

Having tested his *X-Men* ability to endure extreme heat, Ryan Sandes embarked on a new form of self-flagellation – a run through Brazil's hot and claustrophobically sweaty jungle, teeming with a vast assortment of wild and venomous creatures.

The 200km, six-day event was run around Alter do Chão – a tourism village on the banks of the piranha-infested Tapajos River in central Brazil. Dubbed the Caribbean of the Amazon, the area has sandy beaches and pigeon-sized mosquitoes, along with the expected shadowy walls of impenetrable, and often poisonous, greenery.

The race stages varied from 16km to 89km, taking Sandes from three to 10 hours 30 minutes to complete.

The course profile looks like a row of pyramids, 100m up the one side and then 100m down the other, for the entire race. Competitors are constantly falling over roots, twisting their ankles in holes, and slipping and sliding down muddy banks.

With humidity at 98% and stifling temperatures under the canopy of trees, sweat does not evaporate and so your body cannot cool itself. Fortunately river and creek crossings brought some relief.

Sandes, 27, won five out of the six stages, finishing in 26 hours 33 minutes, a record for this race. Second place went to Salvador Redondo, 46, from Spain and Mike Wolfe, 29, from the US, who took third.

Starting on day one with 11kg of gear on his back, including 2.5l of water, the weight slowly reduced by a kilo a day, as he ate up his supplies of cereal, soya mince, stock cubes and freeze-dried spaghetti. Sandes did not carry extra clothing (to save weight) and washing took place in the rivers.

Race safety officer, José Flamenco, informed racers to avoid the myriad serpents and creepy crawlies: a bite from the multi-coloured 'bushmaster' snake will give you just two hours to live; a certain scorpion either kills

you or has a Viagra-like effect; and a local guide attests to feeling like King Kong after his grapple with a stinging arachnid. Hornet stings are common, and although painful, are not fatal.

ANACONDAS

The mud swamps induced mediaeval fear in competitors. Innocuous at the first slushy step, you all of a sudden plunge neck deep into the glutinous soup. This is when you recall the briefing about where anacondas and boa constrictors live, and how they slowly squeeze the life breath out of you. The Comrades starts sounding like a picnic in comparison. One unlucky runner, trying to pull himself out of a swamp, tugged on a dead log, that was a hornet nest. A double whammy!

At river crossings, a shuffling feet motion is advised to ward off the stingrays.

Putting up his hammock each night was particular fun and a new skill Sandes had to learn. Knowing how to tie a strong knot is vital, or you land up on the toxic centipede, blood-sucking tick and biting fire ant strewn ground with a sharp bump.

Selecting the right trees is crucial, as some drop vicious spiky fruit at night, rewarding the sleeper with untimely needle-like jabs to the cranium. And remember to shake your shoes out in the morning, as spiders (of the hairy variety) enjoy nesting in them.

Other competitors endured mixed fortunes along the trail. (During the opening formalities, a race volunteer fainted, succumbing to dehydration and becoming the first casualty.) Of the

136 starters, 50 dropped out due to overheating, exhaustion, blisters and injury.

STRIPPER

One entrant was forced to leave for work reasons. A former French Foreign Legion soldier, turned male stripper, decided to protect his assets from the jungle's chaffing effects, rather than lose his income at a forthcoming function.

Northern hemisphere runners, used to cooler climes, were particularly prone to overheating in the 40-degree haze. Two of them spent most of the event in a coma after being evacuated to hospital.

Race doctors frequently administer drips to depleted runners. But this assistance comes with a double whammy



JUNGLE FEET

Sandes's ankle had been bothering a bit the whole race but held up well to the end. His feet were in amazing condition compared to some of the other participants.

with a time penalty for their lack of concentration. Not managing the body's salt levels and fluid intake is a short trip to being out of the race.

On the big, fourth day of 89km – Jon Shield, a strong competitor from the start, crossed the finish line last, carried on a stretcher. His knees had given up the game and he was no longer able to walk.

The entry fee to this event is about R24 000. This amounts to one rand for