

The Record, Bergen, NJ (16 May 2004)

He's back, and he's bushed.

Raj Iyer, Basking Ridge's man about the world, is back from his three-week "GreatEscape2004: The Global Scavenger Hunt," still a bit dazed but definitely amazed.

"Oh, my God, I was running around like a chicken with the head cut off," he reminisced. "Everything was a blur."

Iyer and his teammate competed against four other teams to collect the most points in a scavenger hunt that took contestants to 10 countries on four continents.

The wild nature of the ride was set at the first meal before departure in Los Angeles.

"The very first day, we were eating ants. Ants and crickets," at a restaurant called Typhoon, near the airport, Iyer said. Strange experiences were the norm from then on.

The group's itinerary, only divulged to them as they flew from Los Angeles to Hong Kong; Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, Siem Reap near Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Bangkok, New Delhi, Dubai, Tangier, through Spain to Lisbon, and then finally to New York.

Along the way, the surprises never ceased. The "Disney-esque" quality of Dubai, the beauty of Lisbon, a place he had never really considered visiting before. Iyer was even surprised by his homeland of India. "I go there all the time, but I saw it in a different light this time," he said. "I don't ever go to a mosque," but one of the scavenges required him to find out who was buried in a particular mosque.

"I was treated like a celebrity. I was wearing shorts, and wasn't allowed to go in, but they were so nice to me, they relaxed the rules a little." The hunt also took him to an isolated temple in Galta, India, which he and even his driver had never heard of.

"They had three tiers of pool: one for men, one for women, and the third one was for ... monkeys!"

It was all so beautiful, he said. "I'm still shaking my head."

Back in New York, the winners were announced. Iyer's team came in third. If they'd had "deep pockets," they could have won, he conjectures. The group decided up front to forgo cash awards, and "go for the honor," Iyer said. But a third of the proceeds will still be donated to several charities. And Iyer got \$40 pledges from 50 friends, to be paid when he finished the race.

"I still have to collect. Right now I'm too weak. But I'll get it," he said, laughing.

He's also collecting his thoughts for account of his adventures, which will appear in June in the Travel section.

Stay tuned.