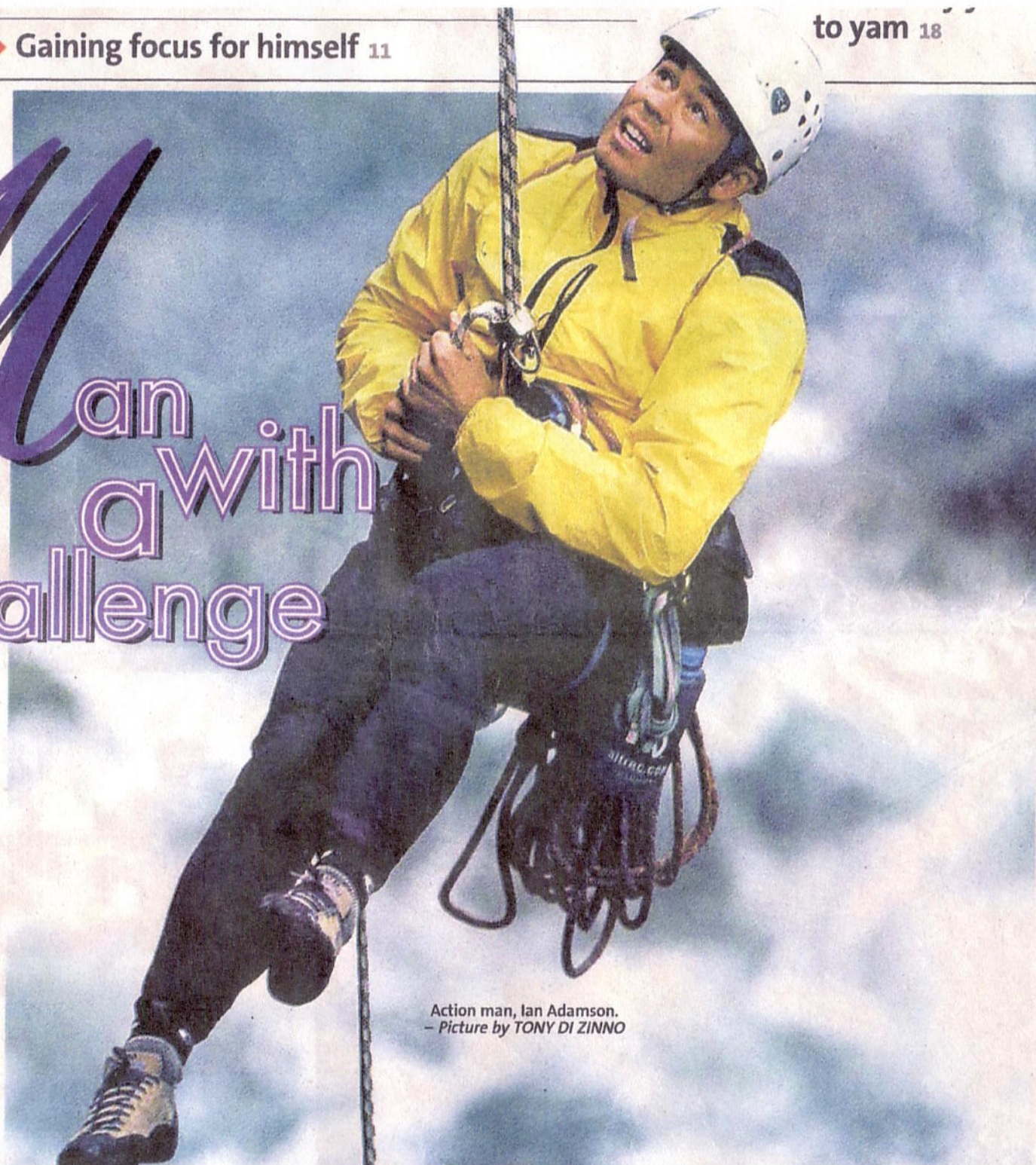


Man a with challenge

When you have the most impressive credentials in the world of adventure racing and are only one of two people in the world to have won the sport's "Grand Slam", what sort of adventure course would you design?

StarWeekend meets Ian Adamson to find out.

> **Adventure 2**



Action man, Ian Adamson.
— Picture by TONY DI ZINNO

A man of action, yes, but Ian Adamson is an uber-jock who wears many hats. He's a corporate trainer, motivational speaker and contributing editor of a publishing group

Adventure 3

SATURDAY 1 November 2003

Weekend

Ian Adamson, adventure racer extraordinaire, gives LEE SIEW PENG the low-down on the Outdoor Quest racecourse in Sabah.

Prepare for a wild ride

PICTURES COURTESY OF TONY DI ZINNO, SRI PELANCONGAN SABAH & OUTDOOR QUEST

HE'S one of only two people in the world to have won adventure racing's "Grand Slam" a.k.a. the Big Four: the Raid Gauloises, Eco-Challenge, Southern Traverse and ESPN X-venture. He set a world record for a 24-hour kayak distance in Colorado in 1997 (324.8km), only to break it the following year in the Yukon Territories by another 22.4km.

He sails, swims, surfs, kayaks, skis, skates, bikes, runs, abseils and climbs. He also scuba-dives and flies light aircraft. Just say the verb, he's probably done it.

A man of action, yes, but Ian Adamson is an uber-jock who wears many hats. He's a corporate trainer, motivational speaker and contributing editor of a publishing group. He patented a medical device for CPR, but left his US\$150,000 (RM570,000) job as a biomedical engineer in 1996 and is now director of operations of Colorado Adventure Training, his corporate leadership and adventure skills company. And to top it all off, he speaks five languages, is a classically trained flautist with degrees in mechanical engineering and sports medicine, and can prepare you a gourmet meal.

Too much.

The 39-year-old Aussie of Thai-Portuguese-English descent is definitely the man you want



The race will run over four days and 300km, with many disciplines.

biking, kayaking and in-line skating, participating teams will also have to paddle, and perform adventure skills (such as abseiling and orienteering), and traverse oxygen-deficient mountain plateaus, steaming jungles, treacherous rivers and open water. Teams will race for four days, covering 300km, and will sometimes have to perform all seven disciplines within one day.

Sounds tough? What else can you expect from the guy who's also been called the "toughest man on the planet".

Adamson started racing at a young age, thanks to the influence of his adopted father, who was a national class masters road cyclist. Even in high school, he was already a walking mini-Olympics: he cycled competitively from age 12 to 16, and was a star swimmer, runner,

footballer, water polo and volleyball player. He also became a national champion in wild-water, two-person downriver canoeing while still at university; at the age of 24, he won a 400km canoeing competition down the Murray River, beating some 3,000 other participants.

Funnily enough, he did not automatically take to adventure racing (which was called "multi-sport" in its early days). But after moving to the United States in 1995, he met Harvard professor Robert Nagle, an adventure racing veteran, on an internet newsgroup. They agreed to form a group for the Raid Gauloises in Argentina, but through a series of quirks, coincidences, and twists of fate, they wound up in Utah for the inaugural Eco-Challenge. Along the way, Adamson met Kiwi John Howard, adventure racing's first real "superstar".

Even as unofficial participants, Nagle, Howard and Adamson simply tore that Eco-Challenge course apart. The next year, Adamson won top honours in the Southern Traverse and Eco-Challenge; he then quit his job, and the rest is history.

Despite his awesome accomplishments in adventure racing, this modest man says he was honoured to be approached by

IMG (the organisers of OQ) in 2000 to be the technical and course director. "Having competed successfully in the event in 1997, 1998 and 1999, and with experience as an events director in the United States, the relationship is extremely productive," he says in an e-mail interview. (He's also mapped out courses in India, China and the British Virgin Islands, among other countries.)

"My role is to set and manage the racecourse. I work closely with John Howard, who is the technical director, and Murphy Reinschreiber, the race director. John is in charge of the technical aspects of the race, such as ropes and adventure skills, whilst Murphy manages the logistics, rules and staffing on the course. My goal is to make a safe, interesting, athletically challenging, and culturally diverse race that meets the spirit of the event."

(A further note on John Howard: he is not the Aussie prime minister but the "Superman of adventure racing", the only other athlete to win the "Grand Slam".)

With Adamson and Howard at the helm, you just know the OQ is going to rock. As Adamson

on your team, whether you're out at sea, high on a mountain, or down on the ground.

However, Adamson, dubbed the Yoda of his sport, will be working behind the scenes as Course Director for this year's premier adventure race, the Outdoor Quest (OQ) in Sabah.

Yoda and Superman

The theme for this year's OQ is "From the Top to the Tip". In addition to the "usual" events like the team biathlon, running,

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puts it: "One of the primary considerations in planning a racecourse is knowing how the athletes act and think. John and I have over 50 years of elite multi-sport racing experience between us, so we have an unprecedented feel for race courses."

And exactly what sort of race course makes the race?

Adamson ticks off the criteria: "It must be challenging to the teams, yet visually stunning and safe. We also take into consideration elements such as the climate, local geography, athlete skills, adventure, athleticism, cultural interest and an even balance of the seven sports."

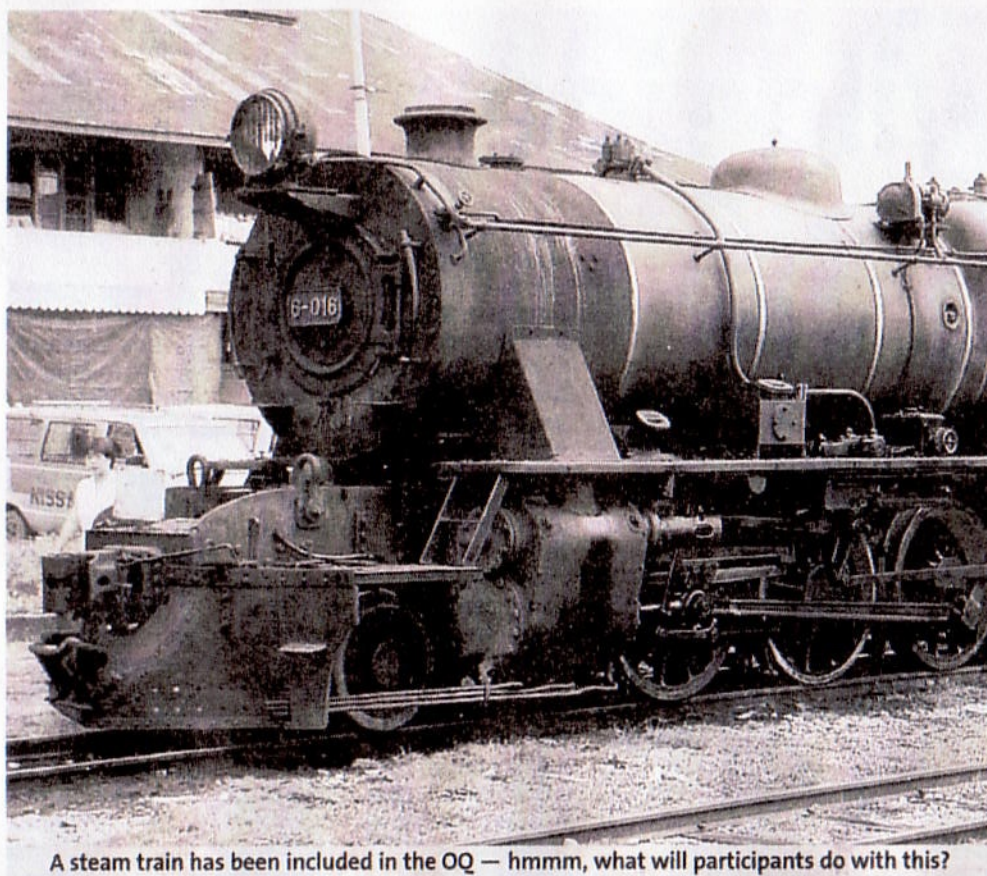
The lure of Sabah

But how do you make an event even more appealing the second time around in the same place? After all, this will be the second year running that Sabah is hosting the event. (Lijiang in China had the same honour in 2000 and 2001.)

Adamson says the OQ "is not a triathlon where the course remains the same. In fact, we go to great lengths to make sure no day is the same as any previous day in the event's history. We also try to include a new element each time, which is quite a feat given that there have been 24 race days since the race started in 1997."

Adamson explains that new elements ensure that the teams that come every year will not have too much of an advantage. "The beauty of adventure racing is that the teams won't know what to expect since each course is completely new," he adds.

Different from the rest



A steam train has been included in the OQ — hmmm, what will participants do with this?

This year's surprises, he divulges, include a day where the teams will be required to share one, two and three bikes between each of the four runners on three successive team biathlon sections. "We are also including a historic and unique wood-burning steam train, and a primordial paddle through a little-known sago plantation."

One of the attractions of OQ is its eco-tourism facet— one can still appreciate one's surroundings whilst hurtling round a hairpin bend on a bicycle at 50kph.

"The physical beauty, hospitality and friendliness of the people make Sabah a truly wonderful place to work and play," Adamson says.

"Mount Kinabalu is one of the most beautiful mountains in the world, with dramatic peaks soaring over 4,000m over the coastal plains, and spectacular cliffs plunging hundreds of metres into the surrounding jungle. The incredible diversity of climatic conditions and the pristine beauty of the coastal areas make Sabah an ideal site for the OQ. The beach areas in Kudat and around the tip of Borneo are an untapped coastal paradise largely devoid of urban and industrial influences, allowing us to include even more variety in the course this year."

Nevertheless, the *kiasu* question begs to be asked. How does Sabah compare to Lijiang?

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"The main differences are the climate and altitude. Malaysia is very hot and humid and largely at sea level, whereas our previous locations in China have been cool and dry. Sabah has dense jungles and stunning beaches. China has more open spaces.

However, both are blessed with majestic mountains," Adamson says diplomatically.

He likes the steam train start ("it's unique and very much a 'fun' element"), but is most excited about Mount Kinabalu, his favourite part of the course.

"Last year was great, but this year it's unbelievable.

The abseil into Lowe's Gully is probably the most thrilling thing we have ever put in the Outdoor Quest. The abseil itself is immense, with most of the 110m overhanging, but then the drop into the gully is a mind-boggling 1,000m!"

Adamson has visited Borneo on seven separate occasions, and is familiar with its diverse terrain, having raced there before. One of his most memorable encounters occurred during Eco-Challenge 2000, when he zipped round a corner on a bike to come face-to-face with a herd of elephants crashing about in the bush!

Severe, yet safe

The first phase of designing an adventure race course, says Adamson, is to research the area to get an idea of its location, geography, climate and culture.

"Next, we scrutinise the maps and talk with local experts to get an idea of likely ideas to investigate. In the past two years, we have used helicopters to assist us in the initial scout for the courses. This allows us to see an enormous area in a short time.

"We take videos, stills, notes and mark out maps while still in the air, and then spend a week or so investigating what we've found. Once we know the best areas for each of the seven sports, we mark several possible courses for each sport for each day, including start, transition and finish areas. Every location, trail, road and route has to be aesthetically pleasing, visually appropriate (for television), logistically possible and suitable for each sport."

Phew. And to think it "only" took a team of four or five people, working with local guides three to four weeks, to come up with the course!

The OQ also emphasises cleanliness. Stiff penalties are imposed on teams that are caught littering. Adds Adamson: "When designing the course, we make sure that the natural areas are well taken care of, and we avoid or tread lightly on the environmentally sensitive areas."

It would seem that everything about this course — from concept to implementation — is extreme, but Adamson stresses that "the single most important is the safety of the athletes, staff and onlookers."

attachment at all times, and we have redundancy in all of our rigging and procedures. (This means that if one point of safety fails, a second or even third one will be in place to prevent a catastrophe.)

"On the water, we have a large number of professionals and have designed the course

to avoid dangerous places. Our safety team consists of experts from as far as Finland, New Zealand and the United States."

Adamson will literally run his own course about a week prior to the start of the event, checking if it's safe to be done.

"We have improved on last year's



There's a challenge in every nook and cranny.

course by taking into consideration the athletes' comments and by learning from our mistakes. We had some challenges with the heat last year, so we changed the timing and distances of certain events, like the trail running," he says.

Speaking of challenges, Adamson's biggest was climbing 6,000m-high Mount Cotopaxi in Ecuador, the world's highest active volcano, during Eco-Challenge in 1998. "This happened on the third day with virtually no sleep, we still had a week of non-stop racing to get to the finish, some 500km further on," he remembers. (His team, which included Howard, went on to win by a two-hour margin.)

For this year's OQ participants, Adamson warns: "The altitude on the mountain and the heat will be the two main challenges this year, and we also have some interesting adventure skills that may ambush even the most experienced racers. Quite a few of the locations and trails we found are unknown to most people. Expect the race to be fast, furious and close!"

What's in store?

"This year's OQ is the most competitive yet. (Some 32 teams are taking part, the largest number so far in all OQ's years of competition.) There really aren't any multi-sport races that come close in terms of course design, professionalism and polish. This event is truly at the top level of events internationally, as we consistently hear from athletes who have competed in this and other races," Adamson discloses.

"I love course setting for the OQ. It gives me the opportunity to explore new areas and make my own adventure. It's very satisfying discovering new places and experiencing the local culture, but ultimately the most gratifying part of course design is once the race is over and seeing that everyone stayed safe and the athletes had a great experience."

But hey, if it's a course by Ian Adamson, could it be anything else? **W**

□ The Sabah Outdoor Quest will be held from Dec 11-15 and will kick off at the Lagoon Park