



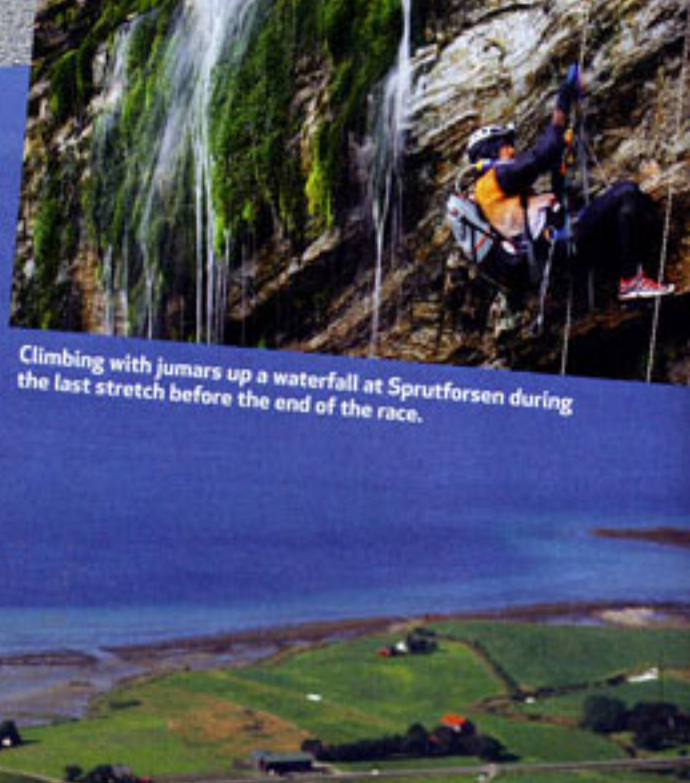
At left: The US team *Spyder* rappelling at Trolltjerna in Norway. This page: After the long kayak trip, the adventure racers tackle the orienteering portion of the race on Svartisen.



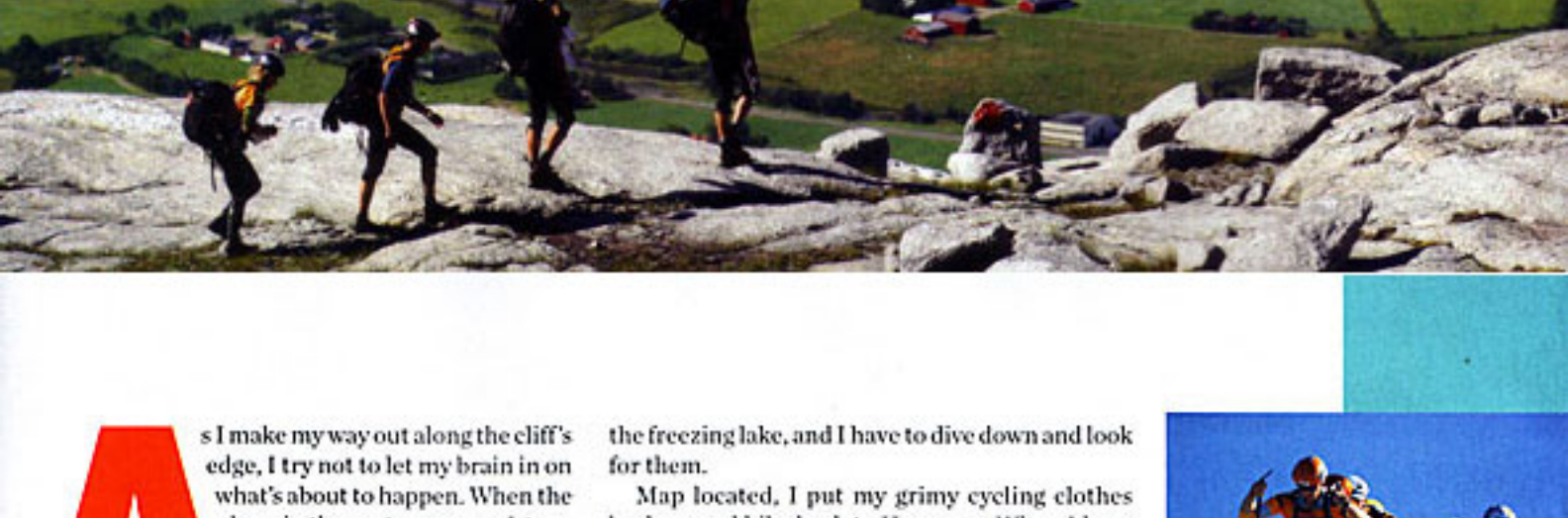
DISCOVERIES

Alpine trekking during the second 24-hour period at Ostindalen.

Team Lundhags treks down Seven Sisters on Norway's coast.



Climbing with jumars up a waterfall at Sprutforsen during the last stretch before the end of the race.



As I make my way out along the cliff's edge, I try not to let my brain in on what's about to happen. When the drop is three steps away, I turn and ask "Here?" It's totally rhetorical, because by the time the answer comes, I have already stepped off the ledge.

The free fall quickly accelerates my body toward the dark patch I have aimed for. It's about a six-meter drop, and it takes some time before my sandaled feet hit the freezing water – too late for my brain to object.

I am in Mjurtsebacken outside Hemavan in northern Sweden, and the reason I have just jumped off a cliff is that, well... everybody else did. I am following the competitors in the Adventure Racing World Championships, and my mission is to, as far as possible, do whatever they do. There's something impressively disturbing about people who punish themselves like this, and I want to dip my toe in their particular pool of madness.

BECAUSE I RECOGNIZE ROBYN BENINCASA from TV, I decide to follow the team she captains – Merrell/Wigwam. They're not the fastest team, she tells me, but they get along great and have tons of collective experience.

At the starting line, Benincasa is relaxed, laughing and goofing off with her three team members. Then the gun goes off and all 32 teams rush madly through a thicket and onto a 200-meter-long field, falling and clawing their way to the inline skates on the other side.

Considering that most teams will be days apart at the finish, it seems strange for them to be jockeying for position this early in the race. But then these are exceedingly competitive people. They haven't simply trained for years for this – they have adjusted their lives to fit the massive doses of training necessary to compete at this level.

When all that training went into these people, though, I wonder if a little common sense didn't trickle out. Gary Larson had a cartoon once of an "inconvenience store" where all the goods were out of reach on a shelf just under the ceiling. That's how adventure racing feels. If there's a relatively convenient way of getting to the bottom of a gorge – hiking along the edge – adventure racers are often obliged to follow the most inconvenient one – pushing down the rocky river in a wet suit and helmet.

AFTER CROSSING THE STARTING FIELD and skating two kilometers uphill, I follow part of the canyoneering section, including that jump from the ledge. Back at the transition area, I switch maps and hop on my rented mountain bike. Twenty-five kilometers later, I am stripping down to swimming trunks and wading into Lake Gäuta. The maps for the following trekking section have – inconveniently enough – been tied to buoy lines at the bottom of

the freezing lake, and I have to dive down and look for them.

Map located, I put my grimy cycling clothes back on and bike back to Hemavan. When I have only a few kilometers left, it begins to rain. Soaked and shivering, I start thinking I deserve to spend the night in my hotel room instead of on the mountain like I had planned. About 20 steps from the hotel entrance, I bump into media director Stefan Nordström. Unfortunately, I tell him about my plan. "What do you mean?" he says. "If you're serious about doing this adventure racing thing, you shouldn't even go into the hotel to use the bathroom." My heart sinks. "You can pee right here," he says and points to a spot between two cars in the parking lot. I don't think he really means it, but he's right. This is a mental game, and I can't chicken out at the first sign of discomfort.

So I pack my camping gear and hike up Kungsleden as far as I can reach before it gets dark. Most teams racing toward me through the mountains north of Syterskalet won't stop at all this first night, but I'm tired, hungry, thirsty and devoid of group pressure to make me do something as stupid as hike in the dark.

There's something disturbing about people who punish themselves like this.

THE NEXT MORNING brings 77 kilometers of road biking, taking teams into Norway and Hattfjell, the site of a 230-meter Tyrolean traverse across a ravine. Racers buy coffee and sandwiches, and waiting teams sleep in a teepee around a flaming fire. I don't begrudge them a few minutes of shut-eye, but the sandwiches have me wondering about the whole living-on-nature's-terms rule. If the race rules allow for buying food here, what's to stop a team from filling up at the local 7-Eleven?

"Nothing," says Jeff Akins, a veteran adventure racer and Benincasa's fiancé. "The trick is to survive in whatever environment you're in, and if there's a restaurant in that environment..."

Seems my options were much greater than what I realized.

I have nobody to tie into a rope team with for the treacherous nighttime trek across Ostindalen Glacier, so instead I drive around the massive mountain range, stock up on candy at a department store (what can I say? It was in my environment), and drive as far as I can up the backside of Gräffellet to Gear Zone 3. Continuing on foot, I reach the lake of Morkbekktjorna at 10:15 pm and pitch my tent on its shores.

Fog prevents me from seeing across the small lake, but there's no missing the roar of glacier →



Inline skating: Team *Spyder*



Kayaking: Björn Rydval



Cycling: Robyn Benincasa



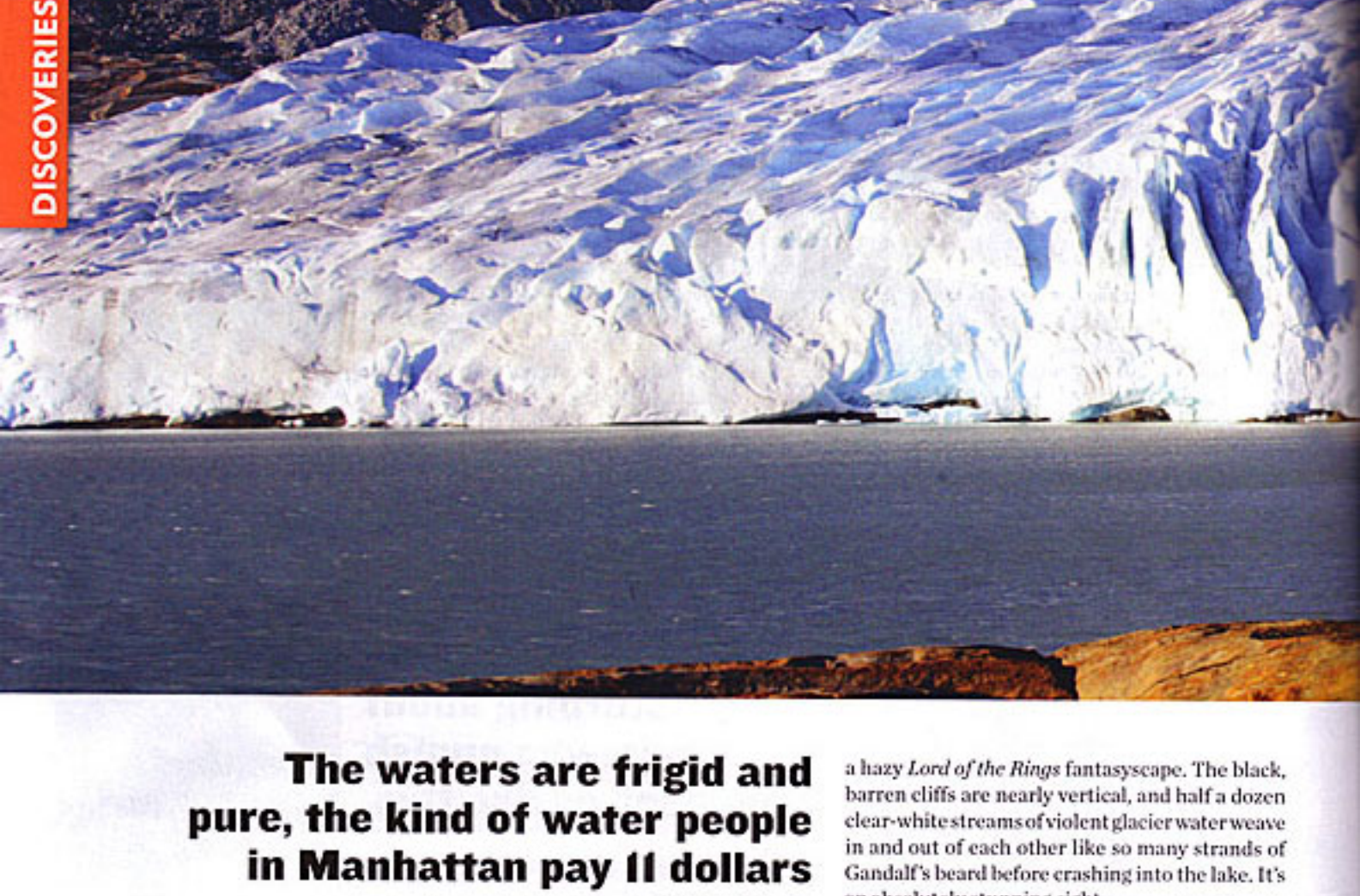
Swimming for a map

MANDATORY FULL-TIME PERSONAL EQUIPMENT

- Backpack
- Sleeping bag
- Hat
- Full-finger gloves
- Fleece top
- Waterproof jacket
- Waterproof pants
- Headlamp

MANDATORY FULL-TIME TEAM EQUIPMENT

- Altimeter
- Two compasses
- GPS tracking device
- Radio
- Whistle
- Waterproof map holder
- Foldable knife
- 20 waterproof matches
- 20 waterproof red pens
- Four-person tent
- First-aid kit
- Strobe light



DISCOVERIES

The waters are frigid and pure, the kind of water people in Manhattan pay 11 dollars a bottle for.

streams cascading into it. The waters are frigid and pure, the kind of water people in Manhattan pay 11 dollars a bottle for. Surplus water spills out into a stream, Morkbekken, on the northern side, where a bridge that once spanned its head is now a couple of twisted metal beams.

I fire up my stove and make a late supper in the drizzle, and then, as I'm brushing my teeth with a saved-off toothbrush like the pros, the fog suddenly lifts, revealing the far side of the lake like

a hazy *Lord of the Rings* fantasy landscape. The black, barren cliffs are nearly vertical, and half a dozen clear-white streams of violent glacier water weave in and out of each other like so many strands of Gandalf's beard before crashing into the lake. It's an absolutely stunning sight.

BY MIDMORNING THE NEXT DAY, the leading teams make their way along Morkbekken and then bike down the valley to an orienteering section at Korgen campground. A photographer and I decide to try it to see what the racers are facing. We are warned that the first third of the course is demoralizing, so we're suitably giddy at finding the first checkpoint (after about an hour) when the Merrell/Wigwam team shows up. Benincasa and her boys look unruffled, considering what they've been through.

Discipline	CANYONEERING	CAVING	ORIENTEERING	MOUNTAIN BIKING	ROPE WORKS	RIVER KAYAKING
	Walking, wading, sliding, swimming, flushing and jumping down a stream	Squeezing through caves filled with ice-cold glacier water	Thirteen checkpoints in uncleared forest	Nine sections on hard-top roads, dirt roads and mountain trails	Rappelling and climbing through caves and waterfalls	Bouncing in inflatable boats down Class II rapids
Distance	5 km	1 km	15 km	407 km	3 km	21 km
Time spent	1 hour, 30 minutes	30 minutes	4 hours	27 hours, 30 minutes	1 hour, 30 minutes	2 hours
Average speed	3.4 km/h	2 km/h	3.75 km/h	4.8 km/h	2 km/h	10.5 km/h



"Hey, what happened to tagging along with us?" she asks me.

"Uh, I'm having trouble keeping up," I answer. "Yeah, but now we're moving like pond scum."

Not the most floral of metaphors, but I understand what she means. They need to pick up speed. Meanwhile, Team Finland has switched into over-drive, blasting through the 13 checkpoints in under three hours and taking the lead.

While they and the rest of the teams bike and hike through their third night, I drive out to the magnificent Helgeland coastline, DJ Vibeke keeping me company with Norwegian rap on the radio, and pitch my tent for the night.

I spend the better part of the next morning climbing up to checkpoint 22, located next to a small lake below the summit of Kvasstinden, the sixth peak in the spectacular Seven Sisters

mountain chain that the teams are hiking. It's a rare glorious day on the Seven Sisters, and we can see for miles around in all directions – mountains, islands, farmland, ocean and lakes are all now bathing in the sunlight.

After about half an hour, Nike PowerBlast arrives in second place looking unreasonably fit.

"Get any sleep?" I ask no one in particular.

"A little."

"How much is a little?"

"Let me see... the first time it was six minutes, then 10 minutes, then three hours."

"Does 10 minutes really help?"

"Oh, yeah!" team captain Ian Adamson cuts in. I have a hard time believing this, but sleep deprivation is one aspect of adventure racing that I have yet to test. And Adamson and his teammates really do look rested.

Above: On his way to Svartisen pass, photographer Peder Sundström takes a break to look at the panoramic view.

MOUNTAINEERING	OCEAN KAYAKING	INLINE SKATING	SWIMMING	TRAVERSING	TRIPPING
Two sections of trekking and climbing on rocks and glacier ice	Two racers in each boat, through open seas, with strobe light attached at night	Three sections on hard ground, mostly uphill, poles allowed. Teams can use kickbikes instead	To the bottom of Lake Gäuta to retrieve map for orienteering section	Sliding along edge of 60 meter-high ravine to bottom	Five sections on trails and off-road
85 km	90 km	72 km	20–200 m	230 m	95 km
24 hours	12 hours	6 hours, 10 minutes	5 minutes	11 seconds	21 hours
35 km/h	7.5 km/h	11.7 km/h	17°C (water temperature)	75 km/h	4.5 km/h

(Times calculated for the fastest team)



Above: Our intrepid adventure editor Henrik Harr tries his hand at trekking Seven Sisters.

NEXT, A GRUELING 45-KILOMETER INLINE SECTION takes racers to Fagerfika, where they switch to sea kayaks for an insane 90 kilometers of paddling. Me, I manage a little less than one kilometer of skating, and they won't let me out on the waves by myself. Instead I take the inland route to Melfjorden where the paddlers will come ashore.

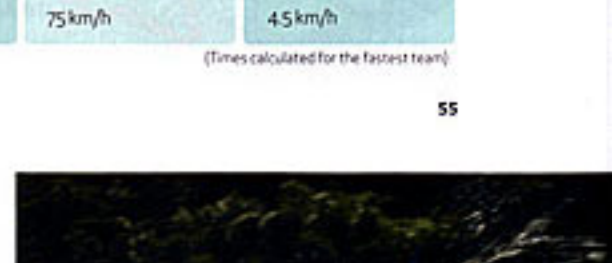
Onboard the car ferry from Lovang to Nesna, I wash my hair with hand soap in the bathroom. It has been four days since I had a shower. A handful of Norwegians are inside watching TV while I stand outside and marvel at the amazing panorama in front of me. After crossing Ranfjorden, the Flying Finns have already been and left. The sliver of a moon just barely clears the top of Handnesoya to our right.

Feeling guilty that I haven't been participating as much as I had planned, I decide to try my hand at sleep deprivation. So instead of pitched camp, I roll into Mo i Rana's irresistibly named suburb of Bimbo for two hours of shut-eye in the car. I am properly disoriented when the buzzer sounds at 2 am, but I manage to drive the remaining two hours to Melfjorden without killing anyone.

After watching Team Finland come in first from the kayak leg, I abandon the race in order to catch my flight back to civilization. I drive to the airport in a daze, stopping occasionally to test Ian Adamson's 10-minute sleep therapy. It doesn't work. How adventure racers can do what they do with so little sleep is beyond me. During a five-day race like this, top teams sleep as little as 10–12 hours.

BY SHEER COINCIDENCE, the trip odometer of my car clicks over to 800 kilometers just as I crawl into Hemavan. This means I have driven the exact same distance that the racers have covered on foot, bike and kayak.

After I leave, Ian Adamson and his PowerBlast team pick up the pace, overtaking the Finns and rolling into Hemavan as World Champions after five days and two hours of racing. As



Winning team Nike PowerBlast kayaks across Melfjorden.

for Benincasa and the Kiwi boys, they fly through the sea kayak section like we knew they would, but drop out during the following hike. Benincasa gets trench foot and ends her 12-year streak of never quitting a race. So it goes.

"I literally sat down on that second technical glacier and couldn't walk another step," she tells me after the race. "The layers of skin on my feet were so engorged with water that they started separating, and the pain was like tearing flesh with every step."

Why subject yourself to this kind of pain? After four days of tracking these adventure racers, I can make out three recurring components of the sport: fatigue, monotony and danger. Not an entirely healthy mix. And if things go really wrong, this stuff can kill you. Australian Nigel Aylott died when he was struck in the head by a falling 150-kilo rock during the Primal Quest in 2004. Anybody who suspects they might be clumsy, reckless, stupid or generally lacking in judgement should not try any of this. Ever.

Having said that, adventure racing is still fun, life-affirming, maddening and a whole range of other contradictory things. My advice is: Try it, but do one-tenth of the distances in twice the time. At least.

And sleep. For the love of Christ, sleep. ☺

HENRIK HARR is a Scanorama editor. He used to dream of competing in long-distance adventure races. Then he wrote this article. henrik.harr@yahoo.com

MAKING TRACKS

FINAL RESULTS ARWC 2006

- Nike PowerBlast 5 days, 2 hours, 22 minutes
- Team Finland +3 hours, 51 minutes
- Lundhags +5 hours, 8 minutes

WORLD CHAMPIONS 2006: Team Nike PowerBlast: Ian Adamson (captain), Monique Merrill, Richard Ussher and Dave Wiens

TOTAL LENGTH 797 kilometers
AVERAGE SPEED 6.5 km/h. That's walking speed, sure, but walk for five days straight and see how easy it is.

Thanks to Naturkompaniet in Stockholm (www.naturkompaniet.se) for providing equipment.

DISCOVERIES

Anybody who suspects they might be clumsy, reckless or stupid should not try any of this. Ever.

NEXT, A GRUELING 45-KILOMETER INLINE SECTION takes racers to Fagerfika, where they switch to sea kayaks for an insane 90 kilometers of paddling. Me, I manage a little less than one kilometer of skating, and they won't let me out on the waves by myself. Instead I take the inland route to Melfjorden where the paddlers will come ashore.

Onboard the car ferry from Lovang to Nesna, I wash my hair with hand soap in the bathroom. It has been four days since I had a shower. A handful of Norwegians are inside watching TV while I stand outside and marvel at the amazing panorama in front of me. After crossing Ranfjorden, the Flying Finns have already been and left. The sliver of a moon just barely clears the top of Handnesoya to our right.

Feeling guilty that I haven't been participating as much as I had planned, I decide to try my hand at sleep deprivation. So instead of pitched camp, I roll into Mo i Rana's irresistibly named suburb of Bimbo for two hours of shut-eye in the car. I am properly disoriented when the buzzer sounds at 2 am, but I manage to drive the remaining two hours to Melfjorden without killing anyone.

After watching Team Finland come in first from the kayak leg, I abandon the race in order to catch my flight back to civilization. I drive to the airport in a daze, stopping occasionally to test Ian Adamson's 10-minute sleep therapy. It doesn't work. How adventure racers can do what they do with so little sleep is beyond me. During a five-day race like this, top teams sleep as little as 10–12 hours.

