

Battling against the heat, rain and disease of the jungle, Noel Hannah, Alison Morris, Ian Cumming and Timmy Flavin represented Ireland with courage and skill in the annual Eco Challenge, a 12-day multisport adventure of canoeing, biking, trekking and climbing that tests the mind as well as the body

Irish endure rigours of Borneo jungle challenge

By Todd R. Nicholls

BALLYNAHINCH man Noel Hannah is a man who likes an adventure challenge – big time. So much so that he put his health at risk.

The Iivewire Co Down man was recently one of an Irish team of four who took part in the Eco Challenge, a 12-day multi-endurance event that each year has a different venue, a different set of challenges.

This year the event was held in Borneo, a place where the conditions are hot, the terrain rugged and the insects, most of the time, frisky.

The race was a multisport adventure race. Competitors were asked to canoe, climb, mountainbike, ascend and descend ropes. If it sounds like hard work, Hannah says it was.

"You are testing your body and mind to the limits," he says. "I don't think you realise just how difficult it is until you go and do it. It's the ultimate adventure."

"This year there was a lot of jungle trekking and there were two different types of boats which we sailed. It was really a bit of everything."

The Ireland team was made up of two members from the Republic and two from the north. As stipulated by the rules, one of the team members had to be female.

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The team also included Alison Morris (north), Ian Cumming and Timmy Flavin, both from the Republic.

"We all got on well," Hannah says. "We had all trained as individuals, but the first time we got together as a team was at Heathrow before we left."

Hannah and the Irish team finished in just over 10 days, in 27th place.

Not bad considering that only 44 teams of the 78 that started actually managed to finish, while the team that finished first and the team that finished third last year both dropped out of this year's event.

It was also not bad also when you consider that the heat and humidity of Borneo was a long way removed from the climate of Ireland.

"You can't really train for the heat," Hannah says. "Because with the likes of the mountain section and the mountain biking session it was over 42 degrees. You don't get that sort of heat here. You just had to get out into the mountains with a heavy backpack on and put the time in."

Hannah says that the effort required in training was immense. He would



■ **TEAM CHALLENGE:** Noel Hannah (left) with the rest of the Irish team, Alison Morris, Ian Cumming and Timmy Flavin (right), who performed creditably in the Eco Challenge endurance test in Borneo.

train between four and five hours a day, six days a week for the event.

"When your body is fit, well then, it is amazing what your mind will do. Even when your mind tells you to give up, your body won't let you."

The race itself, he says, was difficult. Take sleeping for example.

"It was hard to know when you could sleep, it's just really a balancing act. At some times you would only sleep for a couple of hours, while at other times you could rest up a little longer."

Eating was also difficult. Because there was no room for fresh food, the team virtually survived on junk food. Naturally after a time the body started to tell you that you needed vitamins and your performance suffers as a result.

The conditions were also tough. From 42 degree heat, to lashing rain that would last for four or five hours at a time, the Irish team faced it all.

"There was times that we used bin liners just to keep ourselves warm when it was raining. Whenever we got up the mountain it got cold with the rain. The bin liners kept the heat in."

Then there was the constant fear that team members would pick up a disease. Hannah himself spent seven days in the Royal Victoria Hospital.

"The water was a nightmare," he says. "All the rivers were full of absolutely brown water. We had to get our water out of the rivers. I got sick when we came home. There were over 50 American racers ill with the same thing."

"We were drinking around four or five litres a day and there is no way that you can carry that. We had filter bottles and so we were just dipping the bottles into the river and hoping that we wouldn't get sick."

Hannah says although training takes

time, there was also plenty of effort involved in trying to arrange details, especially since the team were travelling to a third world country which has no respect for the health and well-being for those who are not prepared.

Luckily the team had good sponsors in Clarins Beauty Products and Bridgedale Socks to assist them with their challenge.

To enter the event cost £3,000 and while the winners got \$50,000, for the remainder it proved to be an expensive exercise.

"It is costly," says Hannah, "and it would probably cost £16,000-£18,000 to take a team over, although it is worthwhile if you enjoy it and the challenges that come with it."

This was the second year that Hannah has raced in the Eco Challenge.

It was also the second year that an Irish team had finished the competition. Despite the hardships, the sickness and the overwhelming sense of tiredness, he says he would do it all again.

"This is talk that next year the challenge will be in South Africa. I'll be there," he says with a smile.

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■ **DRESS PARTY:** Noel Hannah at the opening ceremony with Borneo ladies in national costume (above) while both pictures on the right give some indication of the hostile conditions of the race