

A Pura Vida Experience

| by Jean Pommier

Mix 130 miles of running through the Costa Rican jungle, seven stages, a handful of micro-climates, breathtaking views, top quality food, ultrarunning camaraderie, a pinch of competition, outstanding logistics, rustic and non-dry camping. Shake for six days and you will get a memorable Coastal Challenge cocktail.

I first heard about TCC (The Coastal Challenge) last year, from ultra veterans Chuck Wilson and Bev Anderson-Abbs. Chuck had run the first three editions and Bev won the women's division in 2005 and 2007. Having run only single-day races so far, I was a bit intimidated by the format of the event: six consecutive days, one stage every day plus a second one on day five.

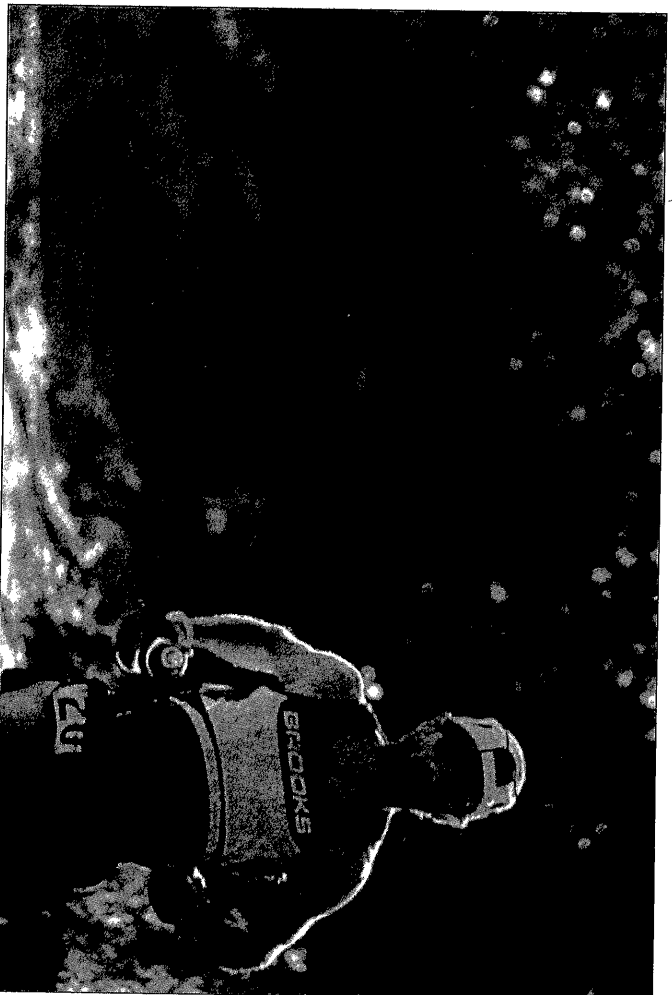
One nice thing about TCC is its dual format: a longer version called Expedition and a shorter one, Adventure. There are a few cut-offs on the Expedition runs and if necessary, you can switch from Expedition to Adventure, while still competing for the remainder of the week. Family members can also join you and have their own activities during the day and camp with the group.

The course is designed by Rodrigo Carazo, a native of Costa Rica and specialist in adventure racing. Rodrigo listened to previous participants' feedback and included even more trails in this year's edition. He also likes to incorporate some surprises in the runs, such as river crossings, some canyoneering or swimming in the sea. Overall, I was amazed at the variety of terrain we crossed, as well as the different types of weather we experienced: from heavy humidity and tropical rain when going around the Arenal volcano to the heat and dryness of the Pacific Coast, at the border with Nicaragua.

One thing special about running in Costa Rica? The wild and farm dogs. I had a heads-up about this from Bev who got bitten on her second day there last year - 11 stitches! But she is such a tough runner, that did not stop her from competing and winning. Bev specifically told me that yelling at a dog coming to you was inefficient and the best trick was to have a rock in hand, ready to be thrown at the assailant. What I experienced and really worked for me on several occasions was to bend down and grab a rock whenever you saw a dog coming. I was astonished at how every dog would then turn around. To me it is like a "canine cultural" difference with Europe or the Americas, where a dog would actually think that you want to play with him, by throwing something he can catch and get back to you...

For those of you who are wondering if adventure and stage-racing is for you, let me say that this is the perfect format to give it a shot. Quite a few other participants had run in other races and reported much more rustic conditions. Compared to them, I found that TCC was a "comfortable" adventure event. We could change our clothes every day and did not have to carry our own food for the six days. Our tent and other equipment were delivered to nice campgrounds, and the chef and his team served great local food. The course was almost perfectly marked, there were frequent and relatively well-stocked aid stations for such a remote course, and great medical support at the camp sites and on the course (two Red Cross cars followed us the whole week.) The staff and volunteers were cool, dedicated and very supportive.

A stage race is also an opportunity to experience the amazing wonders of the human body's recuperative abilities. I paid attention to stretching after each stage and was positively surprised to not experience any soreness in the mornings. Maybe I did not push hard enough, but I was actually satisfied enough with overall second place for my



Jean Pommier wins the stage

Photo by JEAN POMMIER

first experience in this type of event. The key is to not get injured, - twist an ankle, bruise a muscle, get blisters - misfortunes I avoided, thankfully, but for one small blister from the mile in the river on day four.

Last but not least, I experienced something even stronger and more beautiful than the usual sense of community we feel in ultra races. Spending a week together, supporting each other, having plenty of time to share about the joys and tough moments of the stage brought much more bonding than what you can do with a one-day race. One of my best memories was spending several hours at the finish line on day three greeting runners until everybody was in; not something I usually take the time to do.

Overall, this is an amazing way to visit Costa Rica. Although the racers cross the country on foot, there is still some CO2 emission involved in the logistics so it is not 100% eco tourism; however, it is quite close. From running in the jungle of the rain forest, in heavy rain, through the mud, to the hot and dry savanna, or secluded beaches, all in the same week, this is definitely worth the trip to such a wonderful country, driven by the appealing Pura Vida spirit. I hope you too can experience this challenge.

For more details about the author's experience, see fatherfaster.blogspot.com/search/label/Coastal%20Challenge.