



Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset 19th edition – 2017 Race report.

Overall the 2017 race went well. We had more local participants than usual, and some young and very good Mongolian runners from the Hovsgol region are emerging. During race week we had some very useful meetings with local authorities and friends, which will further improve our main concern of keeping this national park as clean and waste free as possible.

The Ms2s organizers asked two participants, Beata and Tomasz, from this year's event to write the race report. Beata is an experienced competitor in long distance horse riding, and she helped as an aid station volunteer during the race. Tomasz is a seasoned long distance runner and jointly won the 42km veterans' category. We are very grateful for their detailed race report, and hope you will enjoy it.

Wishing you all the best in your training this year and hope to see you in 2018 for our 20th anniversary race.

MONGOLIA SUNRISE TO SUNSET 2017

PARADISE FOR RUNNERS

Written by Beata Szlezynghier-Jagielskielskia and Tomasz Jagielski

We usually travel without going through any travel companies, but this time we got in contact with web site of ecoLeap Foundation who organize Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset marathon. The information on that web page was so interesting we decided to participate in the “world’s most beautiful” ultra-trail run. It was a very good idea! It was a great tour with some activities and we are recommending ms2s to everyone who will travel to Mongolia and wants to run in a national park and unspoiled nature. The team of organizers is wonderful - very friendly, responsible and they did an amazing job of organizing everything and were always accessible.

Mongolia is a land of surprises - from the barren Gobi Desert, through Altai Mountains to the quirky Russian-influenced city of Ulaanbaatar. Between is the grassland of Mongolian steppe. This land is defined by its rugged terrain, vast expanse of blue sky and fascinating culture rooted in traditions. Our adventure began in Ulaanbaatar, where runners from all around the world gathered at the International Chinggis Khaan Airport. This city is not very nice, a curious mix of Mongolian Gers - tents and Russian style apartment blocks. It's a city in flux, with the oldest buildings dating to the start of the 20th century. Before then it was a migratory city of gers. The Russian influence is seen everywhere – in its public squares, war monuments or soviet-era State Circus. Now there are high-rises springing up.

From the capital city we flew together to Moron, the closest city to the Khovsgol lake, and drove the rest of the way with the vans. Today the road is fast and easy, asphalt made few years ago. Before the road (so we hear) it was quite an adventure trip. Luckily we arrived to Toilogt Camp, on the shore of the Lake just before sunset.



The views were amazing and somewhat surreal - amongst barrel landscape we caught glimpses of semi-wild horses, sheeps, goats and yaks. To our surprise a few reindeers were grazing just across the road. Along the way, we met several Mongolian families, including traditional herders who seasonally move their gers and animals to greener pastures. Mongolia is vast, but home of a mere 3 million people. Half of them live in Ulaanbaatar, the rest are spread out on the grasslands, living traditional life herding and breeding livestock.

We stayed at Toilogt Camp at the lake Khovsgol, arriving 3 days before the race. It was necessary to arrive early in order to acclimatize to the altitude of 1650 meters above sea level. In 1992 this stunning area became Lake Khovsgol National Park. In recent years it has become the destination of more and more travelers, from all Mongolia and beyond. The international group of runners enjoyed everything what this beautiful place can offer like canoe trips on the lake, walks in the forest, and mountain biking. We had the opportunity to observe local nomadic families in their ger-tents. We also explored the national park on the famous Mongolian horses, that would prove to be the most hardy and tireless horses we have ever had privilege to ride. But most importantly, we took short runs out to see the terrain of the approaching race.



Our ger was straight from a folk tale - a little circular tent of felt, lattice and brightly painted wood. In the center there was a wood-burning stove. Despite its remoteness there was a satellite dish, wi-fi , clean toilets and showers facility with sauna..... Even in the outback, signs of “modern world” are everywhere.



The camp is surrounded by natural beauty, and there is plenty of gorgeous and rare flora and fauna. Some environmentalists say that this lake’s water is the purest in the world, rather than Baikal Lake. In fact the two “sister” lakes are linked by the Egiin river which flows into the Selenge river and then to Baikal. Khovsgol is not as large as Baikal but is really huge, the deepest in Mongolia (262 m) and 16th biggest freshwater lake in the world. Surrounded by beautiful alpine scenery, the region is one of jagged mountains and taiga forests. Hundreds of Bronze-Age ritual mounds and deer stones are found throughout the region, symbolizing a cultural history that witnessed the transition from early forms of worship and sacrifice to Shamanism - one of the oldest religious beliefs on earth, strongly guided by a reverence for nature that is still practiced in this remote area by Dukha-Darkhad tribe. Mongolians call this tribe the “Tsaatan”, meaning “The Reindeer Herders”. In the 21st Century, North Mongolia is a combination of Shamanism and Buddhist beliefs remaining an easy and unselfconscious part of Mongolian life. Traveling across this country we frequently come across small mounds made up of rocks and stones. In the forest steppe regions, these mounds often consist of branches of trees. Looking closely you could notice empty bottles of vodka, sweets or small pieces of dairy products inside them. The stone shrines are known as ovoos - erected by local families and travelers to show gratitude and respect and to honour the spirits of the surrounding land, forest or a hill. Ovoos are an integral part of Mongolian life. Circling three times in a clockwise direction and small offerings suppose to ensure the safety of the trip or good fortune in life. But...Mongolia is not particularly religious place. Soviet-enforced atheism and the ultra-pragmatism of nomadic life kept religion from being a serious social force during the last century. Since 1991, religion has made a sort of comeback, as Buddhism returned and Christian missionaries arrived, but it still doesn’t have much impact on the public sphere.

The restaurant in our camp was really very good. In our minds, people in Mongolia don’t have much time to spend with sophisticated recipes, not to mention rare ingredients. The diet is dominated by meat - in the winter - and dairy products - in the summer. Meat is the basis of the diet, primarily beef and mutton. Mongolian have supplemented their protein diet with local herbs and greens when they could find or grow. Over the years, Mongolian nomads have developed a number of unique dairy products “white food” (tsagaan idee), which include different types of yoghurt (tarag, aarts), cottage cheese (byasag), dried curds (aarul) and fermented mare’s milk (airag). It may be further distilled to produce a mongolian vodka (shimiin arkhi) – best consumed warm and fresh. Because of special weather, environment and traditions the way the Mongolian use their milk differ in each region, province and even family. Milk and cream are used to make a variety of beverages, milk is used in several Mongolian rituals.

We also had a presentation from the Khovsgol Dairy Project. The project is a collaboration between Danish

Architects without Borders, Dairy without Borders, ecoLeap Foundation and the cooperative of nomadic herders Sarlagiin Saikhan Khishig. The aim is to build and establish a local dairy facility owned and managed by a cooperative of nomadic herders. The project will create local jobs and provide a boost to the entire region, which can help reverse the trend of urban migration.



On the second evening in camp, after dinner, we had a cultural performance of a group of young musicians and dancers. They played typical tunes of Mongolia and were dancing in their traditional costumes. Popular themes of traditional music are odes to nature, horses and the open steppe. Long songs (as the name suggests) have been passed down for many generations and are loved by Mongolians. The originals were written about 800 years ago. There are special songs for weddings, festivals and religious ceremonies. Traditional instruments are made from metal, stone, bamboo, leather and wood and include string and wind instruments, drums and gongs. The most spectacular is a vocal technique by which a single performer can produce two or even three separate lines simultaneously (khoomii). Khoomii, or throat singing, is linked to shamanism and is characterized by the production of sounds imitating those of nature: the soft wind cascades, rivers or bird songs are just a few. National classical dance is performed to the music of Mongolian instruments in a ger in circle of people. It is a descriptive dance, or a pantomime, with a dancer acting out several scenes from everyday life of herders, such as milking the cow, cooking, hunting etc.

The afternoon before race day we had a meeting with the aid station personnel. Each aid station consists of local Mongolians including a horse rider and a foreign volunteer. They were instructed how to provide water and food for runners, and to support the medical doctors. For some of them it was unique to see our running gear.



On the day of race, after a short sleep, we woke up super early in the morning (3.00 am) to the sound of Mongolian folk music. After a very quick breakfast (a small bite and a hot tea) and a check that each of us were carrying the mandatory items, all 53 runners rushed into the darkness with head torches. There were 33 international runners and 20 Mongolians, and some were competing in the 100K, some in the 42K. The course typically follows horse trails along the lake through the National Park or up in the mountains.



The 100km course has a total elevation gain/loss of 3360 meters. The course begins with a narrow single-track in the forest. Runners need to be especially cautious during the first few kilometers in the darkness because of the risk of trunks, fallen trees and roots on the way. It was cold and dark during the first hour of the run. Then a beautiful sunrise appeared over the lake - putting us in awe of the whole magic of the area. The atmosphere was fascinating and the weather was beautiful for the entire race. People at aid stations were so friendly and efficient at helping us with water and food.



On the pass we saw Mongolian Oboo, and runners circled them three times to ensure the safety during marathon and good luck. Just in case! The track was very well marked so we had no difficulties in finding the way. From the hills we could see the beautiful Khovsgol Lake and surrounding mountains. Around noon, the 42km runners finished their race. For the rest, 58km was still ahead. By late afternoon, all of us were looking for the 100km finishers. The weather suddenly changed and heavy rain started so the last of the 100km runners had to fight not only with pain but also with rain. Some of them finished the race in darkness. The official results we can see on the web site of ms2s marathon.

The international group of adventure-loving people made the Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset marathon so special. 20 nationalities – 53 runners, we can say that the Mongolia marathon family is truly global. Among the runners in

2017 were true adventurers – Jamie from England, who travelled by bike through Mongolia steppe and reached Khovsgol Lake for run; Jelena and Igor from Croatia who travelled by motorbike from Croatia through part of Europe, Iran Central Asia to Mongolia, and many more.



8 runners finished the 100K distance, an amazing endeavor. Daria from Irkutsk was the first woman across the line in 13:51, followed by Clare from South Africa a few hours later. John from Ireland was the first in the male competition, arriving only just before Claire, in 13:43. John was followed by Hugo from El Salvador (14:25) and Igor from Croatia (17:44). Jamie from UK, who won in a previous year, was the first in Male Veteran 100km finisher in 16:03, followed closely by Enkhtur from Mongolia (16:46). It is important also to mention that the best result on 100K was achieved by Tumenbayar from Mongolia but he was disqualified after crossing finishing line without his backpack containing all mandatory items needed to be carried all the way.



The best female in 42k was by Chiara from Italy (5:53) and Stella from South Africa (6:26) in the Female Veteran's category. The fastest man was Tuguldur from Mongolia (in a blistering 3:55) and Steen from Denmark together with Tomasz from Poland crossing first together in the Male Veteran's category in 6:51.



The day after the race was dedicated to recovery, with a special Mongolian dinner and the award ceremony in the evening. Next day we took a flight back to Ulaanbaatar, settled into the hotel and met for a farewell dinner in a Mongolian traditional restaurant. The party was great and food really special!

We had already promised ourselves that one day, we would return! For us it was a journey of a lifetime and we still think about going back – the country is just so different than everywhere else we have been. And the other thing that makes the race unique is the fantastic support of the locals - horsemen, overlooking the course and watching runners, the aid station people-volunteers and cooks, waitresses, helpers in the camp.

