

First Stage: Villa Nueva - Santa Maria de Dota
40.9 Km (25 miles) G+ 2,830 m (9,300 ft) G- 1,380 m (4,500 ft)

After a 6k prologue on Manuel Antonio's surfer's beach and a good night's sleep in a pleasant hotel, things got serious at this first Stage of La Franstica with a 41k run and 2,830 m positive gain of altitude.

Start is at sea level, temperature is already 30C (86F) and rising. The laterite trail wanders through grazing pastures with cows and zebus keeping us company until the first refreshment (supply) point.

There is a complete change of scenery after 9k when we arrive at the edge of the jungle. Morphos (large butterflies of mystical blue color much sought after by aficionados) keep us company.

Other racers had the good fortune to see toucans, snakes, tarantulas and hummingbirds.

Climbs are steep, temperature keeps going up and everyone is hurting in spite of the rivers we cross with delight.

I hit a wall at Km 27 and no longer can I cool down. I start walking while admiring the scenery which is now a coffee plantation.

Roiny, the Costa Rican runner, catches up with me. I cheer him up and try to follow him; it's hopeless as my legs no longer carry me. I finish the Stage at my own pace, saving energy for the next four runs.

I finish in second place in 5h14', 13' behind Roiny. Our destination village, Santa Maria, is famous for growing the best coffee in the land.

Everyone is suffering from the hot and humid weather but we all manage large smiles at the end of the run. The camaraderie in this group is uplifting.



Second Stage: Santa Maria de Dota - Ojo de Agua
39.7 Km (24 miles) G+ 2,912 m (9,500 ft) G- 1,527 m (5,000 ft)

It is 7.30 AM and runners of the Costa Rica Ultra Trail are gathering at the heart of the village of Santa Maria de Dota, altitude 1,500m (4,900ft), coffee capital of Costa Rica.

40km to run, with a 2,900 m rise. Start whistle is blown by Bernard, the race manager.

A wall greets us at first but we take the time to admire the scenery; rolling jungle hills and the Pacific Ocean for those who took the time to look back.

We soon reach a track bordered by tall vegetation and here I am at KM 19, I get fresh supplies while talking with the amiable staff. They are good-natured and truly caring of us. They will give us massages in the evening bringing our sore legs back to life and ready for the next run.

There is a 10K downhill which I find easy. I go into freewheel mode and quickly arrive at the lovely village of Providencia where Filou and Juju are in charge of the refreshment point PC3. We exchange a few jokes before I return to the jungle to face the last climb of the day (+1,200m) to reach Ojo de Agua, altitude 2,984m and where the average annual rainfall is 8m (26ft).

I finish the Stage in 4h34'; Roiny is 19' behind me and Jean Pierre at 50'. Agnes wins the girls' race, followed by Harriet at 1'. Tomorrow's Stage is a surprise.



Third Stage: Purisil - Kiri Lodge - El Humo
33 Km (20 miles) G+ 1,120 m (3,600 ft)

The day is off to a great start as we have the privilege of going to a primary school where we hand out school kits and toothbrushes to every kid.

They were eagerly expecting us for two months and everyone is emotional. We see how pleased they are to see us. Happiness does not depend on much and one has to enjoy moments like these. Special thanks to the race management and the racers for giving us this opportunity.



After a short hop on a bus we are ready to tackle the 32km and +1,100m that lie ahead of us. It is a tad after 10 AM and we already feel the heat.

The start is given in a coffee plantation and within 2K we arrive in thick jungle on a mini trail opened by machete by the race organizers. It is extremely muddy; we cross tree trunks and have much fun on this obstacle course. We emerge from the jungle after 12K to enter a trail with several water crossings. They are welcome and help us cool down as by then we were rather hot under the collar.

Roiny is ahead of me but I keep him in sight until a 600m climb where I lose him. I remain cautious so as not to miss the control point.

Km 22 - I take the time to grab a bite and drink a glass of coca at the refreshment point. Filou and Juju tell me only 10k remains, all downhill except for a couple of hills.

I am running through blooming sugar plantations. The village of El Humo mustn't be far. A few houses and at the end of a bend here is the finish line. I end up 2nd, 3' behind Roiny in 3h6', with Jean Pierre behind me.

As for the girls, Harriett and Agnes arrive hand in hand.

Tomorrow is a 42k Stage with 1,400m rise in the direction of the Caribbean Sea.





Fourth Stage: El Humo - San Pablo
41.8 Km (25 miles) G+ 135m (450ft) G - 1,259m (4,100ft)

We are off for a marathon with 1400m rise on trails and roads in the midst of grazing fields and sugar cane and coffee plantations.

The pack is stretched right from the start. I am at the front, as is the case every day, along with Roiny. We cross a few villages and are cheered up by the locals. It is very hot, 30C with such a high level of humidity that it feels like in a steam room.

At the last refreshment point I meet with Marion who was capturing a toucan on camera (a magnificent bird with bright colors and a long beak). I drink a glass of coca and nab some dried fruits then start chasing Roiny who did not bother to stop.

I finish the Stage in second place in less than 4h, one minute behind the Costa Rican.

Jean-Pierre consolidates his third position and Agnes finishes ahead of Harriet who got lost and wasted an hour.



Fifth Stage:

27.8 Km (25 miles) G+ 124m (400 ft) G- 400m (400ft)

We had a good night's sleep gently rocked by the singing of the howling monkeys from the nearby jungle. This is the last Stage of the Costa Rican Ultra Trail.

It is 8AM and we are near the town of Limon on the Caribbean Sea. The atmosphere is unlike the mountain; beach, surf and bike rides rule. It is hot and we are looking at 28k on sand, through coco trees and tropical forests and on muddy trails.

I am 2' and 25 seconds overall ahead of Roiny and I let him take the lead, shadowing him. Running on sand is very hard and we try to find firmer ground to run over.

At KM9 Roiny takes a moment to refuel, something he never does. I eat unhurried and we forge ahead together for a little while. He launches a first attack and the race heats up. I am thinking this will be good training for the Transmartinique race early December. We reach Km 18 and the last refreshment point before a 10k lap through the jungle. The trail is muddy and I am careful not to lose my Hokas.

Roiny takes many risks and falls several times. I help him get back on his feet and without a word he gallops right back.

I love being in the jungle. I listen, watch and enjoy those unique moments when one feels so irrelevant in this extraordinary setting. We run surrounded by monkeys, sloths, toucans and multicolored little frogs called Dendrobates. From there I start dreaming and Roiny takes this opportunity to run away. No worries however, I keep him in sight and as I can hear the waves crashing on the beach, I know that we are not far from the finish line.

I end up 30 seconds behind the Costa Rican runner who let's not forget, managed to win 4 Stages out of 5. I win the general classification (first place overall) with slightly less than 2' ahead of him.



I followed the advice of La Fontaine, the famous French moralist; nothing is served by running, one must leave at the right time!

Many thanks to the race organizers and my fellow runners for this wonderful experience.





