

LIVING THE DREAM OF THE YUKON AT YUKON RIVER QUEST 2008

If you want to see people walking on water, or to see a kayak climb right up out of the river and shake itself off, or to see how a bear leaps on the branches of the trees, it is time for you to visit the Yukon!

I. Prologue

This is story of adventure. It is a story about Yukon River Quest (YRQ) - the longest annual canoe and kayak race in the world - covering 740 km (460 miles) from Whitehorse to Dawson City in the Yukon, Canada. Looking back in history, the idea for the race is really based on the *Klondike Gold Rush* of the late 1800s. During the gold rush thousands of people made their way to Dawson City using the Yukon River as their "main roadway". Originally the idea was to have a race that would retrace the entire historic "gold road" from Skagway, Alaska on the coast, all the way inland to Dawson City in the Yukon, including the crossing of the Chilkoot Pass. However, after the first race the organizers realized that this route was just too long. Thus they decided to shorten it into just a paddling race along the Yukon River from Whitehorse to Dawson City.

The model for the competition is now constant - the total distance traveled is 740 km (460 miles), and there are two mandatory stops along the way; a 7 hour stop in Caramcaks after the first 320 km (200 miles); and then a 3 hour stop at Kirkman Creek after another 255 km (160 miles). The fastest competitors typically finish the race in 45 hours or less, and the slowest ones usually take 60 hours or more. The race is limited to 100 teams, which includes 25 teams in the voyageur category and 75 teams in the other categories (solo kayaks, solo canoe, tandem kayaks and tandem canoe), and all teams are assigned on a first come first served basis.

The YRQ is open to anyone who wants to participate, and over time it has gained worldwide renown. This year marked the 10th anniversary of the YRQ. The race took place between June 25 and June 29, 2008 and it attracted participants from all over the world - including Canada, the USA, Australia, South Africa, Denmark, France, Austria, the UK, Israel ... and of course, Latvia. We (Ugis and Ilze) formed one of the 3 teams from Latvia. We paddled in the mixed tandem kayak category. Our inspiration, Andris Stavro who had participated the year before, was back again in the solo kayak category, and Jurijs Seleznovs and Jevgenijs Blazevids were there this year participating in the men's tandem canoe category.

II. The beginning. Ugis' story.

A few years ago I happened to read an article on the *Campo* website about the YRQ. Having already participated in some races in Latvia, I realized that I really enjoyed this type of endurance challenge, and I felt an irresistible urge to take part in the YRQ. Then when Andris Stavro's participated in the YRQ in 2007, for me this was a last straw. I had to go to Canada! In the autumn of 2007 I got in touch with Andris and we agreed that we would both participate in the race next year. Afterwards it turned out that Jurijs and Jevgenijs were also planning to go to the Yukon. Before long

Andris arranged for our support team, a necessity for long races, and we all knew we were committed. Having made the final decision I began to work on the detailed plans for my attendance at the race.

First of all I needed to find a tandem kayak that would comply with the strict rules of the race. After spending some evenings searching the internet, I realized that ideal kayaks were produced close by in Estonia by one of the biggest kayak manufacturers in Northern Europe - *Tahe Marine*. When I contacted *Tahe* they seemed very enthusiastic to support my endeavors and their manager Ahti Reinup promised to produce an ultra light tandem kayak of carbon fiber composites.

Registration for the YRQ followed as the next logical step. I had decided not to register until after I had ordered the boat, so I ended up as number 86 out of 100. The registration number is important, as the YRQ has a "LeMans" style start, and the boats are lodged on the river bank in order of registration. The later you register, the farther you will have to run.

In the beginning of April Ahti sent me an e-mail saying that my super-ship was ready and I could pick it up in Tallinn, Estonia. Unfortunately, my partner had informed me just a few days earlier that he would not be going to the Yukon. It is not that he had changed his mind - he had never intended on going in the first place! What was I to do now? Here I had registered, bought the kayak and arranged for my stayovers in Whitehorse and Dawson City, and there was just no way that I could back out now. I feverishly started looking for a new partner. How was I to find a paddler who would be ready in just two months - someone who would go all the way to the Yukon and then paddle 740 km (460 miles) as well? These were not the best circumstances in which to have to persuade somebody, as everyone needs a lot of lead time to ready themselves for this type of event. By that point in April most people had already made their vacation plans.

The first person I called said he would have been happy to go to Canada, had he known sooner. Finally I had a tiny flash of hope regarding Ilze. She had previously paddled in the same boat with people who are as flippant as I - and that was my strongest argument in her favor. Personal character is one of the most important criteria, especially if you have to paddle together in the same boat hour after hour. Luckily I knew that she had not already made her vacation plans. She got back to me immediately and her answer surprised me! SHE AGREED TO PARTICIPATE IN YRQ WITHOUT A DOUBT! Wonders will never cease.

III. The beginning. Ilze's story

At the time when Andris Stavro returned from the YRQ last year I knew nothing of the Yukon, so I just sort of assumed it was a very fast and muddy river and thought to myself that this is certainly not for me. Although, I had already paddled in some races in Latvia and I realized that I did enjoy the challenge and the self discipline required, the YRQ was different - just imagine covering 740 km (460 miles) in just 53 hours - well that is just not normal! Still the story of YRQ was etched in my mind. At the time I kibitzed with my boat-mate that "for sure we also would participate in this... someday". Then in February while browsing the *Campo* website I noticed that three teams from Latvia had been registered for YRQ 2008, and I said to my friends "I see some crazy people are going to the Yukon. Of course I would be doing the same myself, but not right now... it's very

expensive, and good physical conditioning is needed” and so on and so on I went with all the excuses. I left it at that.

Then quite unexpectedly on the morning of March 27 my telephone rings and the incoming phone number is unknown to me. I thought to myself - this must be something to do with work. Funnily enough though, it turned out to be “Fat Ugis” (as he called himself) on the line. He asked if I had any plans for my summer paddling vacation. I knew Ugis from the sea kayaking tour to Kihnu Island in Estonia last year and from our Eskimo-roll training, and I thought to myself, “Oh, he must want me to go back to Estonia!”. I responded that I had no plans and I asked if he had any suggestions. To my astonishment he answered, “Yukon River Quest!”. For a few moments I could not see the connection between Estonia and the Yukon but finally it struck me - he was actually suggesting that we should go to Canada! Had I lost my head? The Yukon? Ugis explained that his partner had backed out, and then someone else he had tried had told him that they just bought a car and the Yukon was financially impossible this year. So here I was, the next on his list. I questioned him about expenses, plans, the program for the race, **and then, so** as not to seem too over eager, I promised to think it all over and call him back in half an hour or so. But my heart was already singing! There was no doubt in my mind. I WANTED TO GO TO THE YUKON! If you really put your mind to something, anything is possible - even finding the money and completing the necessary rigorous training, in just a few months.

IV. Trainings and Preparation

Neither of us has ever been a professional athlete, so three months until the race was far too little time to improve our physical conditioning. We trained both separately and together - running in the evenings, swimming in the mornings, working out at home, at the gym, etc. Every weekend we took our newly made boat, which we had named “Black Berta”, and we paddled for as long as possible to accustom ourselves to sitting at a stretch for many hours.

On Saturdays we used to paddle 70-90 km (45-55 miles), and then on Sundays usually another 20-40 km (15-25 miles). Our lives were now focused on one aim - YRQ 2008. To test ourselves we participated in two races - the Võhandu Marathon (93 km - 58 miles) in Estonia, and then the Riga Paddling Marathon (60 km - 38 miles) here in Latvia. The light pace of the boat and our favorable results in both races encouraged us, and helped us develop that much need “team solidity”. Our confidence grew and we could feel inside that the “Great Race” would end in success.

At the same time we organized our purchases of the mandatory equipment. In accordance with the rules of the race, not only did we require a spare paddle, spray-skirt deck, and buoyancy aid, but we also needed a towline, aerial rescue flares, an orange garbage bag for signaling, a buoyant heaving line, sufficient food and fluids, a bailer, a river map, a basic first aid kit, an emergency space Bivy sack, waterproof matches, one sleeping bag per person rated to -5°C (23°F), a free-standing tent, a navigation light, extra layers of warm clothing (fleece or wool preferred), a backpack stove and fuel with a pot. These items were considered to be mandatory equipment for each team starting the race, and they had to be carried the entire length of the race. Not carrying all of these items would result in disqualification. The mandatory equipment was essential for our own survival out in the

Yukon wilderness and it was intended to make us self-sufficient for a few days if necessary. The Yukon River has very few road access points, and very few people live along its banks, which means that it could take a several days for rescuers to arrive in the case of an emergency. Not knowing how seriously the mandatory equipment would be checked, we paid considerable attention to its provision. Neither our existing sleeping bags nor our existing tent met the requirements for this race. In addition to purchasing these items, extra clothing had to be bought and our wardrobes were supplemented with a respectable amount of fleece apparel. We decided that special items like aerial rescue flares and first aid kits would be bought in Whitehorse, and the orange garbage bag was provided by the race organizers.

We postponed buying our airline tickets to the last moment hoping for a discounted price. We planned to fly with *Condor* from Frankfurt to Whitehorse, mainly due to their low price of boat carriage - only 50 Euros (about \$65) for the return ticket for one boat. When the ticket price dropped a bit near the beginning of May, Ilze was the first to buy one. It was right at this moment that our big pre-race "catastrophe" started. When the ticket confirmation letter arrived by e-mail, it turned out that the return flight from Whitehorse to Frankfurt had a stopover in Fairbanks, Alaska (USA) and for this two hour stop over we required a US visa. The fact that the flight was routed through Fairbanks came as a surprise to us as we had not thought to click a small button in the corner of the website to check on the full flight details. At this point everyone else held off on buying their tickets until the US visas got cleared up. A lot of questions emerged in our minds as we were waiting for our visa interviews. What will happen if we cannot get the visas? Could we fly one way to Canada and then find another route home? If only we were traveling without the boats this would all be so much easier. Luckily in the end we all received visas.

It would have been nice if our ticket buying challenges finished there. But soon after, another major problem arose when we tried to book a boat ticket. After the booking application was sent to *Condor* they answered back that our boat is too long!!! They explained that *Condor* allows a maximum length 6,10 m (15'6"), but our boat was 6,30 m (16'). We were in a real flap! If no exception was to be made, then our only possibility would be to cut the nose off of the boat and glue it back on in Whitehorse! Fortunately before buying the tickets we had written to *Condor's* reservation service asking how to pack the boat for transport and indicating its measurements. In their answers to us nothing had been said about maximum dimensions. We also went back to the *Condor* website to review their transportation rules for sports equipment, and there were no length limits published there either. Ilze then wrote to *Condor* once again making it very clear how they had left us in a most awkward situation. In response we received an answer saying "taking into consideration... and as a one time exception..." we would be able to transport our boat to Canada. Luck was again on our side!

With all of the exhausting training and being so keyed up over the coming event, we then managed to damage our GPS by dropping it into the sea, just a few days before leaving.

We made the decision to leave on Monday (June 16) in the evening. Two days before our departure we bought our final few necessities - energy food power-bars and a heap of the batteries for the GPS. There are certain things you would never wish to run out of, and we wanted to be sure to have an ample supply of power-bars and batteries to get us through any eventuality of this race.

V. Riga-Frankfurt-Whitehorse

Our trip to the Yukon started the evening of June 16 when we departed by car from Riga, Latvia on our way to Frankfurt, Germany. At about 8:00 p.m. we went to Jevgenijs' place where we fastened our boat and his canoe to the car, and we left Riga at about 1:00 a.m. On the way we had to pick up Jurijs in Jelgava. Thus our long trek to the Yukon was started. We were already on the road for a couple of hours, when Jevgenijs remembered that his new PFD was still hanging in the garage back home...

We arrived in Frankfurt as planned, the evening before our scheduled departure for Whitehorse on June 18. We checked in for our flight that same evening and we were really surprised how easy that all went. It was the first time we were traveling by air with our boats. After both boats had disappeared into the depths of the airport, we wondered whether all would go well, and would we be seeing them again in Whitehorse? We spent the night in the parking lot near the airport and with the flights passing so close by it felt like we were sleeping right out on the runway. The next morning in the flight waiting area, we heard two men talking about Yukon River Quest. Punctually at 11:25 the aircraft took off, and we were on the way to Whitehorse - the capital of Yukon Territory in Canada. After we had spent nine hours sitting in the plane, we finally landed at the Whitehorse International Airport, a tiny facility no larger than the bus station in Riga. While waiting for passport control we carefully watched the luggage being unloaded from the plane. Where were our boats? We pressed ourselves against window as soon as we saw the truck come alongside the airplane. The baggage compartment was opened and then the tip of the first boat came into sight. We were simply elated. Neighboring people began to ask us if these were our boats, and where we were from, and would we be paddling down the Yukon? We briefly explained that we were from Latvia and we were going to paddle in the Yukon River Quest. We received their best wishes and good luck! Even the customs inspector wished us "Good luck!" Our accommodations in Whitehorse had been arranged in German Detlef's house, and Detlef also arranged for a tall Japanese fellow named Atsushi to meet us in the airport, and take us and our boats home. Atsushi was punctual, greeting us with a wide smile, while he held up the cover of a cardboard box with our names written on it. As we had to unpack Black Berta for customs, Atsushi was the first to assess the boat. He commented that it was a very good and very expensive kayak.

VI. Last days before start

We spent the next six days in Whitehorse sightseeing, regaling our eyes with the Yukon River, buying the few remaining mandatory equipment items and preparing our kayak for the race. Meanwhile as we did some final training we happened to meet a few of the more famous participants, including 67 year old Heinz Rodinger from Austria, who was the second oldest man in the race, and an American, Joe Evans (Bumbazer) who paddles in a solo canoe. We also met our direct competitors in the mixed tandem kayak class - from Denmark, Peter and Vibe. As it turned out they also had decided to go with a *Tahoe* kayak. Their boat was very much like ours, but made of

fiberglass. Unfortunately for them, their kayak was being transferred in from Vancouver (Canada) and it arrived in Whitehorse only few ours before start of the race.

The “meet, greet and eat” welcoming reception was held on June 23, two days before the start. Here we met other famous participants, Ingrid (age 60), who paddles in a solo kayak. Whilst eating this Texan, who looked like a ZZ Top soloist, took a seat next to us. His team “Texans” had won the race last year. He asked us where we were from. Unlike many of others he knew where Latvia was. When we said that he was world famous, he did not agree with us, instead saying that there was a tall man from Latvia named Andris Stavro, who was famous for his hands.

The day before the start was meant for registration, boat measuring and mandatory gear inspection. The boats were laid out on the lawn near the river and it reminded me of a respectable boat show. A voyageur team from Saskatchewan, Canada (“Hatchet Lake”) was settled in next to us. Ugis agreed to take some photos of their team and I think he did an excellent job of that, because in all pictures you can see our Black Berta in the background ☺

Many people who passed by expressed their admiration for Black Berta. Usually they asked where we were from. But when I said “Latvia” it was as though I had just told them “Never Never Land”. They seemed perplexed by this strange country name that they had never heard of before.

The inspection of the mandatory equipment went well for all of the Latvian participants. We lacked only an ointment that we substituted for a disinfectant fluid the following day. Not far away we saw Heinz trying to convince some volunteers that he would be boiling water in a plastic bowl... And thanks to Black Berta, Peter and Vibe from Denmark (whose boat had still not yet arrived from Vancouver) were able to pass the boat measuring inspection simply by explaining that their boat was exactly the same size as ours.

That evening the mandatory pre-race briefing took place. As had been done in other years Jeff (the race marshal) imposed a two hour penalty on those teams that where absent. Without mercy. We were informed about river procedure, checkpoints and probable dangers on the river. They said that bears, moose and other animals are all a bit shy and really not too interested in the race or the racers, so nine times out of ten they will see us but we will never see them.

VII. The race

06:30 hours and the house is brimming with excitement! A lot of pasta is being cooked - as we will be taking it along. 08:30 hours marks the final checking of the mandatory equipment. Everyone will be starting the race in a predetermined order - and every boat is carefully positioned in its proper place within the consecutive order. Little by little the lawn near the river becomes a huge area where boats are being packed and re-packed as we are all trying to find the very best equipment arrangement to keep everything within easy reach. We are permitted to set our boats by the riverside only one hour before the start.

Once our boat is there and ready, our support team arrives with a bowl of cold pasta that is eagerly eaten with fingers near the edge of the brushwood.

After this we all go to the Main Street - the starting place. The start of the YRQ is on the street, and once the starting shot is fired the participants will need to run about 500 m (500 yards) to the river bank.

Half an hour before the start - the greeting speeches are made and all the participants' names and countries announced. When we hear the name "Latvia" a great feeling of pride comes over us. At least a few people will now have learned that Latvia is in Europe and not somewhere in Africa☺. And then those last moments before the start are unforgettable. During the last six days while we were training and waiting for the Big Day, we felt neither fear nor thrill, we really didn't even feel like we already in Canada. But now, poised under the starting line we are feeling real throbs of joy - our dream has come true. There is excitement all around. Here we are standing under the starting line and counting seconds before we will be off into uncharted waters. And then it comes... ten, nine, eight, seven, six... everybody counts together... five, four, three, two, one... shot!...We are running!

Looking back now it is impossible to recall those first few meters (yards) of the race. We only remember a Native American shaman standing on the steep bank and beating the drum monotonously. After the mad running, for the first 40 km (25 miles) from Whitehorse to the Lake Laberge we paddled breathlessly. Then the lake surprised us. For the first time in the history of the race it is calm like a mirror and unruffled in all of its 50 km (30 miles). We are paddling with all our strength, but when a couple of boats go by it raises our first despair. We find ourselves waiting for the end of the lake where we will finally start to perceive the flow of the Yukon River. It is now 10:00 p.m. and we are across the lake. We are joking to ourselves that we have just paddled one Latvian "Gaujas baziens", and six more such races still lie forward. After the lake there is a verbal checkpoint. At this point we jump out of our boat to put on something warmer for the night, as the mosquitoes begin to eat us alive. After a ten minute break we paddle onward. Our first night on the river is approaching. The breathtaking scenery, the pasta, and the strong flow of the river all help to lift our spirits. The first 30 miles (50 km) after the lake is called "The Thirty Mile" and it is one of the most scenic parts of the Yukon. The midnight sun that never goes completely down makes the scenery seem magical - no wonder this is often called "a race to the midnight sun".

Soon after midnight Ugis starts to feel like falling asleep and two hours later he cannot stand it anymore. We risk capsizing. For a moment Ugis really does fall asleep while paddling and luckily we do not capsize. At 3:00 a.m. we determine that it is necessary to sleep for a short while. Unfortunately it is very hard to find a place to stop. Along the bank there are almost no back-currents and the river is so fast that it is impossible to react even when we notice one. A couple of tough and risky hours pass before we finally find a place to go ashore. Ugis has the hardest time - despite a tantalizing sleep he must hold the boat and steer. In the meantime our GPS batteries go dead, we cannot change them without stopping because the new ones are too well packed away. Two hours go by where we are constrained to orient ourselves only with our self-printed map of the river. At 5:00 a.m. we are saved by a narrow muddy spit paved with the footprints of moose. After pitching a tent as quickly as possible we agree to sleep one hour. A waterproof camera serves as an alarm-clock. Shortly before 6:00 a.m. we wake up and see some boats are passing by. Later we will leave them behind again, but exactly how many boats are even further ahead we do not know. Despite our

yawns we are full of power again, and we paddle. Sometimes the river takes us right through the “middle of nowhere”. The trees have all been gutted by fire, and the land is barren and gray. At 9:30 a.m. we stop once again to revive and eat some cold pasta. Lack of sleep agonizes both of us and after a few more hours of paddling we stop again for 15 minutes. Little by little the river becomes faster and thus places to stop become rarer. We manage to stop near a bluff that is overgrown with trees and bushes. Ugis falls asleep sitting in the mud while Ilze is sitting next to him patiently. Suddenly she catches a crackle of branches behind her back. A BEAR! Her heart starts beating and she turns around. Oh, just a small and noisy squirrel has come very close and is sitting overhead looking at us. Ugis has been sleeping only ten minutes when Ilze recognizes a mixed tandem kayak passing by. We jump in the boat and follow them. After a while we leave them behind us again. We are paddling forcefully.

After about 320 km (200 miles) at 4:21 p.m. we arrived in Carmacks overjoyed as we were catered to by our support team. Here we stop for our mandatory 7 hour layover. Upon arriving in Carmacks we learned that we are in third position for our class, an hour and a half behind the second place team. We have had almost no sleep for 34 hours and we are very, very tired. We ate and watched Andris start out on his second leg and then the support team put us to sleep in a tent... a tent that has way overheated. The camp itself was overcrowded and looked like a colony of ants all running around. The heat, noise and exhaustion did not allow us to turn in quickly, so we managed to sleep for only five hours or so. An hour before start time, the support team awakened us to prepare for equipment checking and moving on.

The 7 hours are very strictly controlled. While the referee was counting the last seconds, our boat was held so it could not float away ahead of the appointed time. Exactly seven hours after arriving in Carmacks, 11:21 p.m., we are leaving again. The spirit of the race has revitalized our strength and we begin paddling energetically.

Approximately two hours later we expect our next challenge, the Five Finger Rapids with its high standing waves. We have been told which channel we should take through the rapids but the river is obscured by darkness, and we are very apprehensive. Then in the darkest part of the night at 1:45 a.m. we approach rapids. Ahead of us a voyageur team enters the rapids followed by the searchlight of a security boat that makes an ordinary scene seem very mysterious and dramatic. After a while the security boat turns around and starts following us with the light. Our knowledge of the correct channel through the Five Finger Rapids comes only from photos, and in reality it is quite narrow and the waves are strong and sharp with each one followed very closely by the next. When we enter the rapids, the first wave skis our boat and afterwards hurls in the water, and the next wave falls directly over Ilze's head.

The boat is skied a couple of times and then as quickly as they started, the rapids are over. Those were a few very tense moments, but after it all we are elated and joyful because these rapids were our only spectre in the race. A while later we pass through the Rink Rapids whose white and roaring waves make for a ghostly atmosphere. We are paddling lively all night long and in the early morning we begin to get ahead of some other racers. The time we lost by sleeping a little in the first night is won back now. Passing by Minto (approx. 415 km or 260 miles from start), we meet Valdis and Andrejs from our support team who have decided to paddle to Dawson City by canoe.

Here we are, paddling and paddling, when we notice a kayak in the middle of the river. A kayak? Have you ever seen a black, round shaped kayak that moves edgewise focused on the river bank? As the black ball approaches the bank, it creeps out of the river on four paws, shakes itself off and tramples into the woods. A bear. Cold shivers run down our spines as we think that we could have been camping right there...

When we are only some 10 km (6 miles) from to Kirkman Creek (approx. 580 km or 360 miles from start), where we will stop for the next mandatory layover (for 3 hours), the river goes still as if it is not flowing at all. Despite our most energetic paddling, our GPS shows a speed of only 9 km/h (5.6 mph), and a headwind is blowing so mightily that we must hold our paddles with great force. At this time we noticed a kayak roaming the river from the bank to bank, sometimes turning up river. As it turns out they were our rivals, completely tired out and trying to stop somewhere. A chance to leave the rivals behind renews our strength immediately, and suddenly the river begins to flow strongly again and we are passing by at a speed of 18 km/h (11 mph). We cheer! Then to help keep our focus we overtake something that looks like a squirrel swimming in the water, and then later we paddle hard to try to pass a canoe in front of us. A few meters (yards) before stopping in Kirkman Creek we do it!

In Kirkman Creek there are two women out wading in high leg boots with boat-hooks in their hands, catching the boats as they arrive, so no one will be swept on by with the strong current. Our result after some 580 km (360 miles) is close to 47 hours. Our landing time is fixed at 4:59 p.m. The Kirkman Creek camp contrasts completely with Carmacks and it surprises us with its tranquil atmosphere. In the meadow the participants sleep using their PFDs as pillows. A small peg with a team number is stuck in the ground at every sleeping place so the organizers will know when each of the teams has to be woken up. We drop down right there on the ground. We have only 3 hours to rest. There is no road away from Kirkman Creek and anyone who wants to withdraw at this point, has to leave by either plane or by boat. After sleeping for half an hour we are woken up by sudden thunderstorm. We escape under the common tent that is filled with the other participants and chaotic. We fall asleep straight away anyways. When we wake up and prepare to go further, it is stopped raining.

At 7:59 p.m. we go on with our paddling. For the first 6 hours we paddle hard, but as we get into the darker part of the night it gets harder to paddle. The Yukon River becomes wider and wider. Small islands divide it into a number of channels and the river seems boundless. It becomes more difficult to find the best, fastest and shortest passage. We have to pass through the last checkpoint before Dawson City but we hardly know where it should be - "Probably on the island just past the Sixty Mile River". We are keeping left and only a small light in the checkpoint keeps us from missing it. It is now the last day of the race, June 28 and we are expecting the hardest and coldest night of the race, so we put on all of our warmest clothing. Due to our level of exhaustion and lack sleep everything now seems like a dream. We see faces in the rocks. Roots on the sandbars look like moose. Little by little we lose our sense of time and place. How far to Dawson City? Are we the last ones in the river? Despite the pain made by every motion we paddle because we do not dare to stop. Ugis binds his hands with insulating tape because of blisters that hurt. This helps. In the meantime Ilze announces that she is just short of falling asleep and from here on we must talk continuously in

order to stay awake and keep going. After a while Ugis starts to dream with his eyes open. He sees people walking on the water. Then he paddles past a multi-storied housing complex and finally he declares that somewhere there should be a channel to Whitehorse!

At five or six in the morning fog starts to cover the water as it is getting colder. The fog creates an illusion that the trees are fishermen and kayakers. Being aware of the illusion, Ilze sees a bearded man walking in the air. The YRQ stickers "Paddle me hard!" that are attached to the boat on both sides of Ugis cockpit start to make him angry. The fog and the bright rising sun make orientation difficult. We find ourselves paddling blind, afraid of ramming into fallen trees that lie in the water. It is calm and it seems as though the river does not flow. From our map we can see that only a few kilometers (miles) are left to Dawson City but the final half an hour seems to last forever. When we approach the famous Dawson City we cannot readily discern where the finish line is to be. We have been told that the finish will be near the port, but right then a canoe that passes us suddenly turns about and paddles back towards the Klondike River. But we are right and properly on course. The finish line is just a little bit further. Coming closer, that long awaited poster "FINISH" looms on the river bank ahead. As we land we are met by our support team and the referee. They help us out of the kayak and then they take our boat up out of the water for us. We are so tired that the ground is swinging under our feet. Our result is fixed as soon as we cross the finish line but we have to let a referee to check our equipment one last time before it is official. We learn that we have finished in second place for our class behind Peter and Vibe from Denmark in their *Tahe* kayak. This makes us happy. Our dream has come true! We finished the race on June 28, at 8:00 a.m. Our official time was 57 hours and 25 minutes.

We are exhausted and Maris and Diana from our support team offer to carry us to bed with their hands. Leaving our boat and other equipment in the port we go to sleep. That same evening after having a good sleep and doing a little sightseeing around the historic "Golden City", we go to the casino "Diamond Tooth Gerties" to watch a cabaret show. As we are entering the casino, some Canadians say to us that next year they will be using a boat just like ours.

An awards banquet has been planned at Diamond Tooth Gerties on Sunday, June 29. After the awards ceremony we are left with a feeling of great satisfaction. Not for one second during the entire 57 hours and 25 minutes had we ever even considered giving up and withdrawing. We are proud too of our teammates - Juris and Jevgenijs at 50 hours and 5 minutes came in 3rd place in canoe class for men, while Andris at 50 hours and 40 minutes was in 5th place in the men's solo kayak class.

After the banquet and a tasty steak we returned to Whitehorse. Yukon River Quest was finished for this year.

VIII. Epilogue

So what is this "Yukon River Quest"? It is a drug? Is it a Mecca for the paddler? Every racer is the most fierce competitor out on the river, yet everybody is happy to meet you again and again by the riverside. It does not matter who you are or where you are from. You become one ... one of those

250 crazy racers who paddle 740 km (460 miles), and then afterwards no one really knows just HOW you do it or WHY.