

# Amazing Race rejects keep climbing

JENN MARTIN AND JENNIFER FODEN WILSON

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Partners who competed in Canadian event head to Europe for more adventure



Jennifer Foden Wilson contemplates the scenery from the side of a mountain on her Amazing Race trip to Europe. She and her partner, Jenn Martin, came in second. (JENNIFER FODEN WILSON)

“Make sure you’re never unclipped from the cable,” we heard someone say as we stared in silence at the rock outcrop before us. “Oh, and by the way, they call this one the devil.”

The mountain sat with accomplished silence in the middle of the Swiss Alps: an almighty, snow-sheathed beauty that we were to summit on the fourth day on our Amazing Race-style tour of Europe. Others in our group looked terrified; we were exhilarated.

Having found something so perfectly suited to our adventurous sensibilities, we looked at each other with barely contained glee, thinking exactly the same thing: this is our jam. Experiences like this were exactly why we had come here in the first place.

This fondness for adventure may have worked against us had we actually been cast on the second season of the Amazing Race Canada (put your hands up season 2 rejects!). Instead of deciding who would have to jump out of a plane on the CTV reality show’s first Road Block, we would have likely been squabbling over who got the pleasure.

But, after failing to charm the casting crew with our frenzied video full of squawking pigeons, inside jokes and excited recollections about our tendency to screw things up, our dreams of politely bumping into a first place finish on the hit TV show were effectively dashed.

Instead, we had to look elsewhere for this kind of adventure, and not six months later we found ourselves in front of that mountain rooting on our fellow competitors as they were consumed by clouds in the late afternoon sky.

Competitours, the Amazing Race-themed tour company that led us to the foot of that mountain, seemed to be the answer — a cure for all things routine and perfunctory, and the logical next step after the Amazing Race producers passed us over. We were excited to be part of something that guaranteed hands-on interaction and encouraged the same competitive spirit that drew people to the show that inspired it.

We landed in Brussels where we promptly procured a chocolate-dipped waffle from the train station (probably the most touristy thing we would do) and speculated about where this trip would take us. The Swiss Alps? The French Riviera? The surprises started right away when we won the trip's first official challenge — a four-hour chocolate war in Brussels wherein we replicated the city's famous statue of a peeing boy.

Beyond our chocolate victory, our adventure took us to Ghent (45 minutes northwest of Belgium's capital city), as well as to Vaals and Maastricht in the Netherlands. It appeared that our beginner's luck in Brussels was just that, as we performed terribly at our next few challenges. In Maastricht, we made mental notes to work on our fencing skills, as we lost almost every match in a round-robin tournament (including one to a charming and skilful 11-year-old girl).

Maastricht also found the two of us lost outside after completing an underground tunnel challenge — and at the mercy of the war re-enactor who drove us back to our group. In Vaals, we vowed to improve our navigation skills as we got hopelessly, shamefully, unintelligibly lost in the world's largest hedge maze.

From the Netherlands, we headed to Switzerland, where our luck began to improve. We climbed the snowcapped Swiss Alps in Andermatt, raced down a mountainside on an alpine coaster in Churwalden and attempted to guess what we were eating in Zurich while we dined in the dark. When comparing our first-place guesses (salmon, mandarin oranges, custard) to the actual dinner served (sea bream, grapefruit, fig mush), we began to understand the Competitours mantra that sometimes you don't need to win, you just need to be the "least worst."

Our Competitours experience still meant we had to work as a team, taking turns in every challenge. The competitive fire was just as alive as it would have been had we been cast on the real show (minus the pesky film crew charting our every step). That sense of urgency and excitement would seize us everywhere, from the chocolate factory in Brussels to the hedge maze in the Netherlands. There were nine other teams competing alongside us, and they wanted the cash prize just as much as we did (in fact, some wanted it a lot more).

Finally, we ended up in Italy. We made strawberry gelato without a recipe in Sorrento and cooked an Italian feast overlooking the colourful contours of the stunning Amalfi Coast. Neither of us are great chefs, but our fun-loving attitudes must have shone through into our food, as we won both the chef's and people's choice awards.

Sorrento also saw us enthusiastically nailing the steps during a Southern Italian Tarantella dance off. Once in Rome, after a few too many drinks the night before, we rallied in traditional Roman gladiator games (we'd like to think that our hockey-playing, trail-hiking Canadian roots helped us on this one). We finished in Venice, where mask-making and glass-blowing competitions tested our creativity and, ultimately, our endurance.

We learned how to compete, but more importantly, how to balance that rivalrous attitude with our laid-back natures and a genuine desire to uncover a new side of places we'd been before or always wanted to go. Winning was on our mind, but it never once eclipsed our love for travel and sense of adventure.

Yes, somehow, some way, we ended up in the second spot (the top three teams win money, and we ended up with \$2,100 in our pockets). We'd like to believe our laid-back disposition worked in our favour. Who knows if the higher stakes and higher exposure would have turned us into evil villains had we been cast on the second season of the popular reality show, but we wanted to live in the small moments, not the end game.

We wanted to enjoy a glass of Prosecco at the Italian villa during our cooking challenge (instead of spending all of our energy figuring out how to make the best ravioli) and chat with the war re-enactors during our underground tunnel challenge in Maastricht (as opposed to doing it the fastest or best).

The other teams were from all over the United States: newlyweds, a son and his 68-year-old father, parents with their teenage children. Funny enough, the team that beat us (by just a few points, we'd like to add) were two single female strangers, one of them originally from Vancouver. The only other traveller from our home and native land. Go Canada!

Competitive nature aside, very real friendships began to develop, forged by unlikely victories (with the aforementioned fencing 11-year-old) and amusing losses (we found ourselves navigating that crazy, never-ending hedge maze with one of the cutest couples we'd ever met). Steve, our fearless tour leader, turned to us very early on and said, "I don't know what little alliances you guys are forming, here." We laughed, "They're not alliances, they're friendships."

Friendships form on the real life Amazing Race. The \$3,375 price tag is definitely worth the value to participate in this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity (or if you're one Competitours-loving couple on our trip, three-times-in-a-lifetime). You As part of this Amazing Race you can visit different parts of the world you may have never explored before, compete in unique challenges, possibly win some coin, and, hopefully, make lifelong friendships. You may find yourself scaling a mountain with the intent of winning a challenge, but once you've finished, you're comfortably sharing scars and stories with your competition over a bubbling pot of cheese fondue and a couple bottles of cold Swiss beer.