

## MONGOLIA SUNRISE TO SUNSET

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### ***PREPARATION***

The Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset (ms2s.dk) 42km and 100km races take place in the Hovsgol National Park in the north of Mongolia adjacent to Lake Hovsgol - the Dark Blue Pearl of Mongolia, surrounded by lush green hills, mountains reaching for the sky, and dense alpine forest. "It's not the end of the world, but you can see it from here" to quote a former race doctor.

On Saturday 30th August 2016, 84 of us ( 42km runners, 100km runners, supporters/children, organisers) from all over the world, arrived at Camp Toilget, for the 18th running of the race, having flown from the Mongolian Capital Ullan Bator to Murun and then endured a 3 hour bus ride on some not so smooth roads.



The race package includes a weeks accomodation in the camp, and all food and leisure activities. We stayed in a Ger - a traditional Mongolian nomadic herders circular, demountable shelter. Others stayed in tepees, and log cabins surrounding a central restaurant. A set of swings and slide and a trampoline for the kids and a reasonably stocked bar for the adults (although refrigeration only happened when the power was on between about 7 and 11 pm).

The Ger was not animal proof and we were often visited by a ground squirrel who took a liking to our race food and water bottles. We were also woken several time by yaks or horses munching grass round the outside.

The race was scheduled for the Wednesday, 4 days after arrival in camp, to give time for acclimatisation to the altitude, 1700m above sea level, and to get to know fellow participants. At the compulsory race briefing everyone gave a brief introduction about themselves and this combined with the social interaction meant that it was people you knew that you met during the race and who looked after you at the finish.



We had a few recces on the first part of the course which we eventually found after initially following some old marks on the trees. We also found the ovoo, a cairn of rocks with a tepee of branches built over it, decorated with blue plastic strips, where the spirits reside. We duly walked around it 3 times in a clockwise direction and added a branch as you should do to keep the spirits happy.

There were many activities on offer in the days before the race and we had a 3 hour horse ride, went mountain biking on the second part of the course and took the kayaks out on the lake. One afternoon we had a demonstration by the local ladies on how to make vodka, cheese and a sweet from yoghurt. Nothing goes to waste! There were also rides on the yak that had won the local yak race.

The pre-race pasta meal was followed by a traditional musical performance done by 3 lads on 2 stringed horse headed violins (morin khuur ) and a girl playing a box zither,( yoochin) along with some traditional dancing and Mongolian throat singing.

### ***RUTH'S RACE***

I'm lying listening to the rain when the wake up at 2.30 comes around. I'm not feeling great, having spent most of the night in the toilet block, but hang – I've come all this way, I'm just going to have to get on with it. We gather at start, headlights on, its 3:59 in the morning the Countdown begins, 10 – 9 – 8 – 7 – 6 and all the Mongolians rush off. We all laugh and follow them very gently



negotiating the roots and logs of the first hill. After about ½ hour we emerge onto the road, flat with potholes to the Chichee Aid Station at 12km.

Now the path is a jeep track up the hill – steep up. I envy the Swiss guy ahead of me who pulls out walking poles and powers

on up. I pass Dave. He trains in the Bahamas and is even more limited by altitude than I am. Its lung busting stuff, but at least it's not too difficult underfoot. I continue at a slow pace trying not to get too put of breath. I've been going 2 hours and haven't eaten anything. I know that I should keep the food flowing else I will run out of energy, but I don't want anything. I force down a gu. Half hour later, at the top of the last steep section, just as I had overtaken Anna (US) the guts decided they had had enough and emptied out. Anna turned the corner and was horrified to see me having a good chunder. However, I felt much better afterwards and carried on. There was a final gentle rise from which you got great views of the lake (topped out at 2290m). We then zigzagged down a steep track and then headed left across the broad shoulder of the mountain before dropping doing a couple more zigzags down and then going directly down through a grassy meadow with loose stones in the thin grass. Lethal stuff. It's very steep and Alex (US) in front of me keeps landing on his arse. Kim (French) hurtles past with walking sticks flailing, but seems to stay upright. Like his style – must practice it.

Eventually we hit the bottom and continue down on the banks of a shallowly descending wide river (not running). We cross the pebbly river bed and another meadow and see the second aid station. Khasar (Mongolian official photographer) is there with his camera and so I try to look alive and break into a run. I still haven't eaten anything properly yet, so try a few pieces of apple. They stay down. I run the next section on 1 gu and 600ml of sports drink and that got me through 6.5 hrs of running!

The next section goes up a wide river valley very similar to the previous one we had just come down. A horseman points us off to the left and we start climbing. Stephane (French) has been just behind me up to here so I ask is he wants to pass – no he says – I have a good pace that he will try to stay with.

Likewise I have just caught up with Xaiobin (Chinese mega runner – this is a training run for a 600km run in the near future). The three of us head up the trail. It immediately goes to single track which dies completely and we are left going up a steep hillside through skinny trees closely growing with dead ones lying on the ground covered by a thick blanket of moss and mushrooms. It's tough but again very beautiful. There are so many different types of mushrooms including yellow ones with red rims and spots – the fairies must live in those! We had also been told to look out for wolf faeces. I am sure I saw something that fitted that – large grey dog poo with lots of fur in it. I didn't see the wolf though – nor the bears that inhabit these woods.

At the col at the top of the climb (alt 2160m) there is an ovoo. I circle it 3 times clockwise and place a stick on it. The descent is another quad-busting steep grassy meadow. Again Kim hurtles past sticks flying. And so does Enkhtur (Mongolian). He is a little squad guy running in a singlet and his race pack is a cloth bag with drawstrings – how it didn't cut his shoulders I don't know. We get water from 3 guys who have camped out overnight and boiled water for us so it's now good to drink. The rest of the route into the 42km is down a grassy 4WD track on a gentle descent and then onto the road towards camp.

I visit the toilet block and put mozzie repellent on my socks – the b\*ggers had been biting in the meadows. I put my first coke into the water bottle, grabbed some apple and set off. I am just about to go through the gate when Julia comes in – she is looking fresh and elegant. If I want to win I have to keep moving fast – she looks far too cool but I have about ½ hr to play with.



I head out along the road. The drinking boys have gotten themselves lost. It's easy done as you have the choice of running along the road or cutting the corners and going along the lake shore – either on the shingle (hard work) or the

meadows on the 4WD indentations) and so there are very few green marks. I was glad we had checked this bit out on the bikes so I knew where to go. I headed them off in the correct direction and they stomped up the meadow ahead of me. It gently rises and so we are all walking but can do so at a fair pace. At the 55km aid station there is hot mushroom soup and oranges. I cross the road and follow the green marks. They go straight up the pass cutting across the zigzags of the road. It's hardly a path, but obvious enough with the big green paint blobs on the trees. I come to the market and it's hard to find the route from here, but eventually I realise it goes down a wide Edelweiss meadow following some 4WD indentations. It's an easy yomp and I try to keep good time on this. It's hard to walk with such a good angle and easy ground. The road and trail swing round to the left and shallows as it hits the river valley. Its good running although I'm hardly hitting a noteworthy pace. The meadow ends and I have to cross a shoe-sucking quagmire of mud. I manage to retain my shoes without getting too wet – balancing on logs and stone hopping is not that easy at 60km into a race. I am regretting forgetting to pick up another sports drink at the 42km, and hope that there is an aid station soon as I am running out of water. Yes – there it is, Joanna is manning the 65km aid station. They lower me onto a blanket and bring oranges and soup and fill up the water bottle and camel back. Joanna tells me I am sitting in 6<sup>th</sup> place and I try to



work out who is ahead of me. The masseur sets to on my legs – he is fantastic – I could sit there for hours getting treatment from him! But I carry on and empty out half the water – Its only 11km to the next station and I really won't need 2.5l of water.

The next section continues down along the gassy backs of the wide river valley. There are regular motorbike tracks in the grass which are good to run on so I make good time. I am crossing another meadow when a guy rushes out of a hut and chases me down – not hard at the pace I am going. He must have been employed to be a signpost, but couldn't be bothered to wait out on the course. Anyway, with a complete lack of mutual language we established that I needed to bear left and up and over the hill. Actually the signing is easy here, but it was a nice interaction. The path entered open woodland and gently rose over a shallow col. It then descended a dirt road to the lakeshore where I rounded a corner and came across the aid station at 76km. I was somewhat confused as my GPS only said 73km, but we had been warned that although the final distance was exact, the aid stations would be approximate depending on where they could set up. Again I got soup and oranges and I grabbed an apple for later. My second drop bag was here. I emptied out all the power bars – I hadn't been able to eat any of them, so there was no point carrying them. I got out my English flag and stuck that in my pack. (The night before the run the Japanese and Swiss had been practicing their finishing and had brought out huge national flags to run in with. Not to be out done I had manufactured a St George's cross out of a plastic bag, sticky tape and red pen.)

Armed with another coke I set off with massive blisters on my feet. We left the lake shore and there was a b@stard rise taking us up onto a steep lake-wards slope that we were to traverse for the next 10km. It was wooded with thin trees which the path wound its way through. There were 3 more ovoos – 2 of which were at the top of these small rises and I managed one clockwise circle and a donation of wood or stone, but the last one was in a meadow 10m up to the left. I apologised to the spirit as I passed it on the wrong side without circling it or adding to it – there was just no way I could do extra height gain. This was the most beautiful part of the run. I could see the lake about 20m below as I wound my way through the trees, over the roots and over the bogs. More mushroom soup and oranges at the 88km aid station. The rest is straightforward – along the road and back to camp. They assure me its only 12 km from here, but my GPS is saying only 84.6km. I mentally prepare for either reality. It's a toss-up between the road which is flatter, or the lake shore. On the road you have to contend with Mongolian drivers – they come on either side of the road depending on where the fewest potholes are. But they have little understanding of the needs of 100km runners who are at 90km of a race– who does? Sometimes the road is the inside corner so I take it but

otherwise I take the tracks on the lakeshore. At least going round the open sweeping meadows I can see behind me and am fairly sure I can't see Julia.



Its flat so I attempt to run on. I am aiming for 7km/hr, but am happy if I get over 6. Eventually I am just too tired to run and power walk along. A tourist asks if there is a walking race going on. Maybe I really don't look like a runner? I get to the final turn into the old camp road. The gate that I had walked out of has now been nailed up and I have to negotiate a 3 bar fence – not easy when your legs refuse to bend deep enough. And then just for fun, there is another one 200m further on. No - not funny. At least the gate in the wall is still open. It's the last 500m. I try to run it as I know the guys on the finishing line can see me. I make a reasonable showing of the 250m finishing straight. I am welcomed in by a loud selection of clapping, whooping and Mongolian throat singing to a pop beat.

I'm in – I've won – my first ever race win!

They plonk me down on a chair and take my shoes off. Then they try to take the compression socks off but they seem to be fused to my feet so Jo (Kiwi doc) cuts them off whilst the race doc stands on laughing and Khasar has his camera filming all angles.

## RECOVERY

The apres race morning started with the traditional lazy breakfast ,sharing of war stories, and application of copious amount of medication. A Yoga session was held in the afternoon by our lovely 100km runner Julia, using wooden stools as props. At 5pm we had the awards ceremony with the presentation of medals, finishers shirts and podium place shirts. Vests are also presented to all the volunteers and the DNF'ers.

In the evening we have a banquet which apparently contains more vegetables than anywhere else in Mongolia. The celebrations go on well into the wee hours for some of the younger participants.



The next morning we are looking for something to do and manage to creak our way up onto some horses and have a ride for an hour or so with about 20 others. We then round off the morning with a brief paddle amongst some yaks who are cooling down in the lake. Then its lunch and off on the bus to Murun, and then the flight to Ullan Battor and a hasty final meal at the Chenggis Khan Hotel. The following morning we manage to fit in an early morning walk along Peace Avenue and a brief visit to the Choijin Lama

Temple Museum before the start of the long flight home.

