

Would he have a prayer in this Race challenge? Author Jim Colucci takes "The Hard Way Up" the stairs at O Pagador de Promessas church.

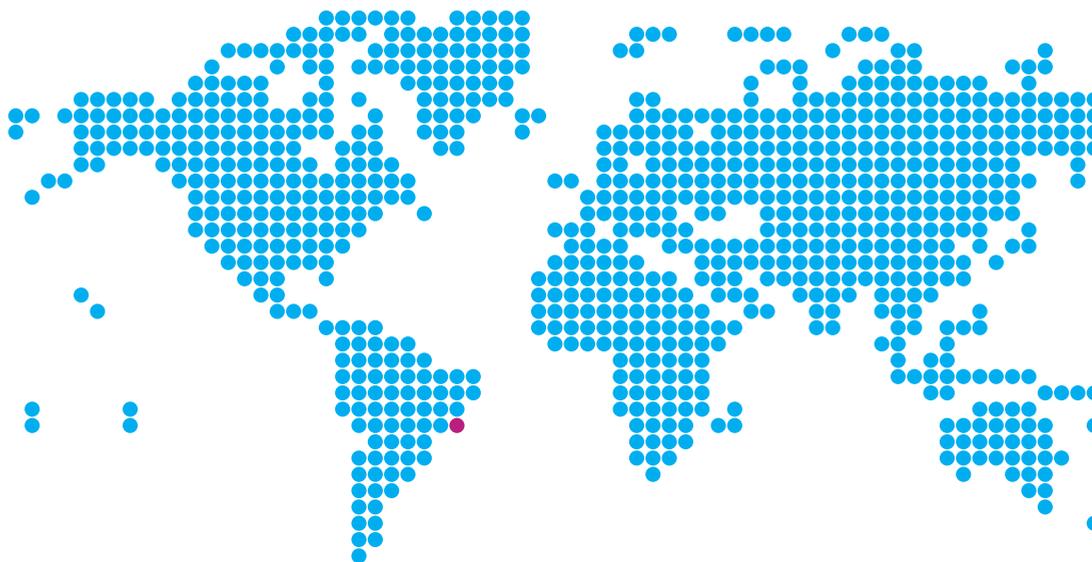
On
Your
Mark,

Get
Set,

How does *The Amazing Race* earn its title? *Watch!* sent Deputy Editor Jim Colucci to South America for the first leg of the race to find out

BY JIM COLUCCI

GO!



I'M SITTING IN THE AIRPORT IN RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil, where my connecting flight to the city of Salvador is more than 40 minutes late. My boarding pass reads “23 abril,” meaning it’s early autumn in the Southern Hemisphere. Temperatures here at this time of year usually top out in the mid-90s. But my travel companions, the producers of the multiple Emmy-winning reality series *The Amazing Race*, who are tasked with keeping track of the show’s myriad moving parts, remain cool.



The scale of the operation awaiting us in Salvador is truly ... well, as I listen in on their cell phone calls, I try to avoid jotting down that obvious adjective from the show’s title that so aptly describes it. More than 200 staffers—a combination of American field producers and local hires—have been in the Bahian capital for a week now, crisscrossing its old-city section of Pelourinho to set up and double-check two fast and furious days’ worth of the show’s trademark route markers, detours and pit stops.

Suddenly, Bertram van Munster zips by. An indefatigable sexagenarian, the Dutch-born Bert co-created the *Race* with wife Elise Doganieri in 2001. Now, as the duo launches their 13th edition, producers and local “facilitators” are already scattered in each of 11 disparate cities. Plus, every 24 to 36 hours, the traveling crew of 70 to 100 people, lugging literally a ton of camera equipment, hops on yet another plane. Add to those numbers the

more than 100 staffers working on the *Race* in the office here at home, and the scale of this operation seems all the more ... let’s use “staggering.”

“We’ve counted so far 2,014 people waiting for a paycheck,” Bert says, smiling, “and of course waiting for us to arrive. We’ve got people all around the world right now with knots in their stomachs.”

MEET THE CHALLENGERS

Just a few weeks earlier, I learned that I would be joining this first leg of what would be the *Race*’s shortest, tightest-ever edition: 11 teams, 11 cities, only 23 days. On the Saturday before the start, I get the chance to meet my fellow travelers and compare the few notes I’m allowed to reveal. Elise had told me she’s particularly excited about this season because this batch seems full of competitors with a particularly strong killer instinct. Now, as I sit with them two by two, I see what she means. The first thing almost every team says is, “Mark our

THE AMAZING RACE
AIRS SUNDAYS AT 8 P.M.
ET/PT ON CBS.



Colucci discovers what adventure awaits him next in Salvador.

words, we're going to win." This being the first look the teams have gotten at each other, I catch a whiff of some nascent strategies and alliances among this brutal bunch. Menschy Arizona State grads Andrew and Dan plan to "play" pretty, pink-loving South Carolina natives Marisa and Brooke. And, I learn about 20 minutes later, vice versa.

A few teams in, I also realize I've never met with so many people so utterly convinced of their own abilities. Even the two New Yorkers in the mix, an undeniably impressive duo named Terence and Sarah, are unstereotypically non-neurotic. "He's the brawn, I'm the brains," so many of the team members say. "We're really street-smart." "We complement each other." "We know each other so well." And when I ask if they have a conflict resolution strategy, they say, "We'll just listen to each other and compromise." Yeah, right. Have they never seen this show?

But clearly many of them have, and the smarter ones have done whatever they could think of to prepare. They've timed themselves running with their backpacks. Long-distance runner Terence and Wall Street whiz Sarah have rappelled and practiced milking cows. A slightly older but incredibly fit-looking couple, Ken and Tina—he's a former college football coach, she's a charismatic corporate executive—have come up with a code phrase, "O Canada," to remind them to stop bickering and concentrate on winning the endgame. On the other hand, the cutest—and oldest—couple on this year's show, Oregon blueberry farmers and self-described hippies Arthur and Anita, plan to just "hug it out." At

the end of my time with them, they hug me, too. I admit it: At this point, I want them to win.

AROUND THE WORLD IN 22 DAYS

I arrive at 7 a.m. on Tuesday at Los Angeles' historic Memorial Stadium. By 10-ish, the stadium's huge thermometer reads 70 degrees, and it only rises for the next hour as *Race* host Phil Keoghan is filmed making introductory remarks to the competitors poised on the starting line. "I love that moment, right before the *Race*," Phil later tells me on one of our seemingly endless flights. "It's like I've been invited with a VIP pass to a cool special event. And when I put my hand up in the air and I'm about to say, 'Go!', I get goose bumps thinking what will be."

The competitors seem to be having the same reaction. Take after take, they look ready to sprint, not knowing whether this time Phil's moves are for real. And then finally, at about 11 a.m., they are. Immediately, a well-muscled young college kid named Dallas bounds up the stadium stairs, with his single mom, Toni, not far behind. The teams rip into the envelopes left atop their backpacks and get their first assignment: Make your way to Salvador.

Quite a few of them have no idea where the city of Salvador is even located (and I have to admit, a few weeks earlier, neither would I have). Nonetheless, they all hop into a series of waiting cars and speed off to Los Angeles International Airport. There, at an American Airlines counter marked with the show's trademark yellow-and-red striped flag, the first six teams score the earlier flight option, traveling via Miami to Brazil. As the remaining teams stand in line, it becomes clear how familiarity with the show's format can be a distinct advantage; instead of waiting, a few have the savvy to get themselves quickly over to United for option B, a flight leaving several hours later and connecting through Chicago.

RUN AND GUN

On my flight to Miami, I meet Cris Graves, a "host producer" on the show since season three. An erstwhile screenwriter, Cris has taken 11 trips around the world with this coolest of all day jobs, traveling every leg with a portable printer in her checked luggage, for making up clue cards and route signs. One becomes an adrenaline junkie working on *The Amazing Race*, Cris says. "You get on another show, and you're just bored."

The contestants are clearly feeling the surge too; I already can see some of them starting to

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work it. Self-avowed geeky gamers Mark and Bill, friends since a long-ago sci-fi convention, score a Portuguese-English dictionary from their seatmate. Divorcees/best friends Kelli and Christy have changed into chic blue tank tops studded with Texas longhorn skulls and, as much as many of the women swore to me that they were forsaking vanity on this *Race*, begin surreptitiously applying makeup. Sarah, who conveniently studied Portuguese in business school, spends her time in the Rio airport charming a backpacker out of various leftover currencies. The extra cash, she tells me later, will hopefully make the difference between hoofing it and a game-winning cab ride.

As she and Terence walk away, their cameraman—there's a two-person team assigned to cover each duo, with assignments rotating on each leg in order to ensure fairness—approaches the backpacker with a release form to sign. As the show's Executive Producer Hayma "Screech" Washington explains to me, *Race* cameramen, most of whom have been with the show since the beginning, are really "more like segment producers." And part-time athletes as well; contestants are required to stay within 25 feet of their camera team at all times, and, together in the heat of the moment, in *Amazing Race* lingo they "run and gun."

BLONG!

To Screech's relief, we finally do make it out of Rio that Wednesday morning, and on our last little commuter flight to Salvador, the game gets into high gear. Dallas Cowboy cheerleader Starr, a contestant along with her New York actor brother Nick, doesn't recognize me as one of her American compatriots as she flirtatiously convinces me to switch seats with her, giving up my perch in row 11 for one way back in 37. On this flight, I realize, placement matters. The race is on.

We land in Salvador and I immediately head off in a boxy gray van to the commercial district. There, before a tiny storefront, lies the contestants' first challenge: to steer rickety pushcarts, loaded with boxes of a gum brand called Blong!, into the *elevador Lacerda*, a 240-foot cliff-straddling structure linking the lower commercial district with historic Pelourinho above.

Teams are already arriving and locating their target, a candy vendor supplied with a batch of yellow-and-red *Amazing Race* envelopes. I see Ty and Aja, an African-American couple in a long-distance relationship between Los Angeles and Detroit, open their envelope and breathe a sigh of relief. Inside is good news: For the contestants, today's work is done. But for me, the challenges are just beginning.

THE HARD WAY UP OR THE SOFT WAY DOWN

As each team completes the candy challenge, I go off to join the production team in inspecting the two stunts they'll be asked to choose from tomorrow. The first will be billed as The Soft Way Down: a descent via a cargo net strung over the 240-foot height of the *elevador Lacerda*.

We enter and climb a steep ladder to the roof of the T-shaped structure. I see ahead of me that, to reach the cargo net, one must climb over the roof's sole handrail, walk unguarded along the elevator core, and onto a 4-foot-wide ledge. Of course, before you do that, the production crew slips a harness around your waist and thighs, and hooks you up to a safety line. At this point, the one other reporter on this trip and I are asked if we want to test the stunt. "Sure," he says eagerly. "I didn't come all this way just to chicken out!"

"I did!" I say a little too quickly, raising my hand. Having been on a series of planes for the past 24 hours, I have had no ... er ... "personal" time. The last thing I need is to become Salvador's newest urban legend, the American journalist who, after only mere minutes in this humid country, dangled by his thighs and lost control of his bodily functions high atop Brazil. So, I hop into one of the elevators and descend to watch the other reporter and Andy Wong, a CBS lawyer who travels with the show, make slow progress down the net. It looks like hard, hand-over-foot-over-hand work. When after about 20 minutes

"WE
DELIBERATELY
ZIGZAG THEM
UP AND DOWN
THE GLOBE."
— BERTRAM
VAN MUNSTER



Host Phil Keoghan admits that guessing who will win each season is an exercise in futility.

they reach the concrete barrier at the bottom, they are sweaty, their legs wobbly. It takes them a few tries to stand up straight.

From here, we're all off to check out the next challenge, later to be described as The Hard Way Up. A few squares away, on a steep uphill street, is the church *O Pagador de Promessas*, where the challenge will be to crawl up the plaza's many flights of outdoor stairs. Two local men have been recruited as judges, to watch for crab-walking cheaters, and two more to demonstrate, with towels taped around their knees for padding.

This time I'm game to give it a try. We both take our places at the foot of the stairs. In the Catholic world, crawling like this is intended to be a religious experience, with a prayer to be said on each step. Now, as the local judge shouts "Go!" my path leads up three steps and then right through some mystery liquid. And so I do find myself praying after all—that I didn't just get pee on my one pair of jeans.

Everyone had been acting as if this is the harder challenge, dealing huge pain to one's knees, but I'm finding it quite easy and exhilarating. I advance quickly forward, with the other reporter close behind. But when I look back, I can see him clearly cheating, squatting and running through the intermittent landings while I continue to crawl. At the top, it's a photo finish. The leader of the African band playing at the top—mostly to disorient us, Bert later admits—asks us both the magic question, the correct answer to which will be considered the completion of this challenge. Once again, it's a twist that anyone who has watched the past seasons of *The Amazing Race* might be able to anticipate. "How many stairs are there?" We both stand up quickly to proclaim, "53!"

INTO THE JUNGLE

It's now 6 p.m., and we head off to visit the contestants at the "nighttime hold," where Bert's sadistic predilections are clearly evident. "I like to set a tone on the first day," he tells me, "that you may think *this* is uncomfortable—and yet it's all downhill from here." The competitors, Bert has found, tend to be too buddy-buddy at first, viewing the first leg as some kind of bonding mutual adventure. "I remind them right upfront that this is not a vacation. In 12 hours, someone will be saying goodbye."

Behind a military base on the outskirts of town, we drive for a few minutes, then hike for a few more, until we finally reach a muddy, klieg-lighted clearing in the midst of a jungle. Here, under a



This season's teams include (from top): Stephanie Kacandes and Anthony Marotta, Mark Yturralde and Bill Kahler, Terence Gerchberg and Sarah Leshner, Aja Benton and Ty White, Andrew Lappitt and Dan Honig, and Kelli Crabb and Christy Cook.



single open tent, the teams are already making a futile attempt to get comfortable in an abutting series of two-man mosquito nets. To be fair, under a second tent, a small field production team will spend the night in a similarly awful setup.

By 7 p.m., Starr, who claims to be "a walking pharmacy," splits an Ambien tablet with her brother Nick. As we visitors to this encampment prepare to leave, Bert can't resist twisting the knife. "We're off to The Ritz-Carlton!" he proclaims loudly, and some of the contestants manage a laugh. The last things I see as we exit the clearing are the faces of New Jersey couple Anthony and Stephanie. Sitting wide awake and miserable under the white jungle netting, she in particular looks as if she'd much rather be in the Meadowlands.

DETOUR

By 8:30 the next morning, I've been told that everyone's first stop will be at the Detour box, in the courtyard of the 1702 sandstone Church of São Francisco. I soon find out the trick: There are three churches of São Francisco, all in a row. About half an hour later, the show's roving scouts radio in word that the first contestants are en route. As previously planned, we duck into the doorway of the post office across the narrow street, although I wonder how the teams won't notice us standing there so brazenly. But as the experienced crew members predict, the contestants arrive so focused on their task they blow right past us.

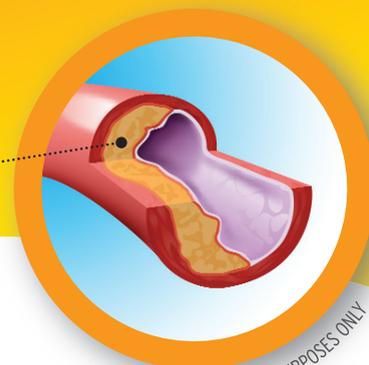
I then head for the base of the *elevador Lacerda*. I'm surprised to learn that, after retrieving the card from the Detour box detailing the two choices, 10 of the 11 teams have opted for the terrifying cargo net—even after realizing that with the wording "Soft Way Down," they have clearly been duped. I'm *not* surprised to see that, at the base of the net, a huge crowd of locals has gathered to watch. As teams descend, a local news helicopter begins to hover—not even as high as the top of the net—and a cameraman leaning out videotapes the crazy Americans pulling this never-before-attempted stunt. Finally, Nick and Starr are the first at the bottom, ripping into their envelope, which reveals the pit stop location: a fortress several hundred yards out in the Bay of All Saints, reachable only by boat.

PIT STOP

I take the brief water taxi ride with co-Executive Producer Amy Chacon. Amy is able to travel on only the first three legs of each *Race* before racing

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- fibrates (used to lower cholesterol)
- niacin (used to lower cholesterol)
- warfarin (used for thinning blood)
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- birth control pills that contain ethinyl estradiol or norgestrel
- antacids containing aluminum and magnesium hydroxide (used for heartburn)

Know all of the medicines you take and what they look like. It's always a good idea to check that you have the right prescription before you leave the pharmacy and before you take any medicine.

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herself back to L.A., where she supervises an Emmy-winning team of 16 editors in fashioning more than 200 hours of footage into each 43-minute, 11-second episode. By matching the common Los Angeles-time code on each camera's output, Amy's team whittles the 11 separate perspectives into one common narrative, while being careful to maintain its integrity. Editors can compress, but not alter, the overall timeline, she says, in building episodic and season-long story arcs. They scour the footage for any dynamic moments between two people or teams, but sometimes, squeezing it all in, she says, "is like a big Sudoku puzzle."

It's nearly 100 degrees atop the *morro*, where Phil leans on a stone wall beside long-dormant cannons, shielding himself under an umbrella against the relentless sun. Several teams have already raced up the ramp to finish on the show's famous world-map mat, and in between interviewing them, the overheated host has also been taping some stand-ups to insert later. "It's taken 12 seasons for people to truly understand what happens with our schedule on the road," Phil half-complains to me later about his days spent racing ahead of—or in some cases, behind—the competitors to tape bits and pieces of the show. "In the beginning, I think people honestly thought that I was going back to my hotel room, or sitting near a pool, drinking piña colodas and then going shopping."

I linger in the heat, ducking down when I'm told that the shot will be swinging my way. Finally, it's clear: Last-place Arthur and Anita, when they finally do arrive, will be told they're being eliminated. It's hard to feel bad for them, though, because these hippies are not exactly going back to the berry farm. They'll be spending the next three, expense-paid weeks vacationing at the show's "elimination station," this time in Portugal.

Downstairs in the fortress museum's café, I meet up with the surviving 10 teams to talk about their experience. For one thing, no one got much sleep in the jungle last night. Nick complains about having been pressed up against a sweaty Mark in the neighboring tent. For his part, Mark notes that Tina spent part of the night moaning in her sleep. I remind Tina that, as Phil had already warned me, the anti-malaria medication we're all taking often causes lurid dreams, but still she turns bright red. Ken steps in to defend his wife. "We're having a group sleepover, and they feed us beans before bed," he says, shifting attention elsewhere. "Yeah," Tina chimes in, laughing. "I could talk about some of the guys with that one, but I have a little bit more class."



This season's teams include (from top): Marisa Axelrod and Brooke Jackson, Nick and Starr Spangler, Ken and Tina Greene, Dallas and Toni Imbimbo, and Arthur and Anita Jones.



WANT MORE OF THE AMAZING RACE? VISIT THE SHOW ONLINE AT CBS.COM/PRIMETIME/AMAZING_RACE.

In marked contrast to their pre-*Race* bravado, everyone seems to have been humbled a bit by leg number one. Ken and Tina have realized that despite their best efforts, some little thing—in their case, a bum wheel on their candy cart—can always go wrong. And that, says Phil, is part of the fun.

"I think what makes the show work," the host theorizes, "is that there is really no particular set of attributes that determines whether a team will win. We've had all sorts of people win in the past. You could say that yes, they need to be good communicators, but luck also plays into it a huge amount. All it takes is a taxicab ride." To prove his point, Phil reveals that every season, the crew takes what they think are educated guesses as to which team will be out first, and which ones will make the final three. "And I can tell you that every season," he reveals, "every single one of us has been wrong."

FORTALEZA OR BUST

In the café, Bert briefly congratulates the teams—and with that, he and the advance crew head for the airport, jetting off to city number two. "We deliberately like to take them from hot to cold to hot, to zigzag them up and down the globe," Bert had told me earlier. But just as unpredictably, this time the next stop—Fortaleza, a city farther north in Brazil—will be relatively close by.

In all, Bert reveals, the planning for a *Race* takes up to six months, and usually requires that he physically travel the entire route four or five times himself, nailing down every detail from facilitator recruiting to insurance to permits. Luckily, officials in any given location are usually more than happy to comply, Elise explains. "They know the show is basically a one-hour commercial for their country."

In any given *Race*, I'm told, there are two types of cities: 12-hour and 36-hour holds. Salvador is of the 12-hour variety, meaning that the teams will be up and off to Fortaleza early on Friday morning, while I stay behind to enjoy the Boston-like colonial architecture and Miami-like beaches of Brazil's first capital city. That night, I sneak down to dinner at the Pestana Bahia and find the teams eating en masse, fraternizing yet clearly still sizing each other up over plates of Bahia's unique, African-influenced recipes like *moqueca* with shrimp. Although I'm exhausted, I half wish I could continue on with them. I just know this will prove to be a really fascinating race.

As I kick back on the sand at Barra the next day, only one word continues to go through my mind that fits this whole experience in. I can't help that it's a cliché. I have to say it: *Amazing!*