



Grand Raid de Reunion - Diagonale des Fous 2006
143 km; 8700 meters of climb

One of the most famous and biggest ultra races outside the USA is the Grand Raid de Reunion. It traverses the Island of Reunion, which is situated next to Mauritius off the coast of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean.

Reunion is a French department and is in many ways comparable to what Hawaii is for the US (surf, vacation and honeymoon destination...).

This year it was the 14th edition of the run, longer and harder than ever. The race evolved each year from a 98km distance over 128 km to the current 143 km. Usually the race is filled very early in the year, however this year the Chikungunya virus epidemic hit the island very hard in January/February, so that most tourists and runners cancelled their trips for the year. This was good news for me, since I could enter the race at fairly short notice end of July. (In the meantime the infection rate was down from 40000 cases per week to about 10 cases per week, so the infection risk would be very low at the end of the dry season end of October.

This year there were about 2000 starters from Reunion and another 500 from outside the island, mainly from metropolitan France. There were 14 Germans in the race. I had looked up last year's results and was pleased not to find too many of the top placed runners in this year's starter list. Well, this was a mistake: Since entry at short notice was possible, the whole Swiss and French Elite was present! So I buried my thought of maybe placing within the top ten.

Given the elevation profile and distance I had calculated a sub-24hr. time as a tough, but not impossible goal. After viewing parts of the course I also buried that thought: the descents were far too technically difficult such as to race the downhill parts. The time limit for the race is a very generous 63h, together with tents & mattresses at 2 locations this explains the large number of participants: Speed hikers taking a few hours of sleep in between may well finish within the time limit.

I arrived 5 days ahead of the race in St. Denis. Here I rented a car and did some exploring of the course and the island. -- Much too short a time for an island so diverse and interesting with beautiful hikes, mountains up to 3000m elevation, gorges, an active volcano and beaches with surf or sheltered with reefs and the most amazing density of colourful fishes, right at the shoreline.

Wednesday 3pm was scheduled for receiving your start package in the stadium of St. Denis, where the race would later finish. When I arrived there were already a large crowd present and I queued up for my start number. Though the queue was not too long it did not advance and it took my 2+ hours in the hot sun to finally receive my bib number. Advice for all others: Show up at 6pm, then the queues will be lighter. I was somewhat shocked and did no longer expect much of the organisation.

Race begins at 1am at Cap Mechant in the south-east of the Island. The organization provides shuttle buses which pick you up on either coast road between the finish, St. Denis and the start. They were scheduled to arrive around 10:30 pm at the start: This means you wouldn't sleep at all before the race if you took those buses. So I explored the start area and found a nice quiet spot to park my car, a Renault Kangoo minivan just a few 100 yards from the start. There I slept well in the back of the van from 7pm till 11:30pm. Then I got ready, took my 4 drop bags and went to the start. Surprisingly the check in and the control of the obligatory equipment (space blanket, spare batteries, bandages...) were quick and effective. Also some breakfast was being served there. Here I overheard some German and met some of my compatriots. Some had already run the race before. The general advice was: Take it easy at the beginning, but also be upfront, since after 16km there is a narrow steep trail where it is hardly possible to overtake.

About 30min before the start I went towards the starting line: Too late there was already a big crowd ahead of me. After the start it therefore took a little while before I could start running. However since the first 16km are a gradual climb on a forestry road I could soon settle into my rhythm while overtaking several hundred runners.

At the beginning of the narrow trail there were still quite a few ahead of me and it was kind of a single line of runners hiking uphill at a pace somewhat too slow for me. So I took my chance and worked my way past those in front of me - wherever possible. After about 30 minutes the single line of people was cut into shorter groups of 2- 10 persons travelling uphill. Here we were moving now at a decent pace, every now and then I was overtaking and sometimes I was being overtaken. With increasing elevation it got colder and windier so that I put on a light jacket. The climb leads in 32 km from sea level to 2350m elevation, which took me about 4:30hrs. Meanwhile I had moved up to 58th place. Here was the first big check point: the bar code of your number is scanned here for the split times. Also a large variety of food and drink was being offered. I was very pleased to see that the run organisation itself was way better than the start number distribution. Also on the way up there had been some checks where your bib number was punched to ascertain everybody followed the correct route by foot. There also had already been aid stations on the way. During the whole race I hardly filled more than one of my bottles, since the aid stations were plentiful and well equipped. Course marking was mainly done by red tape and the occasional arrow on the ground. Here at the beginning markers were never far apart, all intersections were very well marked and nearly everywhere there were volunteers to make sure no one got lost.

During sunrise I passed the volcano and climbed up to the highest point of the course at 2400 m elevation. I was glad to have passed the longest climb without the sun hitting too hard on me. The descent to follow was for the most part quite well runnable and I reached the first drop bag location, Mare a Boue at about 7:30 am. Here the next shock: The drop bags were neatly arranged in line - but without any system! Now find your drop bag amongst 2000 others! Surprisingly enough I found it and changed for the hot day to come from short tights to runners shorts. Fortunately there were some clouds covering the sun every now and then so it didn't get too hot on the next climb to Kerveguen, which I did together with a multiple finisher of the previous runs. The descent from Kerveguen is very technical and includes a few ladders, but I was still strong and the two of us moved quickly downhill towards Cilaos. Here the roads were improving and the weather got unpleasantly warm. I had to reduce speed and lost contact with the other guy. Nevertheless, just before reaching town I caught up with a small group around Corinne Favre the female French Ultra star. I remembered her from the Ultra trail du Mnt Blanc a few years early where she had overtaken me on the way into Courmayeur. We chatted down to the big aid station at Cilaos.

Fortified with some noodle soup I left Cilaos ahead of her.

By the time I left the aid station I had moved up to 25th place. It was late morning and the sun was very hot. Additionally the itinerary didn't climb right away to the Col du Taibit (2100m) but meandered through the hot slope first descending some 100 meters and only slowly climbing back up. This is the only place where I ran somewhat short of water. Due to the heat I went on a reduced pace up to the Col du Taibit, where fortunately the clouds moved in front of the sun again and the temperatures were again bearable. Nevertheless I was somewhat exhausted and could no longer race downhill. Speed was reduced to a minimum effort pace now. Some guy passed me at an incredible speed on this downhill: Yes I believe the clue to this race lies in the capability to be fast on those technically difficult downhills. But I kept moving relentlessly downhill until I reached the suspension bridge at some 200m elevation. I had been warned by the Kayers (whom I had met on a reconnaissance trip) that the upcoming part through the cirque de mafate was very nasty with plenty of ups and downs. It was quite warm here, but fortunately the valley is so narrow that the sun didn't touch it any more, now on the late afternoon. I was moving uphill when suddenly I got passed by two persons: Corinne and her companion. She said that the 2nd woman was closing up to her and that she wanted to speed up so that she would not be caught before the night. This waked me up out of my daydream-speed and I followed her pace to the next aid station. Here I lost contact, since she blew right through and I stopped to fill my bottles. I knew that there was a difficult stretch ahead until the river crossing at deux bras and that the night was soon falling. So I kept the fast speed upright to cover as much terrain as possible in the daylight. For whatever reason, since Cayenne the marking of the trail was close to non-existent and this worried me somewhat, so that at one point I was convinced to have lost the trail. I just moved ahead since I thought the trail I was on would eventually meet the other again. Some hikers confirmed however that there had been runners ahead of me and that this would well be the right trail.

Marking would not improve to the finish, by the way.

In the limelight I reached Aurere when Corinne was just about to leave. Here I got myself ready for the night and started out with my headlamp. Two more persons were following me. Since my light was better than theirs I could quickly bring some distance in between us on this technical descent and would also soon

overtake Corinne again. Down at the river it is still a fairly long way to go until the last big aid and drop bag station: Deux bras was reached.

Here I changed batteries - but there was a contact problem: The lamp wouldn't work again. After some nervous fumbling I decided to take the spare/backup lamp which I had deposited in the drop bag here. After some edrink and some mashed potatoes I continued. As usually the way out of an aid station is often not so easy to find and persons would talk to me and tell things but not direct me clearly where to go. My nerves were blank. After some yards I didn't recognize that a creek crossing was up ahead and when I finally realized where to go I was so nervous that I slipped from the rocks and fell into the creek. On the other side of the creek was fine sand. - great that's right what you want.

Anyway I kept moving with my soaked sandy feet. Since there were tons of volunteers on their way you couldn't tell by the shone of headlights if someone was closing up or ahead, most of the times it turned out to be a volunteer, not a runner. Before reaching the next aid station I had the impression that my light was going to fade. And of course my spare batteries were not compatible with the exchanged light!

I was glad to have reached the road which I could follow without light to the stadium in Dos d'Ane. But no - they made us leave the road very soon and onto small roads and paths which were very poorly marked. Several times I had to stop, look around hike back, ask people to find my way. The village of Cilaos had been so perfectly marked, here in the night there were no arrows on the ground, no reflective markers or glow sticks, just very very sparsely the odd red ribbon. Anyway I reached the aid station.

Here I borrowed a flashlight from a volunteer to be sure my light would suffice.

Since this was a pretty bad handheld light I first tried to save on my headlight and went on with my emergency button-cell handheld LED-light. This just out provides enough light for climbing, on the level and downhill parts I switched to the headlight. Between Dos d'Ane and the finish I could find markers only on most of the intersections but hardly any in between. So I was very glad to have checked out the course beforehand so that at least I knew the rough directions. Additionally there was some garbage left behind from the runners ahead of me. I have never been so delighted to see an empty gel sachet or energy bar wrapping on the trail than during this night! Just before the last uphill I saw a runner ahead of me. And indeed I managed to overtake him just at the end of the uphill. Together Raphael and I tried to find our way down to Colorado aid station, which I entered just ahead of him. We didn't stay for long and continued downhill. I wasn't very happy with my weakening light, so I fumbled the handheld flashlight out of my bag, while Raphael overtook me. That flashlight unfortunately wasn't much good either. So I put it back.

The trail was now technical again and Raphael was pressing hard downhill. My muscles were too weak to follow him at that pace. Too bad since this had been 10th place! With Raphael gone I tried to find my way down cursing at the unclear marking, but eventually arriving at the near empty stadium - without indication where to go. After some shouting "and now?" someone told me left and I realized that the finish was to the left halfway around the race track. Here I finished in 24:44:53 very happy on 11th place overall.

Winners were the Swiss Christophe Jaquerod and French Vincent Delebarre which finished ex aequo in 20:39:40, ahead of Winfried Ouledi(21:12:50).

First woman was Karine Herry in 26:33:46, Corinne Favre had to pay tribute to her high speed in the cirque de Mafate and had to give up completely exhausted after the last climb. A total of 1400 runners finished the race.

The second German, Pascal Hagenbach had a time of 34:40.

After a shower I had my legs massaged and my blisters taken care of. Muscles were fine the day after, the blisters were not bad at all, alone my ankles hurt, a ligament at the right ankle was pulled and both ankles were swollen. Motion was only possible without changing the angle of the ankle during the following day. The day after in the morning there were still problems, but from noon onward I could walk fairly normal again.

In the morning after arriving I hiked to the bus station, took the bus to cap Mechant and picked up my car. Back at the stadium all my drop bags were there - apart of the one from Dos d'ane. The coastal road was closed due to a cliff that had fallen on it and I had to wait one more day for that bag to arrive. 4 hours before my flight back home on Sunday the drop bag arrived, I returned my car and went on my 24hour journey back home.

