salt tablets

Many competitors are passing me now. As Brazilian runners go by, my traditional Portuguese greeting of "Hoy!" sounds more like a whiny "Oi." I'm in pain. Using my last rational faculties, I pull out an emergency supply of salt and pop two tablets. The nausea lifts and I can sip more water. A giant blue Morpho butterfly appears ahead of me and guides me along the trail for a few magical minutes. I jog into camp on a second wind. I think I'm on to something...

## Salt of the Earth

On the third day of the race, I discover salt. Because of intense perspiration, to stay properly hydrated in such extreme conditions requires supplementing the drinking of water with the intake of electrolytes, namely salt. My mistake on the first two days was that I tried to drink in this extra salt through drink mixes such as Gatorade. The drink mix has flavors and sugars to mask the taste of the salt, but after one or two bottles, I became so disgusted by the taste that I stopped drinking it. That's when dehydration reared its ugly head.

I thought that salt tablets were for emergency use only. Then I discover that the pros routinely take 3 to 4 salt tablets an hour! I rethink my strategy. I get some salt tablets from a competitor and spend the entire third stage trying to find the balance between how much water to drink and how much salt to take. There are no rules, but as I discovered in the Sand Marathon, wandering too far off the edge in either direction can lead to disaster.



Our morning swim.



Deep in the swamps.

During the course of the third day, which starts with a swim of 200 meters and was full of swamp crossings, I discover how to read my internal thermostat for salt. At the first hint of nausea, I take a salt tablet. At the first sign of a bitter taste in my mouth, I drink a mouthful of water. There you have it. I am trekking through the jungle balancing myself every few minutes between nausea and bitterness. Staying hydrated in the jungle is a full time job.



As I plow through the dense jungle today, I notice that my footing has become much more efficient. I can climb over fallen trees and keep my hands in the air. I've learned the hard way that the only part of me that should contact the jungle is the soles of my shoes. Everything else, ankles, knees, arms and especially hands, that comes into contact with the jungle gets jabbed, scraped, bit, stung or ripped. The jungle is not a tactile-friendly environment. Nothing out here is out to tickle me.

Earlier in the day, Robert told us: "Ve are lozing too many of you, so ve vill shorten the stage by 3.04 kilometers." I have no clue how Robert manages to so exactly measure 3.04 kilometers in the jungle with all the hills, mud, twist and turns. But measure it he does. This might be God's most primitive jungle, but German engineering is still German engineering. I am glad the course is a bit shorter today. I finish it in good form and even manage to smile at the end.

The race is starting to take its toll. As injuries, blisters and fatigue start to accumulate, I set up my hammock in the midst of the Brazilian contingent. I enjoy hearing the musical sound of their Portugese banter. Even when they are in pain, the Brazilians sound happy.



Above: Cooling off at the end of day 3.

That evening I barter my remaining 480 grams of powdered drink mix for 50 grams of salt tablets. That's roughly the amount of salt in a restaurant salt shaker, which is what I will consume during the remainder of the week. It's a terrible trade on the open market, but in the jungle, salt is worth any price.

## Dark Zone Express

This is the longest of the stages: 87 km nonstop. At the half-way point, the stage passes through a region of the jungle densely populated by jaguars. Anyone wandering into this region alone at night will likely become a jaguar statistic, so therefore the region between CP4 (Check Point 4) and CP5, ominously named the Dark Zone, is closed at night. Whoever arrives at CP4 after 15:30 will be forced to camp at this checkpoint with armed guards until morning. Like the rest of the competitors, I am hell bent on making it out of the Dark Zone by nightfall.

The day starts with a 4:30 am water crossing (photo at right). It is still dark out. While refreshing, this early morning swim ensures that we start our 87 km trek with damaged feet.

I am really pushing to get to the Dark Zone before dark, and while climbing a 30 degree incline, thinking about nothing except the pain from my heel blisters. I notice a few wasps hovering around my feet.



No big deal. It happens all the time. I ignore the wasps and they ignore me. Suddenly I see 5-6 wasps around my legs, and then 10 to 20 wasps angrily circling my body, and then dozens and dozens of wasps encircling me with the collective buzz of a kamikaze attack. Panic sets in.

I flail my hands around my head to protect my face and neck and catapult myself up the incline. In the scramble I drop a water bottle. Dehydrate or get stung, which is the worse death I think to myself? I lurch back a few steps for my water bottle. BAM! BAM! I'm stung on each arm. I sprint back uphill, waving my hands and screaming like a little girl. BAM! BAM! Two more stings on the right leg. I set a land speed record for the uphill 200 meter dash. The cloud of wasps gradually disperses and the silence returns. I pull out 4 stingers and rinse my wounds. The intense burning of the sting sets in and the venom bloats my limbs. At the next CP I'm told that everyone got stung at that point in the trail. "Robert must have trained those wasps," I think to myself. At least this new pain takes my mind off the heel blisters.

An hour after the wasp attack, I hook up with Ana, JC, and Jay. We match our pace and form a human train traversing single file through the dense jungle. We have one goal: to get to the Dark Zone before 15:30. We are the Dark Zone Express and we stop for nothing or no one. Finally after hours of agonizing climbs, descents, swamps and the popular wasp attack, we reach the entrance to the Dark Zone. It's 12:39.

The guards confirm that jaguars were sighted in the early morning hours. A quick fill of water, a few salt tablets, the saying of a short prayer, and we're off to test our luck in the Dark Zone.

As I power-walk through the Dark Zone, the sounds of breaking branches and falling leaves cause me to turn my head expecting to see a jaguar. No such luck. None of the competitors see a jaguar, even though at this point in the race, we are all starting to smell like one. Jay and I emerge from the Dark Zone at 16:10.



Entering the Dark Zone.

We're still only half way through the total distance for the day. We eat a meal and change socks. Jay decides to walk it in. I try my luck at running the last 40 km. My dinner of Chicken Gumbo turns into Chicken Jumbo Mumbo. I take an antacid and keep jogging. I want this thing over with.



Out of the jungle and back in "civilization."  
Half way through the long stage, fatigue is setting in.

## Into the Twilight Zone

Darkness descends on the last 40km of the 87km long stage. The trail is now marked with glowing stick lights. Unfortunately, the local village kids take a liking to these stick lights, and half of them disappear, making navigation challenging. I put on a headlamp and start scanning the trail for snakes, assuming that the course continues along this trail for quite some time.

I lose track of time and when I next look up, it's pitch black and I'm knee-deep in mud on an isolated hilly trail in the middle of the jungle. I look around and see only insects flying into my headlamp and a few red eyes high up in the trees. I turn off the headlamp and look for stick lights. Nada. Shit! Am I lost or are there simply no stick lights? There is no one but me to answer that.

New blisters have formed due to the mud. My feet are throbbing with pain. My water bottles are almost empty. I am completely fatigued, having exerted myself for the last 16 hours, and my thoughts drift in and out of reality. Churchill's famous quote rings in my mind over and over like a mantra: "When you're going through hell, keep going... When you're going through hell, keep going..." So onward through the mud I go.

A few minutes later, the headlights of three oncoming vehicles blind me. I step to the side of the trail to let the convoy pass. The jeeps stop when they reach me, and in the first car are two Brazilian soldiers, two competitors and a race organizer. "Get in," she says. "You're going the wrong way."

I wasn't sure if this was a dream. I remember rocking back and forth on the verge of passing out. My eyelids were heavy. I grab the door of the jeep for stability. "No I'm not," I respond, in full denial. I try to smile as though everything is under control. "Besides..., when you're going through hell...keep going..." I mumble like a drunkard.

"Right, but you're going back *into* hell. You look dehydrated. Get in," she says.

"Where am I?" I ask.

"Jaguarari," snorts out one of the Brazilian soldiers, which is an aptly-named village we were warned has a high density of jaguars around it.

"Holy shit," I think to myself, "I've been wandering alone for hours back inside the Dark Zone, and its bloody dark out!!" I look at the other two competitors picked up even farther out in the Dark Zone. They look comatose, so I get in the jeep.

I feel like I'm entering an alternative reality. Fatigue, dehydration and pain have dulled my senses. I leave the Dark Zone and enter the Twilight Zone.

We drive through the mud 6 km to CP7 (right), picking up a dozen more sorry-looking competitors on the way in the three jeeps. The organizers decide it is too dangerous to let us continue with the trails so poorly marked. So we're forced to spend the night at CP7.





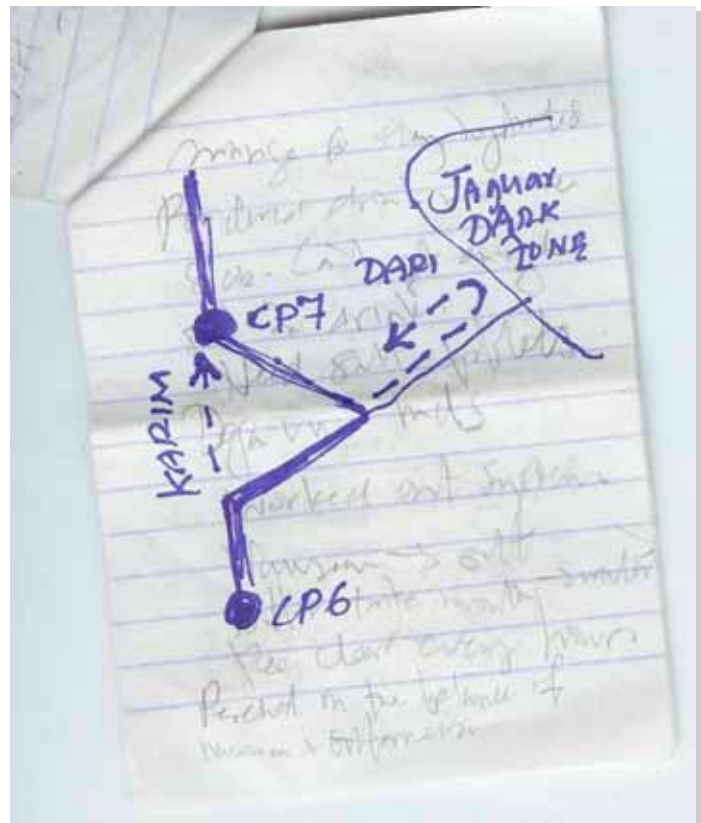
I collapse into my hammock but can't sleep due to the throbbing pain in my feet. Dawn arrives, but I am in no way rested from the night. The race clock is still ticking (in fact it wasn't stopped even though we were forced to wait until dawn) and we have 20 km left to go. I put on my shoes, force myself to eat a handful of granola, and set off on the last beach-front stretch of this Road from Hell.

Sergio, from Spain, and me on the last 20 km beach section.

After being baked by unrelenting sun for 4 hours, I stumble into base camp at 11am, 30 hours after starting the stage with a brisk morning swim in the Tapajos River. That water crossing now seems like a distant memory.

In retrospect, it turns out that I missed a sharp left turn on the trail. I was so zoned out and only looking down at the ground with my headlamp, trying to avoid snakes and working my way through the mud, that I forgot to navigate. Robert's words from last night's briefing now echo in my mind: "Be careful und never loze attention. I vill make the course surprise you." Surprise me he did.

At right is a map explaining my navigation error.



Karim and the top Brazilians runners were smarter. They altogether cut out this entire hilly section of the course and went directly from CP6 to CP7 along the main dirt road. Let's call it "creative navigating" as there were no course markers on their shortcut. We were expecting a summary execution of the offenders, but Robert made due with a severe time penalty instead.

## Sweet Revenge

The human body never ceases to amaze me. A mere 21 hours after being at the point of total mental and physical exhaustion at the end of the long stage, I am at the starting line for the beginning of the last day, completely hyperactive, recharged and raring to go. Or maybe I just want to get this thing over with?

Today is a 24 km “sprint” along the beach of the Tapajos river to the finish line in the village of Alter do Chao. Start time is 8am, which is very late in jungle terms as the sun is high in the sky and the heat of the day has already built up. A competitor suggests to Robert that an earlier start would be healthier. “Nothing in this race is supposed to be healthy for you,” he responds dryly. No surprise there. So 8am it is.

Jay and I start out together with the lead runners through a tough wooded stretch. This is the first time I’m running near the head of the pack, and I’m amazed at the agility with which the lead runners jump over obstacles and how precisely they place their feet. They seem to lope over the jungle, not run through it.

When I started this race, I thought that we’d be a group of Neanderthals pounding our way through the jungle. It turns out instead that the top runners are highly skilled elite athletes. One sees this in their running, pacing, nutrition, hydration, and foot-care techniques. They are true professionals with tremendous race experience, corporate sponsors, and well thought out training regiments. They compete in many such events every year. Their skill is evident in the grace and elegance with which they run the course. The rest of us, well...we’re more like what I originally envisioned: a group of Neanderthals pounding our way through the jungle.

In fact, we are all de-evolving into a more primitive state as the week wears on. Here is Gershon, our Brazilian jungle survival instructor starting the race in his army uniform, half way through in the Dark Zone after he switched to running with flip-flops, and at the finish line. I hope that he has undies under the number 47.



Gershon day 1



Gershon day 4

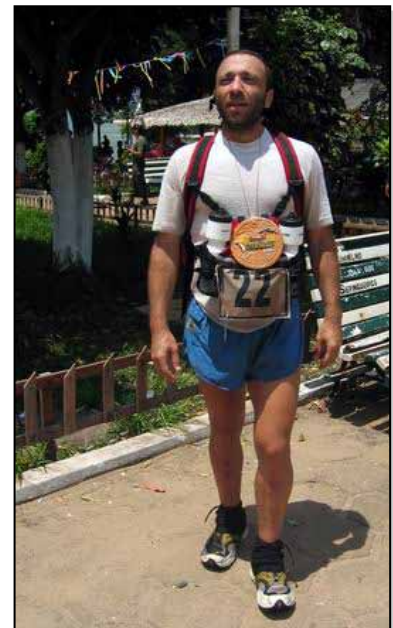


Gershon day 7

Back to the race, Jay and I keep a brisk jogging pace as we re-emerge onto the beach. The blisters and smashed toenails scream at me to stop, but I ignore them. I turn my MP3 volume to full and let the Rolling Stones numb my mind. Many runners sprinted ahead, but now they crack and we overtake them one by one. Now I not only smell like a jaguar, but I start pouncing like one.

At the last CP 6km before the finish, I collapse in the river to cool off for a few minutes. No sooner am I back on my feet, then the beach ends at a major outcropping of rock. We're forced into the water anyway for a 500 meter swim/wade around the rocks. "That was a waste of 4 minutes at the last CP," I tell myself, but I'm finding that I don't want the water part to end. I'm happy in the water. But my MP3 payer isn't. It lets out one last shriek and dies. "I'm amazed it lasted this long," I think, as I rip out the earphones.

Back on the sand, Jay and I run the last few kilometers together hoping that no major muscle groups give way at the last minute. Slowly the village of Alter do Chao appears on the opposite side of the bay, and then the steps up to the village square and finally there it is: The Finish Line! Locals clap and cheer as I cross the finish line in 14<sup>th</sup> place for the day. Out of 80 or so competitors that started the event, only 55 remained in the race and I would be happy to finish the day anywhere in this group, especially after my dismal performance on the long stage. But 14<sup>th</sup> was beyond my expectations given the animals running this thing. According to Stalin, revenge is a dish best served cold. In this case, it was served hot, very very hot.



I bring my motor back to idle and find that I can barely support my own weight. I collapse in the town square under the shade of a tree, flat on my back, and the locals pour cold water over my face and body. "This is heaven," I think to myself. I never want the water to stop. Just then, it stops. "Mas! Mas! (More! More!)" I cry out, and they keep pouring. In fact, I ask them to do it three more times.

So it's over. This toughest footrace in the world didn't disappoint any of us. It certainly lived up to its name and provided each of us with the opportunity to test ourselves, mentally and physically. I don't feel a need to return to this race, but the chatter among the competitors at the party that evening is how to improve their results for next year. The hard core stay hard core to the end. It seems that Robert and these die-hard runners have all found their bliss in this wild jungle race.