

PURA VIDA COSTA RICA!  
THE 2005 COASTAL CHALLENGE  
A 7-DAY 250K RACE

“Take on the distance...Take on the elements...Take on the challenge.”

From January 16-23, 2005 I participated in (and completed!) the first Coastal Challenge along the Pacific coastline of Costa Rica. 77 runners began the 7 day event, including 63 individuals and three teams. Only 10% failed to finish all the stages, because of blisters and heat-related problems. The event drew participants from all over the World, as far as South Africa, primarily adventure and ultra runners. We averaged 20+ miles per day over jungle trail, beaches, reefs, farm roads and including many river crossings and nine zip lines through the trees. Our talisman was a sphere symbol seeking favor with the elements.

The Challenge kicked off with a Costa Rican buffet in the beach resort of Tamarindo, complete with a bullfight, Tico (Costa Rican) cowboys, and a festival of dance and music. We then camped for the night on a secluded surfer oasis called Los Monos Locos (“the crazy monkeys”). Day One’s race (18.8 miles) took off to the beat of bongos from Marbella Beach on the northern Pacific coast. Still recovering from a broken ankle, I found this section very difficult. The terrain was mixed and included many kilometers of crowned sandy beaches and reefs to climb over. We “coasteered” (beach and reef running) at least 10 kilometers that day and ran to Garza where we camped in a school yard. That night the winds howled as our only day with cloud cover was blown out to sea. From here on we would have hot sun and humid days in the 90’s. The winds at Garza kept many runners awake, hanging onto tents and gear until our second day’s wakeup call at 4:30 am.

Day Two took us from Garza to the gorgeous beaches of San Miguel where we camped close to shore and slept to the sounds of the Pacific surf. Most days I fell asleep listening to the sea and awoke to a chorus of songbirds. Day Two included more than 31 miles of hilly running on gravel roads and beach. My ankle did well this day because of the terra firma of the gravel roads, and having switched from my aircast to an ace wrap. The beach sections were flat and firm. One of the aid stations was located in the small mountain town of Islita where many of the houses are brightly painted by a Dutch painter, including some with mirrors set in murals. The winds from the night before kept up for part of the day and rocked the canopies of trees we ran under, whipping up clouds of dust from the dry gravel roads.

Each night we were treated to great Costa Rican food, plenty of fresh vegetables, fruits and fish, as well as a slide show of the day’s events and some kind of local talent. Few of us stayed up past dinner and, on Day Two, sleep was quick, deep and rewarding. Each day we spotted colorful birds, butterflies, iguanas and monkeys. The howler monkeys growl loudly and can be a frightening sound in the jungle if you are not prepared for it. Some runners wore ear plugs in order to sleep amidst the growling. Costa Rica boasts four species of monkey, the white-faced capuchin, the spider monkey, the squirrel monkey and the endangered howler (called “congo”).

Day Three proved to be our most diverse of days. We experienced a variety of travel modes and were amongst a myriad of Costa Rican creatures. Life is everywhere in this remarkable country. The Day 3 run started near San Francisco de Coyote at 5:30 am. Of the 26.4 miles, 50% was on beach and 50% on gravel and dirt roads. When I say roads, these are not dirt roads like we have in Vermont. They are more narrow and extremely rough, with large loose rocks, huge potholes, ruts and crowns, more like a logging trail or poor 4WD road, and very dusty. For the first half of the day, we ran the beach. We were rafted

across the Bongo River which was infested with crocodiles and sharks and had a dangerous current and “strainer.” Nearing Santa Theresa and Mal Pais, I walked on the very crowded beach for at least half an hour barefoot, feeling the sand massage my feet and the waves and salt water soothe them. We came off the beach at Mal Pais, a surfer paradise, and headed into the hills. We climbed a steep “concrete hill” to cross over the ridge of mountains that separated us from our evening destination of Montezuma. Concrete tracks had been set to enable residents to get to their mountaintop homes. We ran through rolling hills and farmland, with green fields as far as the eye could see, and views all the way to the Pacific Ocean to the west and the Caribbean to the east. We had altitude gains to over 3,000 feet. (The Costa Rican volcanos soar to over 11,000' and some remain active.) We finished Day 3 running at Las Delicias on the edge of the Montezuma canopy from where we took nine zip lines through the tree canopy down to the shore at Cobano, a temporary camp. Then we were to board small boats called Zodiaks which were to ferry us all out to the San Lucas Ferry. The San Lucas Ferry, large enough to carry vehicles and 700 passengers, was anchored about ½ mile off shore waiting to take us across the Golfo Dulce (Dulce Gulf) while we slept. It would be an 11 hour ferry ride to our morning departure from Punta Dominical, another beach point along the Pacific coastline. But Mother Nature had other plans.

My friend Jane and I, and eight other runners, walked to the beach to catch the first boat. It was dark and we noticed high seas. The boat nearly capsized coming to shore and then grounded and the engine died. The captain managed to start the engine about 10 minutes later and we all jumped into the boat and headed towards the ferry. No one was asked if they could swim. No life jackets were on board and the vessel had no running lights. We runners turned on our headlamps and prayed. As the boat neared the ferry the seas had eight foot swells with waves crashing over the ferry's bow. We were wet and uneasy. The ferry captain tossed a metal ladder over the side of the ferry, about 8 feet up to a door. Our captain tried to approach the ferry close enough for us to spring onto the ladder. The sea was too wild. Amazingly, his assistant dove into the water and swam to the ferry for a conference. It was all the captain could do to keep our boat afloat. It was like the perfect storm. Waves would raise us into the air and then drop us hard and flat. Finally the assistant swam back to our boat and we returned to shore to come up with an alternative plan. A bus was hired and we were bussed to a ferry dock in Paquera. We were not able to board the ferry until after midnight. It took the ferry that long to travel against the waves and currents to reach us. Our night on the ferry was momentous as the seas tossed and turned us. Sleep was fleeting.

Day 4 was to start with small boats taking us to shore at Punta Dominical where we would start our run. This plan had to be beached as well and the ferry went ashore at Quepos instead. Because a special permit was needed to access the ferry dock we were not ashore until noon. By the time we cleared the ferry, ate a much needed lunch and were bussed to Dominical, it was too late to complete that day's scheduled run of 12 miles (a rest day). We then continued on the bus to the northern end of Ventanas Beach and ran the length of the beach (7K) to our campground. It was on this day that we determined that the mileage was underestimated as it took two hours to walk this section of beach. We began calling the mileage “Rodrigo kilometers” or “RK's” after the course designer. At our camp at Playa Ventanas I experienced my first night of bites, hundreds of them, from sand fleas and no see'ums resistant to Deet and every other chemical I tried.

Day 5 consisted of 23.1 miles, “or so,” of gravel/dirt road, mud road, mountain trail and farmland. The mountain trail was our first venture into thick jungle. Just about every runner got lost on this day, including the frontrunners early in the race. When the first four men and first woman caught up, I was awed by their speed and dexterity through the jungle trails where I was practically crawling. This was a really tough day for my ankle and I resorted to lots of “Vitamin I” (Ibuprofen). The jungle trail had

started outside of Coronado and went straight up, steep, muddy, thick, humid and hot. The trail climbed 900 meters (about 2700') in the first half hour. The jungle is a very loud place, full of activity. It was exciting to know I was in the midst of all this animal and insect life, that they were watching me, and I might never see them. Later this day I observed thousands of leafcutter ants carrying their harvest to their dens. They line up and follow each other for incredible distances, even make trails in the grasses where they regularly travel.

When we left the first section of jungle, we were on steep ridge road. I saw a crocodile in a creek in one of the hollows and wild orchids blooming along the sides of the trail. I met up with a Brit from New Orleans named Danny and we travelled together to the Las Nubes farm where we were directed to follow a cowpath until we crossed a river and then we would climb again. The cowpath we followed took us onto the wrong ridge and, from there, we could see the other runners winding their way up a different ridge. Taking the same route back was so far out of the way that we determined to head cross country until we reached a gully of no return. Luckily one of the runners spotted us and directed us to a point where we could work our way back onto the right trail, some 45 minutes later.

The remainder of Day 5 was primarily along the highest part of the Retinto Range, the highest in the area, with more incredible views as far as the Pacific and the Caribbean. Of course, then we had to run downhill to get back to the coastline where more boats awaited us. The downhill was rough, steep, excruciating to my ankle and much longer than estimated. Once down, we were shuttled into "fast" boats for a one hour trip from Sierpe to Drake's Bay, through inland waterway and into the ocean. En route the skies opened up and we were soaked to the skin and cold. We arrived at the campsite at Drake's Bay to drying conditions and some sun, set up camp and dined in a stick built clubhouse. While we were eating the skies opened up again and torrents of rain turned our path to the campsites into a waist high raging river. During a lull in the storm many of us grabbed our sleeping pads and spent the night on the floor of the clubhouse. In the morning my tent was a flat wet pancake as it had rained 5-6"! We packed up our wet things and climbed back into the fast boats to the Day 6 start at the San Pedrillo Ranger Station for Corcovado National Park. On the way we observed hump back whales along side our boat.

Day 6 was my favorite of all days. It was tough and long (28 miles) but amazingly beautiful, all jungle trail and beach, full of excitement and activity. We were on the Osa Peninsula in the Corcovado National Park, an area tough to reach and closed to the public except by permit. The beaches are unspoiled and remote. The jungle was alive and is the last region in the world where jaguar run free. One runner saw a jaguar track! It was hot and we had to cross many crocodile and shark infested rivers with the assistance of volunteer river runners and either a duckie, a rowboat or a motorboat. One crossing involved wading through waist high fresh water, as there were also many fresh water inlets coming from the interior. Until one of the Costa Ricans told me I would not be able to survive the bugs at night, I surmised that these beaches were perfect for being shipwrecked. All the resources you needed to survive were in reach with some creativity. The beaches are populated by thousands of crabs, snails and mussels. It was amazing! The crabs were scurrying around as if playing games of hide 'n seek. It was also another good beach for incredible shells. Overhead flew pairs of bright colored scarlet macaws and formations of pelicans. In the jungles the howler monkeys roared. We ended at Carate, a small village with an airstrip, and camped in a grassy area inhabited by thousands of pale grey spiders with blue eyes that got into everything. As we started to eat dinner, the skies opened up again and an estimated 2-3" of rain fell on this night. My tent survived. Thankfully it was warm so that being wet and soggy did not also mean being cold. By this time few runners had any dry shoes, socks or clothes left.

Day 7 was a loop from and back to Carate, estimated to be just 10K, but more like 8-10 miles. It

included a riverbed, then gravel road, and several kilometers on the beach running south to north. We chided that this opposite direction with the beach crown to our right would balance us after six days of running south. When we finished the runners were loaded into cattle cars. The busses had not been able to get through because of the rains. We rode like cattle or refugees for two hours, then loaded the busses and returned to Playa Ventanas for the finish celebration. Except for more bug bites, it was a wonderful venue. Playa Ventanas has rock formations that pass through from the beach to the sea, which you can wander through when the tides are right. Ventanas is Spanish for windows, Playa for beach, therefore the "Beach of the Windows."

Our last night we feasted with beer and cerviche, a Costa Rican fish specialty, and lots of music. The awards ceremony took place on the beach with torches and more beer and dancing. The venue offered good showers, flat tent sites and an opportunity to reflect on the days of running and experiencing Costa Rica. I have never experienced a country of so much beauty, resources and people of wonderful spirit. I learned more about staying in the moment and enabling myself to take in every morsel of the experience around me. Even when my ankle hurt, or I felt hot, hungry, thirsty or tired, I could look around and see, smell and marvel at what was around me. The country is beautiful. It is clean. It has amazing fruits, vegetables, fish, free range chicken, fresh eggs. It is colorful in its flora, its people, its personality. It has music, dance and a sense of time, Tico Time, which transcends what we are and have become in America. Costa Rica is rich, but not monetarily or by hierarchy. It is rich in character and substance. It is known as the country that contains "no artificial ingredients." Costa Rica has a 96% literacy rate, 6% unemployment and no Army. It takes care of its sick and its poor, including the many healthy and mellow domestic dogs which are an everyday part of its culture.

The overall race winners were awarded prize money at our celebration feast. The top three women were Beverly Anderson-Abbs (40) of California, Stefanie Jackenthal (38) of New York and Ann Hall (37) of California. The top men were Charles Bedley (31) of Canada, Juan Carlos of Costa Rica and Charlie Engle (42) of North Carolina. The oldest male competitor, Jay Norman (66) of Texas completed all but two stages, having struggled with terrible blisters. My friend Jane Kellogg (57) of New Hampshire was the oldest female and completed all the stages. The youngest competitor, Rory Fuerst (20) of California, also completed the entire event. Everyone was excited to have a Costa Rican win money, and Juan Carlos was a gem of a person.

In the days before the race, Jane and I were able to visit the mountain region of Monteverde, run in the Santa Elena Rain Forest and see the Arenal Volcano. We drove the roads of Costa Rica which are truly the worst, and very slow, but one reason why Costa Rica has preserved its simple ways of life and beauty. The Pan American Highway is no wider than Vermont Route 100 and without shoulders, with enormous potholes that will eat your vehicle. One native chimed that the U.S. Highway transportation system should be deemed the 8<sup>th</sup> Great Wonder of the World. Imagine that, when all Americans do is complain about our roads.

After the event, Jane, our new friend Kim and I returned to the beach town of Mal Pais for some respite under a full moon and for time with the locals. The surf in Mal Pais is some of the best in the world. We spent time watching surfers catch great waves. The Pacific waters there are as warm as a bathtub. We ditched our plans to return to the volcano region and to visit the Caribbean side on this visit. We needed a rest. Also, the Caribbean side had been struck by major rains and flooding within the past two weeks and many bridges and roads were out. After the event and our quiet time in Mal Pais, returning home was bittersweet. Costa Rica lives on in my heart and soul as an eternal blessing when confronted with our American realities. I could move to Costa Rica in a New York minute with the right

offer. I encourage each of you to visit and revisit the country before it is fully discovered and spoiled.  
Pura Vida!

Dot Helling, February 3, 2005