In the tradition of countless scout hikes, here is my log of the Amazing Singapore Race experience. Many people have already asked me “How was the race?” I hope this answers that question, and conveys our experience, as well as my own thoughts and feelings.

**The Team**

**Dean Baey**, 3rd year in NTU Computer Engineering and one of my scout buddies, was the first to propose the idea back in May when I first returned home. One of our navigators, he is especially familiar with the west. He was also in charge of eating weird stuff.

**Jeremy Chan**, 3rd year in NUS Architecture, is my other scout buddy and walking street directory. Knowledgeable on all but the most outlying areas, he made quite sure we didn't ever get lost.

**Andrew Wan**, just started serving my bond with the SAF. Too many navigators get us lost, so my focus was on the tasks (“monkey work”) and strategy.

**Catherine Chien** or **Jiawei**, a new Associate Consultant at Bain & Company and my fellow UPenn alum, was our linguist and the other activities person. Between the two of us, we've probably done every adventurous sport available in Singapore, and then some!
25th Friday 2000 - 26th Saturday 0500

Our race started on a rather sad note from the very beginning when our backup camera died, Dean's sole started coming off, and we couldn't even find the start point at Escape Theme Park in Downtown East - well, not immediately anyway. Then we decided that we were carrying way too much food, and dumped about a third of our supplies and some equipment. After the GOH finally started us off, we took off at our slow and steady wins the race pace.

Things continued downhill as the race began. We were barely out of the first forest on the way to checkpoint one when Dean's sole came off completely. We fixed it using our medical tape, and then proceeded to search for the entry point into the next stretch of forest. There were many teams heading off in various directions, but we quelled the urge to follow them and decided to rely on our own instincts. A bit egotistical, but we figured that a team with three president scouts and four GEPs did not need to follow the crowd.

In the second forest, we found the Guardian, who gave us a list of eight places to visit, centered mainly in Changi and Silaran. With the entire night ahead of us, we set off at a brisk pace to Changi Village. Soon, other teams began to pass us on taxis, and we even saw one picked up by a private car. We had resolved not to waste money since everything was within easy walking distance and we had only $80, but it was about this time that Dean and Jeremy began to sing the refrain to Take It To The Lord In Prayer with every passing blue top - "Have we trials and temptations..." One of the invaluable memories we picked up from ACS' chapel.

The night passed quite uneventfully. Although not all the clues led to the places we had first thought, teams ahead of us were very friendly and helpful, and we would trade the locations of checkpoints that we had already visited. Morale reached a low when at our third checkpoint, we met a team that asked us how to get to their ninth - before running off to their waiting taxi. We really began to wonder then if they were just stupid to spend all their money now, or if they had more illegal resources.

Undoubtedly the most memorable of the checkpoints was the old Changi Hospital, a dilapidated building with endless flights of stairs. We had to clamber along pitch dark corridors with weird people following us and making ghostly sounds - we suspected that they were drug addicts of some sort - with the smell of disinfectant in the air trying not to wonder how many people had passed on here and left their restless souls.

Towards the end of the night, Jiawei suddenly revealed the skill that probably makes her the most invaluable member of the team. From an extremely ulu Chinese temple, she managed to hitch us a ride out to the main road, saving at least half an hour. Even better, she managed to grab a ride from Changi Chapel to the Newater plant in Simei in a Lexus SUV! She will probably attribute it to successful internalization of her negotiations class at Wharton, but I'm sure her feminine charms must have played a part too. The Newater clue also posed the greatest challenge yet, but she managed to unscramble the letters - buat air baru.

As we strolled down the home stretch (the plant proved to be really far in, damn we should have taken the SUV further), we were all set to rest until the Haven opened at 8am as we were told in our briefing. Instead, we were surprised to find teams coming out, and we were shocked to find that our information was wrong, and the first teams were already hours ahead of us! That was a great shock to us and after a Newater parade and a powder bath, we were soon on the road out again.
Thinking Aloud

Our initial strategy was quite simple. Since we were told that each Haven (a sort of rest point) would only be open for a one-hour window, there was no advantage from getting there early except to sleep. So we planned to conserve all our money and Sun Tzu cards (which allowed us to do things like reveal the location or even skip the next checkpoint) until the last leg, so that we could overtake all the other teams in a final burst. But it was really quite demoralizing to see other teams zooming by on wheels, and we had to wonder if they were just silly or too rich. Anyway, the other cornerstone of our strategy was that we are the best, so we do things our way.

I’m also continuously amazed at Jiawei’s persistence and ability to stop vehicles and hitch rides. She claims you just have to be more tired, but I think it takes a lot to overcome the pride and reluctance to inconvenience others, and our feet would certainly be a lot more sore if she were not around.

26th Saturday 0500 - 26th Saturday 1400

Our next stop was Tang Dynasty Village and we took one of the first trains from Tanah Merah down to Lakeside, where we were also able to get Dean a new shoe. We hit another snag there when the condom we were using to collect water broke, but I was fortunate to decipher the next clue: “My country? In ‘brand new condition’ or ‘a herb’?” Finally I didn't feel quite so redundant.

Some time later, we were following a deserted train track, emerging at a muddy canal beside Jurong Town Hall Road. Tasked to catch three grasshoppers, we tried to pass off crickets instead because we didn't want to join the other teams wading in the mud. We wasted a lot of time there because the crickets were much harder to catch, and ultimately not only did they make us get grasshoppers, but they sent our whole team into the ankle-deep muddy water to search for the next clue. The next clue split the team, sending me to Snow City and the other three to the Bird Park waterfall.

The next four hours were the most frustrating of the race. On reaching Snow City, I found myself number 138 which is already pretty bad. But worse, the twentieth person had only just begun the task of snowboarding down the pathetic three-storey slope. I settled back for a long wait, and managed to kill time by talking to some of the other frustrated participants, whoever was still awake. The most annoying thing was that they cleared the first 120+ people at a rate of about twenty per hour, but just when my turn came they decided to switch to snow tubing which took a mere fraction of the time. So after waiting ages for my turn, I found myself in a glut of people trying to grab a cab and as misfortune would have it, by the time I reached Dragon Kiln near NTU, there were only about ten teams left! The others had completed their mission in the Bird Park in record time, but it was of little use as they still had to wait hours for me. We were at the bottom of the barrel; it was time for a change of plan.

Thinking Aloud

We probably made some of our biggest mistakes on Saturday morning, because it may have been possible to avoid some of the delays that grasshopper catching and Snow City imposed on us. Dean had suggested using a wild card when they first gave us the task, but somehow the prospect of catching grasshoppers seemed too easy - just that there turned out to be so few of them. And they probably would have made us do it anyway. Snow City seemed like a dream come true to a snowboarding fanatic, because I had already struck it off my list of potential activities due to the inherent logistical problems. The fact that it was a solo task made it seem a little more credible, but on hindsight we should really have just tried to skip that checkpoint altogether, if it had been possible. Being an expert is of little advantage going down a short slope, especially if you have to wait for others and nobody fails anyway.

After three hours think at Snow City, I was convinced that the only way we could possibly still win was to play our ultimate wild card - the Gotcha. Supposedly it could be really good or really bad; if it
was good it might give us the boost we need, if bad it probably wouldn't matter anyway. We still had all our cards and almost all our money, so our placing at the very bottom was deceptive, and we still had a chance of winning this race.

**26th Saturday 1400 - 27th Sunday 0100**

At Dragon's Kiln, we played our first card - our most dangerous card, because it could be good or bad - the Gotcha. In my mind this was do or die and it turned out to be a Zoom which allowed us to skip the next checkpoint, directly to the one after. I was a little disappointed because the negative consequences the card threatened were much harsher, but nonetheless it gave us a little boost. Our next few checkpoints were spent wandering around the Lim Chu Kang area, mainly on the back of numerous friendly trucks and pickups, trying our best to catch up with other teams.

One turning point was when we were given two tasks: one person to follow a trail and get the next clue while the remaining team members had to decipher a coded message. Dean went to get the clue, and Jeremy made short work of the code. But then we realized that although we were surrounded by numerous teams, none of them were puzzling over the code which meant that they were all just waiting for the next clue! In a snap decision, we dashed in to extract Dean and played our Shio kai card which revealed to us the location of the next checkpoint: Jurong Frog Farm.

Just like that, we leapfrogged past numerous other teams, putting us back in the top 100 by my estimate. At the frog farm, I got to kiss a frog, and we got an extra Shiok card! And that was supposed to be difficult? Next stop, was down to the Indoor Stadium, where Dean and Jeremy had the pleasure of sampling fried crickets and a semi-formed chick from within an egg. Jiawei and I just watched with our stomachs turning. There was actually an expat on another team who commented that her really liked the taste of the egg; well good for him!

We went our separate ways then: Jiawei and I to the largest D24 in town where we were made to eat a real durian. (We later found out that Dean is the only person on our team that actually likes the prickly things.) Dean and Jeremy sped off to Fort Canning where Dean made quick work of the task to twist up a balloon mouse. We met again at the top of Mount Faber and proceeded to the gardens of Alkaff Mansion. This stretch was probably the most scenic of our route, and we got to enjoy both our lovely surroundings as well as the city's night skyline.

It was also at these gardens that we escaped a potentially disastrous blunder. We were pretty sure the next clue led to Pearl's Hill, but not quite. Finally, we decided to play it safe and use our Tikam card, which narrowed the possible locations down to two: Pepy's Road in Pasir Panjang and Mount Imbria on Sentosa. We still weren't sure as we headed to Pepy's Road, but if we had gone to Pearl's Hill we would have destroyed our chances completely. Neither of the options they presented us was even on our consideration list!

At Pepy's Road, we were told to find the next checkpoint - an AMX13 on a hill. We figured there were just too many decorative tanks lying around Singapore's military installations, and decided to Zoom on to the next place, the cheese prata stall outside NUS. None of us had realized the name was prefixed by "Niqqi's" and we were a bit apprehensive if it was the right one but it paid off. There we got free prata. Free prata! We also got the extremely welcome news that we were in 23rd place!

Next began a rather uneventful tour of the Upper Bukit Timah area from the railway station behind King Albert Park to two different sides of Xiao Gui Ling at Hillview. It was also about this time that we started begging free rides off the bus drivers, most of whom were very obliging. If Jiawei's charms work on car and truck drivers, maybe my kiddie looks have a similar effect of the bus drivers. It was also about this time that we had a conversation that must have been occurring among teams all over Singapore: guys, we can cheat and win this or we can finish this with integrity and try to attain a decent ranking. We were pretty sure other teams out there were cheating in some way or other, whether by using extra money or with pre-arranged

**Hitching a lorry ride with other teams**

**Kiss kiss! Shiok ah!**

**Jeremy's half-formed chick**
transport, but did we want to be like them? It was a short discussion, but we quickly concluded that there was more glory in doing well with honour than winning without. We would simply do the best we could, and when all that remains of the race are memories, this temptation will not have robbed us of any pride or satisfaction.

The next clue took us to Blk 406 in Yishun. By this time, we decided that the standard of the clues was getting worse at the beginning. At the beginning the clues had required a lot of thought, but when you got it you knew you had the answer. In the later stages, the clues were getting imprecise so that they seemed to point to obvious locations, but there was always a nagging doubt that there was a trick somewhere. This was one of them: it gave us the street directory map number, even the grid number, and the cryptic phrase Toto number 0,4,6,... In the end Occam's Razor won over, but we spent a long agonizing MRT ride wondering if we would be spending the night combing Yishun.

From Yishun we hiked along a dirt trail to Seleter Dam, and then found an amazing helpful truck driver that drove us all the way to Piccadilly Circus at Seleter Camp! There, we got the hardest clue of all. It read

Seemingly everlasting the arctic summer sun
Wildly bloom spring flowers
Mushy, the icy winter ground
No room for fallen autumn leaves?

We sat outside the famous Jalan Kayu prata stall for a really long time, and we were about to use our last Shiok card when a passing team was kind enough to enlighten us. One of the things that never ceased to amaze me was how nice and friendly all the teams were. At the bottom, when people don't expect to win I could understand the spirit of indifferent camaraderie. But racing for the top few positions, it is extremely generous to give away an answer like that to a team that might eventually overtake you and win.

We had our second encounter with unbelievable generosity just a while later looking for the same checkpoint, when we were passing an open gate and asked the occupants where the place was. After they had given us directions, we had some friendly barter because they were quite amused at the high volume of human traffic in such a remote area. This is my pathetic transcription of a conversation carried out mainly in mandarin. "How come other teams got taxi, you don't have?" "We got no money for taxi." "We got two taxis here, you want a ride?" "Thanks, but we have no money for taxis." "So many teams in front of you, how are you going to win?" "I guess we sure lose loh"

What followed, to our amazement, was that a taxi rolled out of their driveway, and the driver gave us a lift to the nearby checkpoint. Even more incredible, he waited for us, and took us all the way to the next checkpoint at the SAF Yacht Club all the way in Sembawang! Even there, he waited to bring us to the next checkpoint, but the ride of our dreams was halted and we had to bid him farewell with our undying gratitude because we had to wait until the next morning to carry out the task there. And the entire time he made no mention of payment, although we insisted on taking down his number so that we could repay him in some way.

Jiawei and I both frequent the club for wakeboarding, but little did we expect to find ourselves here on the race. The logistics just seemed too unlikely, and I sensed another Snow City snafu. But this time, we were #10, and any delays would work in our favor this time. We still had more than four hours till the station opened, so we took a nice hot shower, and curled up to sleep, happy in the thought that we had crawled out from the gutter to within sight of the peak.

Thinking Aloud

Since we were already pretty screwed, we followed a simple strategy of not making any mistakes. We simply could not afford to go to a wrong place because we had so little time and money, and we were willing to take more time to think a clue through instead of following our first impulse. And finally, we tried to learn from the earlier mistakes of the day by skipping over bottlenecks wherever possible. A slightly more complex decision was in saving our Shiok to the end instead of the Zoom, which was a much better card. My rationale was that if we ran into trouble later, the checkpoint might not accept a Zoom whereas most would take a Shiok. Time would tell if this was the right choice.
It’s a little difficult to ascertain whether our meteoric rise to the top was due to good navigation and decision-making skills or if it is merely a normalization of our ranking after taking into account all the cards and money we had saved from the day before. Of course there is also an element of luck involved in the transport that we were able to obtain. The cash crunch soon hit us, and we desperately tried to get whatever free ride possible. My own theory was that hitch-hiking is a lot easier in the more rural areas and at night, so we should save the money for the day and the city. It was also a lot easier to get free rides from bus drivers than taxi drivers since it does not cost them anything, and once you are on the bus already it probably takes more effort to kick you off. (Needless to say Jiawei managed to disprove my theory on both counts. She can get a ride anywhere.)

27th Sunday 0100 - 27th Sunday 1300

I woke up surprisingly refreshed when they called the first 10 teams to fall in. One thing this race has taught me is really to survive quite happily on practically no sleep! The long-awaited task was to sail a topper (laser-class sailboat) around a buoy and back to the shore. All sounded good, and although I took my optimist license about 10 years ago I’m sure I had more experience than most people. But then presumably because there was no wind, they gave us oars, so it became a ridiculous matter of trying to go kayaking in a sailboat with the boom just there to get in the way. It also filled my shoes with sand and soaked them (I had discarded my water shoes overnight because they kept getting in my way) and made my feet pretty miserable for the remainder of the race. (One thing about this race is that they came up with really crappy activities, though I would attribute that partly to increasing the number of teams from 80 to 200.) Then the Guardian showed us a map with an X, and we were off to the next checkpoint – a river mouth on the northern coast near Yishun.

Finally, a real orienteering task that didn’t involve following a rope or markers! This was our chance to show off our scouting skills and navigate ourselves into first place! We hitched a few rides, including one in a taxi, but it was unable to take the dirt track off the main road and we had to do the last few kilometers on foot. We made good time, leaving several teams behind us as we picked up the walking pace. But to our dismay, when we reached the point marked on the map, there was no checkpoint to be found! Instead, we could see amazing racers across the bay, at another beach further up. We had no choice but to make a wide berth around the water inlet in an attempt to reach that location. Along the way, we compared our map with some other teams, and discovered that there were two different versions of where the X was marked. Most of the teams we met had the same location as us, but there were a few poor souls that had marked the X correctly, and had somehow wandered completely lost to our location. Jeremy soon set them right and told them exactly where we were. The real checkpoint was a long way off by foot (although it was almost reachable by taxi, which made it even more annoying to us and sealed our fate since we had long dismissed ours).

The next clue was the most annoying, and we spent ages sitting in Yishun MRT trying to figure it out. (Unfortunately we could not even use the Shiok card.) “Boss no in, anyhow sell! Where else but in Chinatown do people speak like that?” So is it in Chinatown or not, and if so where in Chinatown? Eventually we settled on the Speaker’s Corner, and when that failed we wandered Chinatown until we were directed to a shop called Boss No In. Like duh, that was quite a silly clue. Then we went to Jerry’s on Club Street where we had to eat the most fiery buffalo wings ever known to man. I have never ever had my entire alimentary canal on fire like that. Jiawei got us a ride partway to Bras Besah where we spent some time clambering up and down the HDB block, and finally we were on the home stretch walking back to Orchard Green.

The ending was quite an anticlimax. We turned in our card, got the goody bag and flopped down on the grass to rest. Jiawei began eating, as usual; I joked that she probably ended the race 5kg heavier. We played a little, sparing American Gladiators style, and then one by one they fell asleep. I wandered around looking for new friends to talk to, but it appeared that most of them either failed to complete the race or had
already left, so finally we followed suit.

**Thinking Aloud**
I spent a lot of time wondering what went wrong at the day’s first checkpoint. I had a lot of time to wonder as we hiked out anyway. Was it an error in communication or did our memories fail us? Was it an honest mistake by the organizers or and intentional one to pose additional challenge? I guess I’ll never know unless I see the clue again, but it was really frustrating to have the chance of victory snatched from our grasp when we were so very close, after fighting so hard.

There wasn’t really much strategy involved once we found ourselves stranded in the wasteland. On the way back to civilization, we tried to take some potentially risky shortcuts in the hope that it would save some time, but it didn’t make much difference. We also spent a really long time at Yishun trying to decide whether or not to go to Chinatown. I wanted to go to the stock exchange because although Chinatown seemed more likely, the only way we could still hope to win was if the checkpoint was actually somewhere else and we were the only team that showed up. But in the end, we couldn’t find anywhere convincing enough, and followed the cold trail to Chinatown.

**Conclusion**
So what was the best part of the race? Although we really wanted to win, we never expected it to be easy and we appreciated the difficulties the organizers faced in making a race that was fair to all. We knew luck would play a great part, and we didn’t care what the prizes were, but hey we wanted to win and we didn’t. So did we discover new and exciting places in Singapore? There were a few gems – for example, I’d never been to Xiao Gui Lin, and Changi Hospital was a real scream – but on the whole the places were pretty boring. Did we do interesting tasks? Snow City was a great disappointment and kayaking in a sailboat is just plain pathetic, let’s not even go into running up a HDB block to collect a condom that you then inflate into a balloon. It’s strange that when people ask me how the race was, I can’t really think of anything I particularly enjoyed. And yet, the experience in its totality was truly amazing, which is why I was in such a rush to write it all down before I lost any of the memories.

To me the best part was really hitch-hiking around the island, and I never ceased to be amazed when people stopped to give us a ride. In the words of one Australian lady participant, "I never thought people would pick up hitch-hikers in Singapore. Their cars are so precious!" And considering that I was loathe to get into my own car to go home after the race, I fully appreciate the incredible helpfulness of people like the Mercedes driver, or the Lexus SUV, that unflinchingly gave us a ride when all along they must have been calculating the cost of perfuming the interior. We all hear so much bad press about the ugly or selfish Singaporean, but there are also angels out there, and I’m proud to be a Singaporean!

*This document is still a work in progress. Last updated 1/8/03 9:58pm.*