

THE JUNGLE MARATHON 2004

Chris Howarth



When you hear or read the name of this race you could be forgiven for thinking it is a single marathon (26.2 miles) through the jungle. I recall first hearing of this race and thinking exactly that. I was, of course, mistaken. I discovered after further investigation that the jungle marathon was in fact a self – sufficient foot race covering 200km in 6 stages over 7 days. Somewhat misleading name I thought, but my motivation to compete in the event was somehow even greater now I knew the full extent of the challenge.

The jungle marathon took place between the 14th and 26th September. A couple of days travelling, which culminated in a 9 hour boat trip down the Amazon river to base camp wasn't ideal preparation, but it was hugely beneficial to have a days rest at base camp on the 17th before beginning the race on the 18th. The boat trip provided a fantastic opportunity to view the dense jungle of the Amazon from a far and try to imagine the terrain and conditions that would face us once in the jungle. Many runners didn't miss the opportunity to point out that if we travel 9 hours down the river in one direction then we must be running all the way back in the opposite direction!! A sobering thought for all us runners sitting on the boat in nervous anticipation of the challenge ahead. As the boat journey went on the sun began to set and the stars and moon came out. Now travelling in the dark with only torches on the boat providing light I recall watching a thunderstorm in the distance that went on for sometime. Except this didn't appear as a typical thunderstorm, the European kind I guess you could say! A huge cloud formation that stretched high into the sky appeared to sit on top of the water of the Amazon. Within this formation that was undoubtedly miles in diameter were bright orange flashes every few seconds that lit up the enormous cloud. These were combined with forks of lighting every few minutes that ripped from one corner of the formation to the other. It felt as if we were heading straight towards the storm and I was hugely relieved to finally see the lights of base camp that sat on the shores of the river. That storm for many of us provided a sharp reminder of the challenging tropical environment that we were in and somehow added a sense of enormity to the task of completing the race. As if it was needed!!

Once at base camp each runner found a hammock and organised their equipment. After having some food it was time to try out the hammock. I wasn't anticipating a good night's sleep but it was going to be hammocks for

the whole week so I'd better get used to it. It was about 7.00 in the evening but early to bed was also going to be a feature of the week. After the long boat trip and seeing the vast dense jungle pass by me and the thunderstorm in the evening I remember feeling hugely insignificant in comparison to the jungle and the environment I was in. I thought, I am going to be in it for the next 7 days covering 200km, this could be tough!!

The following day, the 17th, was a rest day at base camp. Base camp consisted of a number of large huts, and was positioned on the beach looking out across the Amazon River with the dense jungle as the backdrop. The size of the river made it feel as if we were on the sea as you could not see the other side. Runners relaxed and chatted, ate food, organised equipment and generally prepared for the start of the race the following day. It was somewhat amusing at meal times as all of us runners crammed in as much food as possible (bit of carboloading!). We knew come tomorrow it was self-sufficient all the way for the race. This meant undoubtedly a certain amount of negative calorie deficit given the expenditure each day and not particularly nice tasting foods, be it in energy bar, dried meal or powder form. Along with enough food for the week competitors had to carry basic medical kit, the clothes they wanted and some mandatory pieces of equipment such as a compass, knife, head torch and emergency hammock. Each competitor also carried 2.5 litres of water carrying capacity. Water was provided at checkpoints approximately every 6 – 10km along the route.

No one knew exactly what the race had in store for us. The jungle was an alien environment and I felt I had best just try to tackle each part of it as it came. As evening came runners discussed and speculated about what the next 7 days may provide. The general feeling was to try and break down each days distance into the distances between checkpoints, this way each day and the total distance seemed more manageable and confidence could be raised. I felt confident in my ability and strength to complete the race but inevitably I was nervous and somewhat fearful perhaps, as we all were as we were about to race through an unknown environment. Whatever the situation, everyone fears the unknown. The organisers had informed us that we would be covering jungle trails, swamp, sandy beaches, plantation tracks and swimming at times. Oh, and it wouldn't be flat!! That's always nice to hear I thought! I have to admit I always thought the jungle was a flat place, how wrong I was! Despite this information, as runners we didn't actually know what this would be like, we could try to imagine but that was all. This unknown made it exciting and even more challenging but of course we were all nervous as we lay in our hammocks and tried to get some sleep.

The race began on the 18th. An early 6am start as it was to be everyday of the race. Every runner did a final equipment check and made their way to the start line. I picked up my rucksack and put it on, it felt heavy but I just kept telling myself that each day it will become lighter as food is eaten. 75 competitors of various nationalities lined up at the start wishing each other good luck. Along with us UK runners were runners from America, Taiwan, Korea, Sweden, Germany, Israel, Ireland, Canada, New Zealand, Italy, Spain, South Africa, Denmark, France and of course Brazil. From the race briefing given prior to the start we knew this day was 15km in length (the shortest stage) but it was to be very hilly!! Everyone was nervously moving on the start line then the gun went and it felt like the start of any race except this wasn't a 10k or half-marathon, we had a total of 200km ahead of us and today was the first 15km. Within 500m we hit a 30m river crossing requiring us to swim. As it was only short everyone splashed and flapped their way across, no Ian Thorpes amongst us runners!! We entered the jungle and immediately were confronted by a steep climb. My first experience of the jungle was upon me so quickly I didn't really have time to take it in, all I could think about was getting up the hill in front of me and staying with the runners who were around me. As I was working up the climb it became obvious that these hills were going to be extremely tough because they weren't just very steep, they incorporated wet mud and loose clay under foot, uneven ground, cambers, and roots and vines across the trail almost every step. I reached the top of this first climb and was aware I was working hard. The descent provided little recovery. With the same difficult conditions as on the ascents technically it was very difficult. I soon realised the best and really the only technique to use, to prevent a fall and potential serious injury, was to run, or shuffle is perhaps a more appropriate description, between trees and hang on to the tree to pull back and slow down before letting go and letting gravity send me hurtling towards the next tree. In the valleys between each ascent and descent was swamp. I had never encountered swamp before and I now never want to again. It was the toughest terrain I have ever tried to run through. In fact running was virtually impossible at times!! To successfully navigate the swamps it was a case of carefully picking your footsteps and trying to find areas that looked solid to step on and progress forward. If you stepped on a 'wrong' part then the inevitable happened and you would plunge almost instantly into the swamp to your waist. I have never been so thankful for having trees all around me that I could hold on to in order to pull myself out. On the first few occasions this occurred I attempted to haul myself out very quickly only to almost lose my shoe off my foot as the swamp seemed intent on gobbling it up. I soon realised if I wanted to complete this race I better pull myself out slowly as hopping the 200km was clearly not an option! This was

essentially the pattern of the rest of the stage. We were up and down on these tough ascents and descents with heavy swamp in between for almost the full 15km. At times going up the climbs I was working seriously hard and I was acutely aware of the heavy weight on my back. Eventually the trail became flatter and the pace could be increased. We finished this first stage on the beach and it was a good feeling to come out of the jungle onto white sand and cross the finish line in 24th place. One stage down five to go that was a good thought, 15km done 185km to go, that was a bad thought!!

Once I had finished this first stage I established a routine which I would follow after each stage for the rest of the week. I took on water as soon as I finished, then went into the river to wash myself and my clothes. It felt good lying in the water after a long hot stage! I then put my hammock up between two trees and hung my clothes to dry. I thought with the heat my clothes would dry quickly but I soon realised with the high humidity and moisture in the air that items weren't drying so I was putting on wet running gear the next morning. I then just lay in my hammock for the rest of the day taking on water and eating my food 'rations' for that day, chatting to other runners and trying to rest. Being constantly hot and sweating made it difficult to try and relax and sleep but everyone soon became used to it. As night fell I organised my equipment for the next day and ate my evening dried meal, it tasted surprisingly good, I was pretty happy with it!

As I lay in my hammock and reflected on this first stage I realised that all the training I had done, all the miles logged on the hilly South Downs with the rucksack on my back and the time spent in the environmental chamber at Chelsea School was without doubt crucial to successfully completing the race, but I could tell even from the first day the nature of the jungle with its terrain, climatic conditions, topography, animals and plants meant I still was going to come up short in my preparation and this race really was going to test me to my limit. I guess I am trying to say you can't completely prepare for the jungle unless you can train in the jungle. It presents so many different and varied challenges it is like no other environment I have experienced and like I was reliably informed by the organisers before the race, it really is one of the toughest environments in the world. One of the clearest examples of this was the climate. Temperatures averaged about 35°C with a humidity of 80-90%. This combination of high heat and humidity is so difficult and oppressive as the inevitable high levels of sweat produced cannot evaporate to cool the runner down due to the high level of moisture already in the air.

On the 19th, 20th and 21st we completed stages 2, 3 and 4, covering distances of 24km, 27km and 21km respectively. Each stage challenged and tested each runner every step of the way. These stages were flatter than the first day but steep climbs, however, remained a constant feature of the terrain through the jungle. Furthermore, from these stages I discovered that the jungle didn't just contain a single type terrain on the trails that we were running. We were presented with ever changing conditions. At times the trails were comparable to the forests of England in autumn with fallen brown leaves covering the path and thick dark trees either side. In fact many times I found myself imagining I was back home in Friston forest on a training run, that helped me along!! Then we would find ourselves on wet, boggy, swampy trails that sapped the energy from the legs. Then, in almost direct contrast to the wet conditions we would be confronted by areas of jungle called thicket. These areas were very dry, with loose straw like trails under foot and very sharp plants lining narrow paths. Cuts were frequent and painful as the path narrowed and we ascended and descended through some steep climbs. I still have the scars on my arms from my close encounters with certain plants!! On the occasions when we came out the jungle we were running on open plantation trails which were made of loose sand. On these paths the jungle canopy no longer provided shade from the sun, so the direct sunlight would beat down on us as we struggled to find footing on the loose sand. When we were on these plantation trails the struggle on the sand was lessened by the fantastic experience of passing through indigenous villages and communities and receiving the support of the local people. As a Westerner who lives in a modern world that seems to be getting smaller and smaller through new technology, the experience was a sharp reminder of the massive contrasts in culture and way of life that exist in the world, and suddenly the world seemed like a very big place still!! The terrain described that existed throughout the stages was, of course, supplemented by consistent cambers, fallen trees to climb over or scramble under, vines and roots every step of the way and small river crossings throughout! I must just add that if I had a pound for every time I was tripped up by a root or vine that didn't appear to be there until it was round my foot then I would have returned from Brazil a millionaire! A significant factor in the development of fatigue during this race was undoubtedly the mental strain. Not only was it crucial to stay mentally positive, determined and motivated to push through hard times on each stage, but it was imperative to remain focused and concentrated on the track in front of you at all times, in order to prevent becoming lost and to try to avoid falling/tripping on the many natural obstacles along the trails that could cause injury. I found many times a moment's lapse in concentration and a root, vine or stump would seem to appear from nowhere and catch hold of my foot.

My usual end of stage routine was followed after each of these stages and it was always a good feeling to lie in my hammock and rest in the shade, reflecting on the day's stage and the distance left to complete. Come the end of the third stage, however, I had added two more parts to my 'routine'. One good, one bad!! I started to receive some e-mails from friends and family back home, so I would lie in my hammock reading them over and over. It was great to read peoples support and encouragement. Thanks Lawrence and Simon, much appreciated! This was, of course, the good addition. The bad, was the fact that by now I had developed serious cuts around my ankles. These were caused by constant running on a camber with wet feet from the rivers and swamps thus making my trainers dig into my ankles, combined with my feet on occasions becoming tangled with sharp sticks and vines. I was pleased however, with the fact that I had developed no blisters and was showing no signs of doing so. It was just the bad cuts!! So, consequently I was now strapping my ankles and feet heavily with tape and plasters to protect the cuts for the next stage. I felt I would be ok, but after applying my strapping and retiring to my hammock to reflect on stage 4, I knew the next day was stage 5 and this meant 86km non-stop day and night! In terms of the race, stage 5 was undoubtedly the crucial one. For me that distance non-stop was unknown territory both physically and mentally, but I was getting stronger with each day and finishing in higher positions than I ever anticipated before the start of the race, so this gave me great confidence and determination for the long stage. I was currently in 17th overall after 4 stages and I felt with a strong result on stage 5 I could move in to the top ten. As I tried to get some sleep that night I was actually looking forward to the stage and felt prepared. I knew it would be hard but I felt ready.

Stage 5 was immensely challenging and demanding both physically and mentally, but, without question, hugely rewarding in many ways.

The race briefing informed us that the stage was divided up into two sections. The first 44km would be in the jungle on the trails and it would be much like the first day in terms of hills!! At the time I had to check with a fellow runner that I had heard that right. I was starting to become uneasy! The next 42km after the jungle would be on open plantation tracks, jungle roads and beach. I thought, loads of loose sand for 42km, great! It was a 4.30am start, the earliest we had. We woke up at about 3.30am on the 22nd with the stars and moon still bright in the sky. The hour flew by with organising equipment and running gear. Soon we were standing on the banks of the river waiting to go in almost complete darkness bar a view torches. Yes, just like stage 4 the day before we began with a 200m river crossing. Rope was extended across the river for us to hold onto to pull ourselves across, but this proved totally ineffective as it was not tight enough and the sheer number of runners holding onto the rope meant it was pushed under, so if you were holding the rope you too were dragged under. This meant we were left trying to find the best swimming technique whilst the rucksack was intent on pushing the head under water. I was fighting many times to keep my head above the water and there were some pretty scaring moments for all the runners I think. Eventually I found a technique of swimming on my side that worked and I struggled and fought my way across. I remember thinking as I was breathing hard and fighting my way across the river in almost complete darkness, only 86km to go when you get out of this water! It was the first and only time that I briefly questioned what I was doing in this race and why. However, I very quickly erased that thought and reminded myself of why I was doing it and how determined and motivated I was to finish. Once we exited the water we checked our equipment and it was into the running, very steady and controlled I kept on telling myself, there was a long way to go!! By this stage in the race I had built up a friendship with a guy called Ray from Canada who was a similar pace to me and we had agreed to run the stage (5) together and pull each other through. Working with someone on the stage was to prove invaluable. I found Ray once out of the water and we set off. Joining me and Ray were also two guys from Italy and Spain called Axel and Sergio respectively. I remember smiling because it was like the start of a joke, "there was an Englishman, Canadian, Italian and Spaniard running through the jungle.....".

As time passed the sun began to come up and the temperature and humidity rose. For 44km the four of us worked together, taking turns at the front and pushing the pace along. I must say Ray did the bulk of the work in this first 44km and I am ever grateful to him for that. We passed through all the different types of jungle trail, with the terrain ever changing as we pushed on. After about 3 hours of running we felt strong and were moving at a good pace, however, we were about to experience the wildlife of the jungle! The four of us were going up a gradual climb with Ray leading the way. Suddenly Ray began shouting in pain and sprinting up the hill. I could hear him shouting wasps! wasps! And before I could respond I saw a black wasp maybe two inches long on my thumb, I pushed it off but not before it had embedded its sting sending a throbbing pain through my hand. At this point the rest of us began charging up the hill behind Ray, but we were in their nest and it was no use we couldn't outrun them. Each of us suffered about 5 or 6 stings to various parts of our body before we reached the top of the hill and sprinted down the other side out of the nest. I thought after, it is amazing what adrenaline

does, because we all sprinted up and down the long steep climb away from the wasps without tiring or slowing. I came out of the 'encounter' with stings to my thumb, arm, legs, bum and worst of all to the side of my head! It was this sting to my head which started to become a real problem. It was throbbing with pain and the longer I went on the worse it was becoming and we were about 2 hours from the next checkpoint. I began to feel if the pain didn't subside eventually it could end my entire race, I really was struggling. I found applying pressure to the area with my fingers helped a bit so I did this for the next 2 hours whilst I tried to stay with the other guys. Eventually we reached the checkpoint and cream was applied to the area and I took some painkillers. After leaving the checkpoint within about an hour the pain began to reduce until eventually it no longer bothered me. The whole 'wasp experience' was something I would never wish on anybody and would never want to go through again. I'm so glad we don't have that species here in Britain!

It wasn't long before we truly realised how tough this stage was going to be. We hit a section that lasted maybe 10-12km in which we were consistently climbing the steepest hills I have ever experienced. For long sections of the climbs we were on a camber and the ground underfoot was loose and muddy. By this time we had completed maybe 30km and I was aware of how hard I was working, with my breathing heavy and my legs burning. Although now much lighter than the first day the rucksack on my back started to feel heavy and pull on my shoulders. We were all feeling pain working up the climbs. With Ray at the front leading the way we eventually reached the top, and were on a type of plateau in the jungle where the trees cleared so you could look out across the jungle canopy. It was a truly spectacular sight. I felt I was standing on top of the jungle. For me it was like a reward for the severe climb and hard work I had just put in for almost 3 hours. Seeing that sight it really did feel worth the effort. However, as soon as we came off the climb we entered a swamp area, not much recovery!! This swamp lasted the rest of the distance to checkpoint 4 where we stopped for a short while. We had another 10km to go before we hit checkpoint 5 and we were out of the jungle. We all felt ok and pushed on along flatter trails towards checkpoint 5. The distance to checkpoint 5 took us out of the jungle on to wide sandy roads with jungle either side. This meant the midday sun beat down on us and water intake increased significantly. Along these sandy roads with the hot sun and almost 44km completed myself and Ray began to suffer, with the fatigue gradually increasing. Axel and Sergio still felt strong and pushed on leaving Ray and I. I felt for Ray as he had done a lot of work at the front of the group and now he was probably paying for it. Ray and I talked to each other and pulled each other along towards checkpoint 5. We were trying to break the distance down into sections and overcome the mental challenge of the stage. We reached checkpoint 5 and we were both in a bad way, but I was determined not to stop or even to rest, I thought even if I have to crawl I am going to carry on and complete the stage within the time allowed. I was unsure about why I felt so bad, but I did and that was the reality that I had to put up with! I tried to put out my mind the fatigue in my legs, the throbbing in my feet and shoulders and the cuts around my ankles. I took a couple of minutes to mentally recuperate and convince myself that the next 42km were achievable and I was going to complete the stage, then we left checkpoint 5.

What exactly happened within 4-5km after the checkpoint I still don't know to this day! The ingestion of Ray's painkillers no doubt contributed, but whatever happened, it was a defining moment in the stage for me. Gradually we both started to feel strong again and the fatigue in the legs was wearing away rather than increasing, my feet became numb to the pain and I could apply large amounts of pressure through them again. We both felt alive and strong again and could increase the pace and push on. We couldn't believe how we felt compared to an hour or so ago and we were now trying to cover as much of the distance as we could whilst we felt strong again. We felt the pain was no doubt going to return!! Now out on open sandy plantation tracks and roads we pressed on, mentally I also felt good. It was a relief to be out on the open tracks where you could run more freely despite the sand and not have to watch your step every second like in the dense jungle. By this time the sun was on its way down so despite being out in the open, water intake was less than before and the heat stress was reduced. As it transpired this was very lucky as checkpoint 6 for some reason was non-existent, which meant no water!! Only a few locals provided us with a small amount of water which Ray and I shared between us. We now knew we had to be conservative with our water intake and ration it between us correctly as we had about 15km to go along hilly tracks with minimal water before checkpoint 7. We pressed on and soon came to a steep climb up a rocky, sandy trail. The climb went on for some 5-6km and I could feel I was beginning to suffer again. By this time the sun was setting and the temperature was dropping, this was a big relief!! As I was working up the hill I became aware that it suddenly felt quite dark but I could see strong beams of orange light shining out at the top of the climb. I was getting closer and closer to these beams until I eventually came over the top of the hill and was confronted by a truly memorable sight, a priceless moment! I was on a high plain with jungle either side of me but in front of me it was clear of jungle and I could look across into the distance where I could see four jungle canopies one behind another, each one fading away with the mist rolling off the top. Behind these canopies on the horizon the sun was setting and the first few stars were visible. I

felt truly humbled and honoured to be in that jungle at that point and I was spurred on with that image held in my mind.

Ray and I kept each other going and we felt we couldn't be far from checkpoint 7. Another dose of painkillers!! I still felt strong and still couldn't believe how good I felt compared to at checkpoint 5. I was now another 15km or so along and I felt much better than before and was maintaining a good pace. By now it was pitch black dark, and in the jungle it really is dark!! My headlamp lit the path about 3m in front of us and we pushed along the sandy roads waiting for any sign of checkpoint 7. By now we were out of water, in fact we had been out of water for sometime! Checkpoint 7 finally arrived, and after over 20km between checkpoint 5 and 7 with minimal water we were seriously happy to have made it. At the checkpoint we saw Axel who had decided to stop for a while as he was too tired and was suffering from bad blisters. Ray was also by now experiencing severe pain with blisters, but we only had about 17km to go now until the finish and I was so determined to push on. I really felt strong, in fact I couldn't believe how good I felt, I couldn't really understand why but I was happy about it!! I was spurred on by the thought of only 17km to go after we had already completed 69km. Just after leaving the checkpoint I was given a sharp reminder of where exactly I was as I caught two large tarantulas in my headlamp sitting on the trail in front of me. As I tried to slowly manoeuvre my way around them they scurried away in to the jungle. It's not the South Downs I thought!!

For 7km or so we pushed on along a sandy trail that ran parallel to the beach, I could hear the noise of the Amazon River lapping on the shore. Every so often the path would drop down on to the beach and we would be running along the shore of the river, trying to find the hard compact sand! I could see Ray was beginning to struggle with his blisters and we talked and he said I could go on and he would be ok. So I pushed on alone and I felt I must be close to the finish. I arrived at a river crossing and I remembered being told that after a 40m river crossing there would be about 10km to go. By this point I had developed some serious areas of rubbing and when I entered the water the stinging was intense making me shout out in pain all the way across the river. I was later told that one of the support crew had come running down with a machete because he thought someone had been attacked by a caiman or piranhas!! Once on the other side of the river I hit a wide open sandy trail with jungle either side of me. Light sticks lit the way all along and I knew it must be the track that led to the finish. With this in mind I pushed on and still felt strong, I looked at my watch and I had been going for about 17 hours. I estimated I would arrive at the finish by about 10.30pm. Going along the trails I felt like I was in a cartoon! As whenever I looked to my left or right into the jungle I would see the yellow eyes of animals shining out. This really made me pick up the pace and stay focused on the track ahead of me! So I guess it was a good thing!! I caught up with and overtook four Brazilian runners on this final trail which made me feel really good and I thought I must be in quite a good position and hopefully I can move up a few places overall after this stage. I could see each light stick in the distance and the trail seemed to go on forever. I kept looking at my watch and kept telling myself I must be close. My legs were feeling heavy now and it felt like the longest 10km! Then suddenly I could see in the distance the light sticks ended, what a feeling that was! I picked up the pace and approached the end of the light sticks where I found the path bent round to the left and more light sticks lit the way down some steep wooden steps on to the beach. I came out on to the beach and could see some orange light that looked like a fire about 1km in the distance. I knew it must be the finish and I found my last bit of energy to pick up the pace. As I approached the finish and I knew I had completed the stage I felt tremendous satisfaction, relief, happiness, sense of achievement, pride, a range of emotions! I crossed the finish line at 11.01pm in a total time of 18hours 6min in 7th position. I was physically and mentally shattered but I really did feel elated. Once I stopped the stress I had but my body through almost immediately started to hit me. After washing off in the river in the dark I put my hammock up (unsurprisingly made a really bad job of it) and went to sleep. I was to soon discover that my body had really suffered in that stage!!

The following day, the 23rd, was a rest day until the final stage (6) on the 24th. In the morning of this day the runners who didn't complete the stage (5) the night before and stayed at checkpoint 7 overnight came in. I was to realise on this rest day that my body was in a bad way after the long stage and I was going to suffer on the final day. But, I thought, I had done the hard work on stage 5 finishing in a good position so now I just needed to finish the race. I had developed a bad stomach and was unable to eat anything and also couldn't hold anything inside me. The toilet facilities, as basic as they were, were well used!! I tried to drink water but I could barely stand the taste of it by now and even that seemed to be making my stomach worse. Also, my ankles were in a serious mess with the cuts, but I got them strapped as usual and hoped they would hold out. My legs didn't feel too fatigued, however, a bit stiff but nothing more which I was pleased about. I didn't know what exactly brought on my bad stomach, but I assumed it was a bug from something and/or the physical exertion of the long stage. Come the evening of the rest day I was a bit worried as I knew the final day was completely on the beach, out in

the direct sun. I hadn't eaten anything or drunk very much because of my stomach and I was losing fluid all the time when I went to the toilet. So the potential for serious dehydration was starting to play on my mind, along with the fact that I would probably have no energy from not eating and would my ankles hold out?!! I wasn't looking forward to the final stage tomorrow! The consolation, however, was of course, that it was the final stage and I just had to finish.

The final day, the 24th, each runner organised their equipment and lined up on the start line for the final 24km of the 200km. I became aware of how much lighter my rucksack was compared to the early stages. My stomach and ankles were no better, didn't really expect them to be!! I felt tired and my legs felt somewhat fatigued as I was preparing in the morning. My opinion that the stage for me was going to be hell was further confirmed when I went to the toilet that morning. A good test for hydration status is to look at the colour of your urine. If it is clear then you are ok, euhydrated. In simple terms the darker it gets the more dehydrated you are. My urine that morning was virtually brown!!! Not a good sign I thought!!!! I thought to myself there is no escaping physiology! I am seriously dehydrated and I'm now going to exercise under heat stress for almost 5 hours. My body is not going to like this and it's going to let me know!! I knew then for sure that the stage was going to be hell for me and I wasn't disappointed!! We ran all the way along the shore of the Amazon River, I was so tempted at times just to plunge in and lie there to cool down. The stage was just one headland after another. We would go round a headland and hope it was the last one only to see another one to go round in the distance. I had no energy in my legs, I was taking on so much water and running out very quickly, my ankles were throbbing and my head felt like it was going to explode. But, I just kept thinking that once I finished the stage the race was finished and I would have completed it! Also, I would be able to eat some 'proper' food and drink something different from water!! I came round the last headland and saw the small town of Alter De Chao. The race finished in the town square. I found some energy to increase my pace and it was a special feeling to run the last few hundred yards across the sand knowing it was the last little bit of a 200km race that's covered a vast array of terrain, presented so many different challenges and special moments. We ran up some stone steps and in to the town square as the locals cheered us home. I crossed the finish line (the final finish line!!) and the emotion is very difficult to describe. The feeling of great satisfaction and achievement was truly overwhelming and I was so happy to have completed (survived) the race and performed far better than I ever thought I would or could! I was ecstatic with my overall finishing position of 14th in a total time of 42hours 4min.

We took a very short journey back to the hotel in Alter De Chao and it was the nicest feeling to get showered and lie on a bed. I looked in the mirror and only then realised how much weight I had lost. I guess the final two days didn't help where I ate virtually nothing!! However, there was lots of food available now I thought, and despite my stomach still feeling dodgy I knew I had to eat and the food would taste good. We travelled back in to the town and ate in one of the restaurants. Come the evening we travelled to a small island near the town where we had a party, with lots of food and drink and a traditional Brazilian dance show. Like all the runners I was so tired and now struggling to walk as my ankles were in a bad way, starting to swell up. Nevertheless, I had a great time and it was a brilliant way to end the event, with all the runners, medical team, support team and organisers together dancing, laughing and chatting about the race. The following day, the 25th, we set off from the hotel for home. We arrived back in England in the afternoon of the 26th, in a significantly worse condition than when we left!! But each of us had our own great memories and had achieved something special that will last forever.

I would recommend the jungle marathon to anyone who is looking for a serious challenge and wants to test themselves in a tough unforgiving environment, in a race which is physically and mentally demanding in so many ways. Give it go and enjoy. I certainly enjoyed it, even when it got tough and I thought I wasn't!! It's all part of the challenge and the fun!! And I would do it again (in a few years!!!).

Chris Howarth, 2004