

Spirit of

Short and intense, the Chapman's Challenge provides a great platform for budding athletes to ease into the world of endurance races.

Chap

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MAN



Zijun Loh, a competitor born with one arm, finishing the Chapman's Challenge effortlessly.



ABOVE Participants being flagged off from Pangkor Laut Resort's Jetty.

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP National triathlete Irene Chong navigating the steep trails; Reebok ambassadors Noel Chelliah and Kimbeley Yap (who is also a SEA Games gold medalist) taking the group through a warm-up session; An athlete races to the finishing line after completing the one-kilometre swim.

stood before Emerald Bay on Pangkor Laut Island, five kilometres off the coast of the state of Perak in Malaysia, watching as fierce waves crashed ashore. Plumes of saltwater splashed violently off the rocks, prompting me to rethink my decision of signing up for Chapman's Challenge. With the breaststroke being the only move I had in my swimming repertoire, I was anything but a decent swimmer. Concepts like treading water were a mystery to me. Clearly, I'd bitten off more than I could chew. Looking towards the roiling sea that seemed to be tossing buoy markers this way and that, I asked one of the ushers: "You want me to swim in that?"

BORN SURVIVOR The Chapman's Challenge endurance race, organised by YTL Hotels, honours the journey of Freddie Spencer Chapman, a British commando who escaped the Japanese forces in 1945, during WWII. As a soldier, Chapman spent most of his time behind enemy lines, blowing up trains, bridges and supplies. He executed these plans so well that the Japanese believed they were facing a team of 200 commandos, instead of a three-man team!

After spending three years in the jungles of the Malayan peninsula, completing missions in Perak, Chapman finally escaped via Pangkor Laut Island. Disguised as a labourer, Chap-

man snuck through enemy checkpoints, hid in sampans, and gained access to the island. He spent a further 36 hours in the wilderness before swimming off Emerald Bay in the dark towards a waiting submarine. This rescue was made possible with the help of guerrillas who procured a radio for Chapman to coordinate the escape. Despite this amazing feat, Chapman remains somewhat obscure in the pages of history, details of his escape derived from his journals, as well as his book *The Jungle Is Neutral*, in which Chapman recounts the beauty of Pangkor Laut Island.

NURTURE VS. NATURE As impressive as Chapman's escape sounds, it was only the tip of the iceberg where his survival skills were concerned. Having endured arduous missions throughout his military career, he was well equipped with the practical know-how to survive the overwhelming odds.

Prior to the war, Chapman often joined extreme expeditions to satiate his appetite for adventure. Chapman lost the nails on some of his fingers and toes due to extreme cold while hiking in Greenland, survived a 20-hour storm at sea in just a kayak, and became one of the first mountaineers to summit the Chomolhari mountain in Tibet!

Then, came wartime, and Chapman was thrown head-on into hardships that would've

broken a lesser man's spirit. In agony, he endured malaria and pneumonia while in Malaya. This took a huge toll on his body and he fell into a coma for 17 days. There were times that Chapman had to bind his mouth to prevent his teeth from chattering and giving his position away to enemy soldiers.

The worst happened when he was discovered by a Japanese patrol, prompting his capture. But Chapman proved to be a wily prisoner, managing to persuade his captors of his acquaintance with the Japanese prince. The officer in charge of Chapman was so taken aback by this story that he did not bind Chapman's limbs, and it was this leniency that gave this charmer the opportunity to make his daring escape.



READY, SET, GO! As far as endurance events go, the Chapman's Challenge belongs in the shorter end of the spectrum, with a 3.8-kilometre road run, 2.4-kilometre trail run, and a one-kilometre swim. However, the race does include an extra factor of time, allowing seasoned athletes to challenge themselves and have a go at setting a record. Being a weekend warrior myself, I would've been content merely finishing the race, especially with my swimming prowess being somewhat lacklustre.

Being part of the exclusive preview for the event that's scheduled to happen in May, I showed up expecting to race alongside peers that ran for leisure. I never expected to be grouped with elites like 2015 SEA Games Triathlon silver

medallist Rikigoro Shinozuka, 2005 Triathlon SEA Games gold medallist Kimbeley Yap, and Ironman Malaysia hall-of-famer Yee Sze Mun!

As if that wasn't intimidating enough, I found myself winded halfway through our pre-race warm-up, while nobody else seemed to break a sweat! As I panted through a series of push-ups, all I could think of was the final component: the swim. I was no stranger to exhaustion; I just didn't want to get tired at sea. It finally came time for the race, and after a brief countdown, we were flagged off.

A TROPICAL PARADISE Pangkor Laut Resort's scenic compound was the best place to start the road run. Cutting through devel-

HEROIC ESCAPES

Here are other heroes who showed steely determination in adverse circumstances.

NICK ROWE Colonel Nick Rowe was captured by the Viet Cong in 1963, leading to five years of imprisonment. Despite being an intelligence officer, Rowe managed to persuade the Viet Cong troops that he was an engineer, and even solved the engineering questions posed to him by his captors. One day, as American helicopters flew over the encampment, Rowe took advantage of the distraction and disarmed his guards, ran to a clearing, and signalled to the helicopters, which eventually led to a daring rescue.

EDOUARD IZAC US Navy lieutenant Edouard Izac was captured after the ship he was aboard – President Lincoln – was sunk by German torpedoes. Held prisoner in the German submarine, Izac obtained useful information on the troop's movements. He did this by keeping his comprehension of the German language a secret. While escaping a POW camp, Izac drew fire from the guards in hopes of assisting others with their escape. He returned home to receive a Medal of Honour – the highest military award.

DIETER DENGLER This US Navy pilot lieutenant was taken prisoner in a Laotian POW camp during the Vietnam War, during which he endured mistreatment for five months. He banded with Thai and American POWs to plan an escape. Together, they observed the guards' routines, and chose the perfect moment to strike. While the guards were eating, Dengler and his party snuck out, stole the enemy's weapons, and used them to break out.



THE CHAPMAN'S CHALLENGE

WHERE
Pangkor Laut Resort

WHEN
May 13-14, 2016

Booking a room for two (approx. USD237 per night), for a minimum of two nights, entitles up to two people to compete in the Chapman's Challenge. Lodging includes speedboat transfers to and from the island, daily meals, goodie bags along with post-race cocktails and barbecue. Sign up at www.pangkorlautresort.com

oped areas on this 300-acre island, my fellow adrenaline junkies and I ran through the sprawling grounds, occasionally stumbling upon rocky outcrops with great vantage points. Once in a while, the route stretched alongside the horizon, allowing for fabulous views of the Malacca Straits (a stretch of water between the Malaysian peninsula and Indonesia's Sumatra). So beautiful was the landscape that I became carried away enjoying the views and forgot to keep pace with the rest of the pack. Pretty soon, I was running all by myself.

When the pavement gave way to jungle trails, what followed was – to me – the best part of the race. Very little of the privately-owned island has been developed. This means that

most of its two million-year-old virgin rainforest remains untouched, allowing visitors to experience its raw natural beauty. As I navigated trails that cut through swathes of greenery, I listened to the calls of macaques, watched fruit bats convening in trees and delighted at the sight of hornbills taking flight across the sky. It was easy to see how this island had charmed Chapman, and he wasn't the only one to be enchanted; Italian opera tenor Luciano Pavarotti also fell in love with Pangkor Laut, and is quoted as saying, "This place is enchanting; it is a paradise. The morning when I woke up, I went out and I was really moved, almost crying, to see what beautiful things God had done. This is a paradise."

OVERCOMING FEARS Although the 20-year-old trail was well-maintained, with pathways and steps to help hikers keep their footing, it still took considerable effort to traverse the steep climbs. This had me wondering how Chapman navigated the terrain before any paths existed. My respect for Chapman grew even deeper as I realised how vulnerable I felt, all alone, surrounded by this wild world full of creatures I could not even begin to imagine. And I was making my trek in broad daylight! I began to imagine scenarios where I was lost, trapped in an unfamiliar world for an indefinite period of time before a rescue party would be able to find me. To be able to live off the land for an extended period of time would not only



ABOVE Yee Sze Mun, Ironman hall-of-famer is no stranger to endurance racing.

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP SEA Games silver medallist Rikigoro Shinozuka currently holds the fastest time at 27:27; After completing the race and freshening up, participants get to enjoy cocktails and a barbecue dinner; Organisers briefing participants on the race details and checkpoints.

require outdoor survival skills but also a special kind of fortitude, which was why I was glad to see the final incline of the route.

That hill marked the most gruelling part of the race, with two-foot-high steps stretching as far as the eye can see. With a last-effort push, I finally reached a clearing, but that meant that the time I'd dreaded had arrived. I had to brave the swim, and I didn't even know if I had it in me to reach the first buoy!

What had begun as niggling doubts had morphed into full-on fear, fuelled by exhaustion. Even the lifeboats on standby didn't do much to calm my nerves. Still, it didn't make sense to give up when I was so close. So, with a caution, I waddled into the first couple of waves as runners who

had completed the course shouted warnings of jellyfish – as if I needed to add another challenge to the already gruelling mission ahead of me!

Before panic even had the chance to set in, a wave crashed into me, helping me to a huge serving of seawater. I stumbled a little, gulped a little more salty goodness, and tried to fight the sea – an impossible task I should not have even bothered to attempt. Flailing against the raging waters, my leg cramped, effectively putting an end to my rather tragic stab at swimming. Disappointed, I floated back to shore, and limped sadly to the finish line. Not completing the swim meant that I had not officially finished the race, and I was extremely frustrated to have gone so far only to be thwarted by this last challenge.

VICTORY FOR ALL When everything was over, my fellow competitors and I were treated to post-race drinks and a barbecue dinner at Chapman's Bar, Pangkor Laut Resort's beachside bar, which is as old as the resort itself. It felt a little awkward to celebrate my mediocre performance at a bar named after a brave commando who'd done so much more.

Mingling with the other participants, I learned their reasons for being there. Some took the race as a filler between their other planned triathlons. Others saw it as a chance to conquer their fear of open waters. For triathlon

veteran Yee Sze Mun, it was a recovery exercise from his three-hour bicycle ride two days earlier! Unlike the rest of the participants, Yee was the only person in the group to have competed in 11 Ironman Malaysia events, and at the age of 78, has often been the oldest participant.

Noting my disappointment at not finishing the race, Yee gave me a little pep-talk, "There will always be setbacks. What's important is learning to laugh at your pain. I once broke a rib rappelling down a wall during a race, and had to paddle a leaking raft with that injury to the finishing line. If my teammates and I didn't find the humour in that situation, we'd have thrown in the towel much earlier. Once you can do that, you can set out to break any limits you have."

And then it hit me. While not as equipped as Chapman to survive hostile environments, all the participants had something in common: the desire to test their limits. Be it the well-conditioned Rikigoro Shinozuka who completed the course in a smoking 27 minutes; or Zijun Loh, who finished the course with ease despite being born with one arm; or even me, wanting to know if I could tackle the seas; we shared the passion to challenge ourselves.

Sometimes, it's not a matter of being strong, but feeling strong. And, there's no better place to discover what you're made of than at events like the Chapman's Challenge. **3**