



# JUNGLE *fever*

SCORPIONS, HOSTILE TERRAIN AND EXTREME HEAT AND HUMIDITY ARE JUST A FEW OF THE HAZARDS RUNNERS ENCOUNTER IN BRAZIL'S JUNGLE MARATHON, AS EXPERIENCED ULTRA ATHLETE RICHARD DONOVAN DISCOVERED

**B**razil's Jungle Marathon is perhaps the most deceptively understated race in the world. For a start it's not a marathon – it's much longer, at either 100K or 200K. The race website contains none of the trumpet-blowing of other ultra events, so many of which claim to be “the toughest race on earth”. And yet this probably is the toughest race on earth.

Just getting to the starting line of last year's race required me fly from Dublin to Lisbon and on to Recife in Brazil. A few internal flights later and I was in Santarém, a bustling trading centre where the Amazon meets the Rio Tapajós tributary in the heart of Brazil.

Despite arriving late at night a couple of days before the race, a Jungle Marathon representative was there to drive me to the village of Alter de Chão, 24 miles away. In such a remote location, I was pleasantly surprised to find a top-class hotel with internet access serving as the race HQ.

It was easy to see why Alter de Chão was once a sacred site for the Tapajós Indians. Surrounded by white sands and lapped by the deep turquoise waters of the River Tapajós, it boasts some of the most beautiful beaches in Brazil. It sits beneath two green hills; one of these is shaped like a church altar, giving the area its name.

Eager to stretch my legs, I ran several miles upriver on my first day. Remarking later to a fellow competitor about the abundance of large birds with turkey-like heads that were looking at me, he replied, “Oh yes – the vultures”. They wouldn't be the only weird creatures I would come across during the ensuing week.

To reach the start, the 62 competitors, staff, medical crew and support soldiers boarded two boats in the early hours. We chugged our way upriver for 10 hours before arriving at a small settlement called Itapuama. This was only 60 miles away from the finish, ▶

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but the total race distance was 200K – 120 miles. The additional 60 miles was made up by the fact that the race didn't proceed in a straight line. Instead, each stage would start at or close to the river's edge and head into the jungle before returning in a loop.

On board the river boat many competitors were learning how to put up their hammock for the first time. A hammock was one of the compulsory pieces of equipment, along with a rain-fly sheet and mosquito net, food for the entire week, medical kit (including salt tablets, bandages, pain killers and disinfectant), knife, torch, insect repellent, water purifying tablets, compass, waterproof matches and water-carrying capacity of 2.5 litres.

The following day there was a jungle survival training course in which it was made clear by Gershon, a Brazilian army instructor, that everything in the jungle wants to kill you, including the vegetation. A demonstration of some jagged grass slicing through meat was proof of this. In addition, the wildlife we could possibly encounter included every size of spider imaginable, jaguars, wild pigs, snakes, scorpions, mosquitoes and army ants.

On the positive side, however, the racebook showed that the first stage was just



The 'stream crossings' were not the kind you could clear with a single bound

16.3K. Admittedly, the book warned that it was the hilliest part of the jungle, but also said there was "a great creek crossing and beautiful little waterfall" on the course. I foolishly convinced myself it would be a gentle trot to start with. Little did I understand that difficulty in the jungle is not measured by distance but by terrain.

Similarly, Christian Schiester of Austria had won several ultra titles, including the Himalayan 100-Mile Stage Race in record time.

Within 200 metres of the start, we crossed our first stream. I had zip-locked my salt tablets and stuffed them in a pouch on my waist for easy access, so I wasn't concerned about getting wet. But this 30-metre wide stream was to prove my undoing, though I was unaware of it at the time.

After the crossing we turned into the jungle proper. We were immediately confronted by a steep incline of uneven ground and loose clay, with cambers, vines, roots and even fallen trees to negotiate with every step. I was working hard, as were the runners around me, and this was only the start. I could sense a collective panic setting in as my own breathing was reduced to short, abrasive gasps.

I reached for my first salt tablet, realising I was also sweating profusely in the heat and humidity. But the tablets were mush, useless – I hadn't sealed the zip-lock bag fully and the stream-water had dissolved them. I pushed onward, unwilling to stop and go through my rucksack to find more tablets. I assumed I would be fine without them.

I eventually reached the top of the hill, feeling like every ounce of my energy had been used in the climb, and hoped there would be some nice downhill sections in which I could recover. My hopes were misplaced. The descents throughout the day were as brutally uncompromising as the ascents because they incorporated the same obstacles. I had to frequently grab branches, often thorny or spiky ones, to try and prevent myself from hurtling uncontrollably downwards.

Other competitors were similarly tripping and stumbling as they tried not to crash to the ground. Mosta, the former winner, placed his hand on a tree branch only to be stung by a scorpion. It proved to be the end of his race due to shock, but his subsequent speedy recovery was a tribute to the excellent race medics.



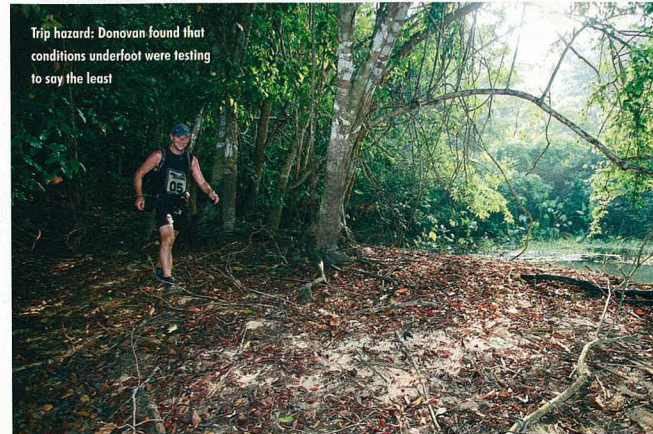
Having to follow the pink tape that marked the course every few metres, while constantly looking at where you placed your feet, was also quite a demanding exercise. It was impossible to tell how far competitors were in front or behind you. It was mean, dense jungle where you could see very little, only hear sounds all around you and start to worry about what they were.

But worst of all, the brief stretches of flat terrain between the hills were littered with swamps. These ensured wet feet that were vulnerable to injury. My trail shoe was already hurting the ball of my foot and the constant tripping compounded the impact. I developed a gash in my foot that would later become big enough to insert a 50-pence piece into.

## SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

The jungle was horrible, but I loved it. Essentially, the race was what everybody was looking for – a genuine up-close and personal jungle experience. Even so, I was suffering badly, uncharacteristically for me so early in a stage race. I was absolutely dehydrated and my failure to consume salt tablets in such a humid environment was proving disastrous. The human body requires salt as well as water to regulate safe body fluid levels.

As we reached the beach finish, I had an almost uncontrollable urge to urinate. I had finished the stage in ninth spot, four hours and 35 minutes after the



Trip hazard: Donovan found that conditions underfoot were testing to say the least

start of the 10-mile run, but I was definitely showing symptoms of severe fluid loss. After peeing what looked like blood, I set up my hammock over a legion of beach ants. I spent the rest of the day rehydrating but suffering a constant headache.

Everyone else was suffering too. Ten per cent of the race field was out at the end of day two (24.5K) and 15 per cent by day 3 (31.1K). After time penalties were calculated, I had actually moved up to seventh overall by the end of the third day but I was still fighting a losing battle with dehydration from the first stage.

monkeys. While those who had reached the finish were told they were harmless primates, several runners still out on the course assumed the noise came from aggressive wild pigs. A group of them banded together and advanced slowly forward, knives in hand, expecting at any moment to be charged. Seeing the relief on their faces at the finish, and hearing their tales of terror, had some very tired participants crying with laughter.

The jungle finished me off completely on the fourth stage (18.4K). From the outset, the best I could do was stagger unsteadily though the trees. Fortunately, I encountered my team-

mates early in the stage (I was running as a guest on the Irish Defence Forces team), and they, after witnessing me urinating blood, slowed down to assist me. They poured water over my head,

as I couldn't drink it without being sick. At the finish, I was diagnosed with the early stages of acute renal failure and placed on a couple of drips. After many litres of liquids, race doctor Ed Archer was happy with my improvement, but there was no question of continuing.

The next stage at 87K was the big one, and on the best running terrain. The virtually unknown British competitor Jamie Lowe, a five-year army veteran, had pulled out in front to win the race. Rebecca Hampton, also from the UK, won the women's title.

Ultimately, this race is a must-do event, and, despite my own troubles, any ultra athlete worth his or her salt shouldn't back away from it.

The 2007 Jungle Marathon takes place from 5 to 14 October. Entry cost is £1,600. For further details see [www.junglemarathon.com](http://www.junglemarathon.com).

*“One competitor placed his hand on a tree branch, only to be stung by a scorpion”*

## GET READY FOR THE JUNGLE

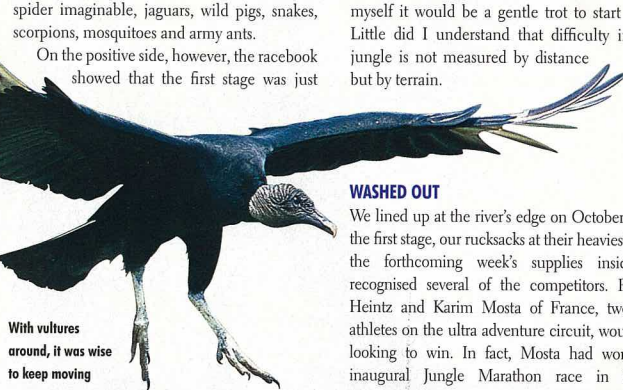
Essential tips for racing in one of the most inhospitable environments on earth

- Extremely good general fitness is vital. The organisers suggest a training schedule of at least 80-90K per week.
- Waterproof everything. There are water crossings and you can expect showers each day. It is very hard to dry anything in the jungle once it is wet. Take a light change of clothes to sleep in and make sure they stay dry with a double layer of plastic bags.

• Humidity is a big factor. Competitors from Britain usually simply have to acclimatise once they are in the tropics, although people have been known to train on a treadmill in the warmth of their attic.

• Your rucksack should fit snugly to your back so that it doesn't get snagged in the trees. Similarly, water bottles could be a better option than a Camelbak as the tube may get caught. Get used to running with bottles.

• Don't forget your mosquito repellent! Also, practise correctly hanging your hammock and mosquito net so that no insects can sneak in.



With vultures around, it was wise to keep moving

## WASHED OUT

We lined up at the river's edge on October 9 for the first stage, our rucksacks at their heaviest with the forthcoming week's supplies inside. I recognised several of the competitors. Renee Heintz and Karim Mosta of France, two top athletes on the ultra adventure circuit, would be looking to win. In fact, Mosta had won the inaugural Jungle Marathon race in 2003.

