

## ret•ro•spect

*Noun*

a review of or meditation on past events

Somehow even the most miserable experiences always appear rich in “**retrospect**”. We’re home, on our soft carpet with the sun shining through the skylight, a beer in hand and feet propped up. Yeah, good times...

*Thanks to SUBARU for providing us the opportunity for this cultural experience!*



**Racing The Planet/ Vietnam:** *Great to visit – happy to be home.*

RTP\_Vietnam was on our top 10 list of most brutal and punishing races ever! It began with 13+ hours of air travel from Aspen to LA (11 hour layover) to Taipei to Hanoi. A bus ride to the train station and a 9-hour overnight train to Sapa. Once we departed the train, we began to pile into vans with all our travel gear. After conflicting information, we were informed we should be race ready – NOW! In a panic, we undressed in the pouring rain, pretending to ignore the stares of the locals. We repacked quickly and climbed into the vans ready to roll. Two hours later, we pulled out...

Before addressing the race, we visited a hospital in Lao Cai where Project Smile was taking place. This is a non-profit program, funded by Racing The Planet, providing volunteer medical staff to help to local young people born with facial deformities. We spent several hours with the children, parents and volunteers. Susan and I packed balloons, which turned out to be a big hit with the kids.



We arrived at camp 1. Rain, cold, fog...your basic wet, dreary conditions. Our tents were pop-ups with jury-rigged walls and tarp floors. A huge bonfire was constructed which drew the attention of the villagers, who were able to keep warm. We were still too timid to push our way into the heat. Race start was still a day away.

### Stage 1

We woke to a loud speaker with a public address straight out of the past. It sounded like exercises, but I’m sure it was some type of code for a communist plot to kill the white man. After a strange and confusing dance in the street (which was fun for the first 20 minutes) with the

locals, we left them to our fire and started our adventure with a verbal 3, 2, 1 - go. A soft stampede of slow pace walking began.

For the next 24 hours we saw nothing. Thick, dense fog and rain in the daylight, then fog and rain in the dark. How can you be in a country for 3 days and see absolutely nothing but your own feet? The first leg of the race was 105k and reeked havoc on everyone's wet feet. Starting a 6-day race with blisters, we realized this would be no cakewalk.

Our surroundings became almost surreal in the dense fog. We traveled through several villages and towns. Strange, at night only men and dogs were visible. Dogs, lots of dogs. Lots of angry dogs! At least 3 dogs per house, times a million houses equals 3 million angry dogs! Lucky for us, only one racer was bitten...

We took the first stage slow, hoping to save ourselves for later. We only managed to trash our feet and frustrate ourselves. Stage 2 – plan B.



### Stage 2 & 3

Go out fast and hope to go numb. Our feet were raw by now. Susan with blood blisters and me with the floating toenails – ouch!

Susan went out fast and was strong-like-bull. Hoping the numbness would kick in and give us both a break from our burning feet (and the dogs). Day 2 was tough and Susan was moving well. I managed to give chase. We finished in 8<sup>th</sup> place, much to our disbelief. Wow, we rocked! Okay, the front of the pack got lost, but it still counts!

I suffered a temporary “melt-down” during Stage 3. My ankle twisted, my feet hurt and I’m not having any fun. Whaaaaaaaaaaaa. With that out of my system, we continued to schlog (my own personal term meaning to run, jog and waddle simultaneously) through the mud. Hum, have I mentioned the mud??? Sticky mud, sloppy mud, mucky mud, yellow mud, brown mud and rich bloody mud (from local livestock slaughters). Boy, were we glad we decided to go with the long tights instead of sexy shorts!

The Vietnamese are actually amazing and resilient people. These were the coldest temps on record in 40 years. The newspaper reported remote villages were in a state of emergency. The very young and old were dying from exposure and asphyxiation from building fires in their homes to keep warm. Thick smoke from smoldering fires was always in the air. Pigs and cows roamed around in burlap bag coats (bags tied around their bellies for warmth). Children played hopscotch in the mud wearing nothing more than sandals. Everyone seemed happy regardless of the conditions.



#### Stage 4 & 5

In our usual tag team style, my endorphins kicked in after day three. I led the assault and Susan gave chase. It's amazing we don't kill each other. By this time we're running through the blisters, aching legs and fatigue for the first few miles. Once the numbness kicks in we run as if we're fresh, knowing full well we'll have hell to pay later. But later is decades away and the only thing we're thinking about now is the next step.

We approach the rice fields. I imagined lightly damp fields we can happily prance through. What was I thinking? These were balance beam mud trails with 3' of water on one side and a 2' drop off to 3' of water on the other. Miles and miles of heightened concentration and tightrope style trekking.

Did I mention the moped bikes? The transportation of choice in Vietnam. And these people take their bikes any and everywhere. No exception. As we took one step forward and two steps back on a 30% grade mud fest, we were passed left and right by mopeds slipping and sliding their way on paths we could barely negotiate! There was literally no where in this remote country you wouldn't see a moped.

Gardens and beautiful, fragrant vegetables! Holy cow, these were some of the richest vegetables I have ever laid eyes on! The cabbages were so green, they appeared blue. Odoriferous and a welcome change from the smoke.



## Stage 6

After stage 5 we were told our camp would be set up in a barn. After the previous camps we were prepared to spend our last night with our counterparts, the other foul smelling animals. We were all pretty ripe by now. Having spent the past 5 days up to our shins in muck, too tired to care and too cold to take anything off before we slipped into our sleeping bags, we reeked! I doubt even the ox and pigs would want to cohabit with us!

But this was no barn. It was a hostile, with mattresses and blankets (for racers lucky enough to arrive in the front of the pack). No one mentioned potential ticks, bed lice or other critters that might be present. All we cared about was comfort, warmth and sleep!

Little did we know this was also the site of a multi-village celebration? Whoohoo – double score! Susan and I were treated to horse meat noodle soup. I was warned against eating the meat, but we're adventure racers. It was tender, with the consistency and mild taste of liver. Then again, maybe I was just hungry. I felt a twinge of guilt enjoying it.

Inside our sleeping quarters was a small smoldering fire in the middle of the room. Above the fire were a variety of legs and organs curing in the smoke. They had been there so long, they were almost unrecognizable. And with the wet, dirty clothes and shoes from 50+ racers, the fire became a smoldering stench pot resulting in a night of coughing and filled lungs.



## Stage 6 - Last day.

We all woke early to escape the smoke. Ready to run at 8AM, we were informed it would be a wave start. Susan and I were in wave 2 @ 11AM. We sat shivering and eating the last of our cheetos around the final bonfire.

Once we started, there was no holding back. We darted off, planning to finish within 2 hours. The bright pink ribbons placed to mark the trail were obvious in the beginning. Once we reached the single track with multiple trail heads, there were no more markings to be seen. Susan remembered we were to head towards a village called Kat Kat (sp). In true adventure racing form she began asking villagers to point towards Kat Kat and showed them a little shred of pink ribbon.

We shot off in the direction provided (follow by giggles) and soon came upon a group of small children with pink ribbons in their hair. Adorable?! Once we passed an ox with a pink ribbon tied to one horn, we knew we were back on trail.

We found a way to Kat Kat, where we hooked up to the road to Sapa and we were on our way home! Finishing as the sun broke through; we were whisked off to the Sapa Spa for a well deserved shower and fresh clothes. All was well.



### **Post Race**

After another 9 hour train ride and crippled with post race swollen feet and seeping blisters, we were happy to be headed to the Sheraton.

While in the cab, I felt this weird pain in my thigh and was convinced I had pulled a muscle without knowing. Within a few hours my body was on fire. I was convinced I had food poisoning, except for this strange swelling and pain on my right thigh. It moved to my shoulder, then to my ankle. Food poisoning? Tarantula bite? Scorpion bite? Dengue fever? Malaria? Blood clot? Snake attack at night? What's going on???

I sent Susan down to the restaurant to eat some dinner since I couldn't bare to have food near me. At some point, I realized this had to be a spider bite. Searching my memory bank for potential relief, I thought back to my childhood and home remedies. Tea bags. My mother used tea to draw the pain from bee stings when I was a child. I hobbled around grabbing all the tea bags in the room, soaked them and wrapped them on my leg. I was desperate and scared. Within minutes my fever began to break and the intense pain on other parts of my body began to subside.

After 6 hours of burning fever and 20 hours in bed, I was feeling better. But, my leg was too swollen and painful to walk. I opted for the wheelchair offer in every airport.

*Little known fact: wheel chairs in Asia are half the width of wheelchairs in the US*

We're home now and it's good to be home. On day 3, I said to Susan, "Take in all of Vietnam now, because we're not coming back!" I have no doubt it's a beautiful country, when the fog lifts. I know the people are both beautiful, friendly and absolutely resilient. I have the utmost respect for them. *But it's good to be home.*



*What's next? We're recovering and packing for the Rock & Ice Ultra in Yellowknife Canada. Looking forward to sub-zero temperatures where no bugs can survive. Life is good.*