

Rumble in the Jungle

The Jungle Marathon in the heart of the South American Amazon is regarded as one of the most extreme and unique races on Earth – and not a race for the faint-hearted. It is a tough 200km stage run through extreme terrain. **Ryan Sandes**, South Africa's own world class desert runner who won the Gobi Desert Race in China and the Sahara Desert Race in Egypt, proved he has what it takes to conquer dense jungles as well. Here, Ryan tells how he took on the Amazon Jungle and came out tops.



LIFE IN THE JUNGLE.

I opted to make the long trip to Alter do Chão, Brazil, ten days earlier, in the hope of acclimatising to the extreme heat and humidity I would be faced with during the Jungle Marathon. Alter do Chão was the host city for the Jungle Marathon this year and is known as the 'Caribbean' of Brazil. With its white, sandy beaches on the banks of the Tapajós River and bordering the Amazon Jungle, this town is one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen and is a tourist hotspot for local Brazilians.

With my non-existent Portuguese and most local shop and restaurant owners not speaking a word of English, it made for some very interesting times when dining out in restaurants. I would point to anything on the menu that was not too expensive and hope for the best. It is quite exciting not knowing what you are going to be served and my meal selections were better than when I knew what I was ordering!

My mind started to play games with me while acclimatising in Alter do Chão. I wanted to do well in the Jungle Marathon – or should I say, I would have been disappointed with anything less than a win. I put a lot of pressure on myself leading up to the race and while in Alter do Chão, I had a lot of time to think about the race. My mind was working overtime and a few days felt like years; with five days to go, all I wanted was for the race to start. Looking back, I think these mind games were a good thing. I visualised running all six stages, thought long and hard about my race strategies, and was hungrier than ever to get a good result.

Finally D-Day arrived and we boarded the boat for the 14-hour journey up the Tapajós River to the start of the race. I managed to get a cabin and avoided sleeping in a hammock for one more night. I woke up in what felt like a paradise, the sun rising over the Jungle and competitors jumping off the boat into the muddy green waters of the Tapajós River.

BASIC TRAINING

Upon arrival at the starting point of the race, competitors were given a few hours to get settled and put up their hammocks before the Jungle training and race briefing. Let's just say that putting up a hammock is not one of my strong points!

During Jungle training, we were informed about all the dangers in the Jungle – which is just about everything! I was most concerned about the snakes, as they told us if you get bitten by a 'bushmaster', you have three hours to live. It was around this point that I asked myself what I was doing there... surely I could get a kick out of things in life that are a little less dangerous?

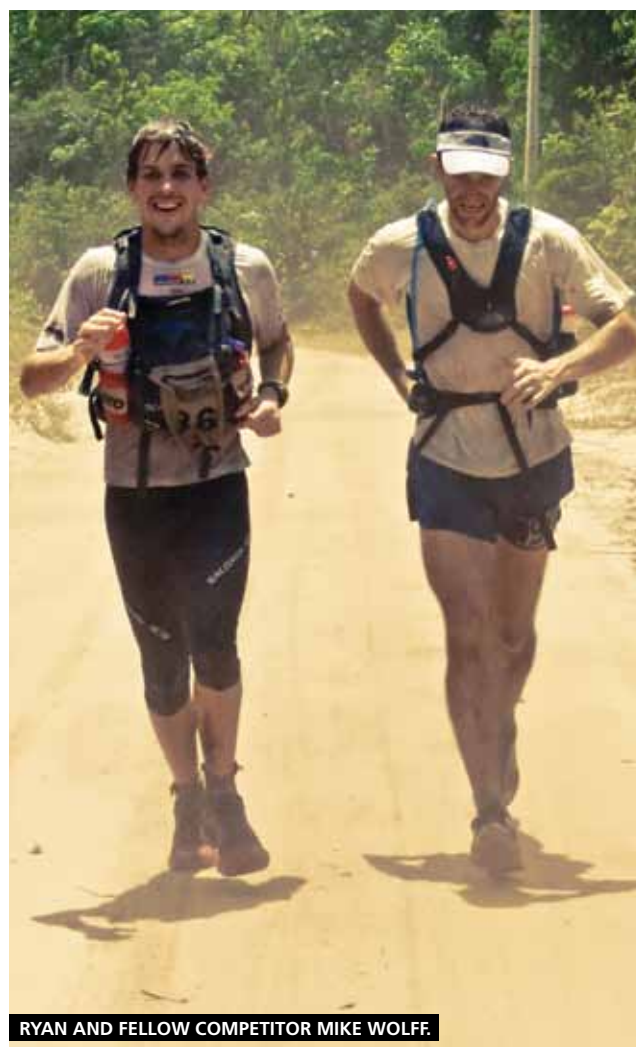
SWIMMING IN SWAMPS

A day after the Jungle training, I found myself lining up for the start of the race. I was really nervous and already sleep-deprived after spending two nights in a hammock. Within minutes of starting the race, I was swimming across a river before we entered the Jungle. The first day was brutal and the hills were never-ending, but I was running on adrenaline and went off fast... too fast! I ran through what I thought was an ankle-deep river, but within a few seconds I found myself up to my chest in black swamp mud, with visuals of anacondas in my head!

I got to the halfway point of the stage feeling good, and felt even better knowing I was leading. However, shortly afterwards, I seemed to hit a wall, a big one; my body had no energy and

even breathing seemed to be difficult. Each hill felt like I was climbing up Mount Everest, I was getting really cross with myself, and to make things worse, I had fire ants on the back of my neck biting me. At the next checkpoint, I poured some water on my head and stumbled across the finish line feeling like I had just been hit by a bus. I won the stage but my ankle looked like my knee and I knew the next week was going to be the hardest of my life. That afternoon, competitors were collapsing over the finish line and four unlucky competitors were taken away from the race by boat. Two of those competitors spent the rest of the week in a coma.

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RYAN AND FELLOW COMPETITOR MIKE WOLFF.

Stage two was really swampy but there were a few sections on the route that could be run really fast. I started off the stage a lot slower than the previous day and ran with Salvador Redondo of Spain for three quarters of the day. I found it a lot easier to run behind someone as I could see what branches and roots tripped them up and where they were swallowed up in the swamps; the guy in front would have to be constantly looking out for the course markers. I also hoped that if a 'bushmaster' wanted to test out the strength of his venom, he would do so on the first runner.

Leaving the last checkpoint, I felt strong and decided to up my pace. The course flattened out a bit and I managed to put some distance between myself and the second runner. The last 2km hurt me, but I was leading and the pain felt good in a way.

MORE MIND GAMES

Stage three was a mixture of stage one and two, never-ending hills and tick-infested swamps. I employed the same tactic as stage two and started off conservatively running with Mike Wolff (USA) and Salvador. The going was tough and we all had our turns to fall over hidden roots, go over on our ankles in holes hidden by leaves and get attacked by man-eating hornets.

Just after checkpoint two, I was running behind Salvador and had a flashback of a race in Namibia earlier in the year where he had beaten me. In Namibia, I held back on stage three, saving my legs for the long stage, which in hindsight was the wrong decision. It had haunted me for the last few months and I was not going to make the same mistake twice.

I made a break and no one followed. I was taking a big risk, because when you blow in the Jungle, it is really hard to pick yourself up again because of the extreme humidity levels, but I was running on the 'edge' and it felt good. I pushed hard up the hills and attacked the swamps with little respect. I saw three snakes in the space of two hours and there were constant rustling noises coming from the Jungle vegetation I passed. None of this fazed me as I was running in the zone and my only focus was getting to the finish line as quickly as possible.

WATCHING EYES

8km from the finish, I stopped dead in my tracks at the base of a monster hill. It kept going up and every time I thought I was at the top, there was a new peak. I was climbing under a fallen tree halfway up the hill and accidentally peeked into a hole, and saw a pair of eyes looking at me. Those eyes gave me an instant energy boost and I charged up the rest of the hill. I crossed the finish line 47 minutes ahead of the second competitor, but the long stage was still to come.

Stage four started off with a 300m river crossing. There was a mad rush to get into the water and swimming with a backpack

JUNGLE MARATHON 2009 RESULTS

Men

1	Ryan Sandes (South Africa)	26:33 (Course record)
2	Salvador Redondo (Spain)	28:49
3	Mike Wolff (USA)	29:27

Women

1	Tracey Garneau (Canada)	34:28 (Joint first)
1	Nikki Kimball (USA)	34:28 (Joint first)
3	Lowri Morgan (Wales)	40:05

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on is much harder than I had anticipated. Swimming across the river skyrockets your heart rate and it took about 20 minutes of running to get it down again. I ran the entire stage with Mike Wolff and the company helped to mentally refuel me for the long stage. We crossed the finish line jointly first and congratulated each other.

THE BIG ONE

I did not sleep much before the long stage and I tossed and turned in my hammock for most of the night. I knew the long stage would be where the race would be won or lost and waking up that morning, I was so nervous I could barely get my breakfast down. The long stage was 89km (Comrades in the Jungle), with the first 46km in the Jungle and the remaining distance run on dirt trails and beaches.

We started off with a big river crossing and were soon back in the Jungle. I was starting to get excited about running somewhere different to the Jungle terrain. After five days of kicking the same toe on roots, going over on my ankles multiple times and getting bitten by hornets, I had lost my sense of humour and wanted to get out of the Jungle. I was craving being able to get into a running rhythm and being able to run without having to jump over fallen trees, swim across rivers and wade through swamps.

I started off conservatively, running the entire Jungle section with Mike and Salvador. Just before leaving the Jungle, we were given a farewell present by a swarm of hornets that attacked us. That was the final straw – I needed to get out of the Jungle! It was a massive relief to get onto the dirt roads and it felt great to be able to run with some freedom again. I got a bit overexcited and took off like a headless chicken. It felt great for the first ten minutes, but then I started to regret my increased tempo. I was too stubborn to back down and let the others catch me, so I kept pushing. My legs started to hurt and I was suffering but my mind would not let my legs slow down.

I got to the second-last checkpoint and knew that if I could just keep running at a constant pace, the race would be mine.



BEATING THE HEAT.

My body was annihilated but mentally I was on a high, knowing I was really close to winning the long stage, which would just about make me the overall Jungle Marathon winner. I let out a scream of joy running along the beach and lost a bit of focus. Within a few kilometres, I had run out of water and underestimated the distance to the next checkpoint. My energy levels started dropping and before I knew it, I was reduced to a mixture between a shuffle and a stumble. I was dizzy and I could feel the race and my dreams of winning slipping away. I was really angry with myself for getting into this situation.

I passed through some dense vegetation and saw a river ahead. My pace increased and I headed straight for the river. Now I had to decide whether to drink the water and risk getting sick, or not drink the water and probably not finish the stage. The choice was obvious and it was the best tasting water I have ever had! Suddenly I felt like a new person, and before long I crossed the finish line. It was a major relief to finish and I realised that all I had to do now was finish the sixth and final stage and I would win the race.



VICTORY!

GLORY BECKONS

My hammock had become really uncomfortable by now and all I wanted was a bed and some real food. Waking up on the morning of the last stage, I was excited about finishing the race, but the last thing my legs felt like was running 32km along the beach. We started the last stage and very quickly I could feel my legs getting tired. I had a two-and-a-half hour lead on the second competitor and knew all I had to do was keep moving forward.

Once again, I teamed up with Mike and we ran the stage together. We had built up a good friendship over the past few

days and the chatting seemed to numb the pain my legs were feeling. Before long, we entered the little village of Alter do Chão and I was handed the South African flag to cross the finish line. The last few seconds were a blur but the feeling of crossing the finish line cannot be described.

I had been sleeping and eating the Jungle Marathon during the last few months before it took place. I had made a lot of sacrifices to get to the race as strong and fit as possible. I had trained really hard and on some days, I could hardly even walk after training sessions.

Sipping a beer, I felt on top of the world and knew the hard work had paid off. Thinking back on the race, it feels like a dream, or should I say a dream come true. It was a few months of hard training and I really suffered in some of the sessions, but in the end it was all worth it.



FOLLOW RYAN'S WANDERINGS

If you enjoyed reading about Ryan Sandes' ultra-running exploits, you won't want to miss the documentary film about Ryan, due for release after he runs the Final Desert, Antarctica race in November 2010.

Production began on *Wandering Fever* at the beginning of 2009, and will follow Ryan as he aims to become the first person to win all four desert races in the 4Deserts Series, which is rated by *TIME* magazine as one of the toughest endurance events in the world.

You can follow the progress of *Wandering Fever* at theafricanattachment.com. For investment opportunities contact info@theafricanattachment.com.



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