



Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset – the 20 Year Anniversary

20 years! A lot can change in 20 years. In 1999, when the first Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset took place, there was no road from Murun to Lake Hovsgol. The journey to the lake was long, difficult and tiring. Today, the dirt roads might still be bumpy, but they are... roads! 20 years ago, ultra-trail running in remote Mongolia seemed to be a completely crazy idea. Today, trail races are being held in the Sahara Desert, in the Antarctic and in the Himalaya Mountains.

But not everything changes: The Lake Hovsgol area is still as stunning, as beautiful, as wild as it was 20 years ago. The local population still lives the nomadic lifestyle, and the shamanic beliefs have endured. There are wild horses, yaks and even some camels. There are seas of Edelweiss and wild flowers. There are reindeer herders. It is still a breathtaking, relatively untouched paradise.

“Relatively”, because the Hovsgol National Park has seen a growth in tourism in recent years. Some camps have been opened at the lakeshore, and more city residents from Ulaanbaatar enjoy time in the wild nature. That is why **MS2S is even more important today than it was 20 years ago: With all the proceeds of the event, the ecoLeap foundation makes sure that this gorgeous piece of our world remains as untouched, remote and clean as it is now, and has been in 1999.** Park rangers are hired, free garbage bags provided, garbage trucks bought. MS2S and ecoLeap also support the local population, including a Shaman, to make sure that they can continue to be proud of their unique nomadic lifestyle and culture.



Then and now: Trail running at Lake Hovsgol.

The Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset is a very special event: Ultra-trail running in a beautiful National Park in northern Mongolia, for the good cause of protecting this park, with horsemen as race stewards and untouched nature as far as the eye can see. The group that gathered in Mongolia in the summer of 2018 was very special, too: Runners and companions from more than 15 countries met at the Chinggis Khaan International Airport in Ulaanbaatar – from various European countries, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, Japan, China and Singapore all the way to South Africa. Some of them aiming to complete a marathon on every continent. Others running to overcome personal blows of fate or the loss of loved ones. Some chose Mongolia as the place for their first marathon or ultra-marathon. One participant cycled for days to reach Lake Hovsgol. A Mongolian runner walked and ran all the 800km from Mongolia's capital to participate – it took him two weeks.

Acclimatizing in paradise

After flying in from all over the world and meeting at Ulaanbaatar airport, a domestic flight took the participants to Murun airport in Mongolia's wild North. There, the runners, volunteers and friends boarded busses – bound for Lake Hovsgol, the "Mother Lake", considered holy by Mongols and recognized as one of only 17 ancient lakes of the earth, with a history of up to 20 million years. Through wide steppes, passing barren mountains, a "Ger" here and there, and hold back only by a herd of goats on the street and a brief engine failure, the MS2S crew finally arrived at Camp Toilogt, warmly greeted by the locals. After a long day of travelling, the participants retreated to their cozy Mongolian Gers, warmed by a crackling fire in the stove, for a good night's sleep.



Horseback-riding near Camp Toilogt, Hovsgol Lake.

Camp Toilogt is a picturesque, lovely place: Surrounded by forests and directly at the lakeshore of crystal clear Lake Hovsgol, it makes it easy for guests to escape the modern life and dive into this Mongolian adventure. For the MS2S 2018 runners, the next days were all about exploring this gorgeous place and acclimatizing to the altitude of 1600 meters. Where else can participants inspect some parts of the race course on horseback, led by Mongolian horsemen? Kayaking on the lake, going for walks or runs in the forest, visiting the shamanic Ovoos – places of worship of the nature spirits, daily yoga sessions at the lakeshore with the amazing teacher Julia, a small dairy presentation

by local ladies of the Hovsgol Dairy project (read more here: <http://www.khovsgoldairyproject.org/>), Mongolian cultural performances including the famous throat singing and tunes of the national instrument, the horse-head fiddle – the days seemed to be short.

We shall overcome

On August 1st, at 3am, a sweet melody of a Mongolian flute sounded through the camp – the wake-up call! The night was chilly, with light rain and some wind. Within minutes, Camp Toilogt was bustling: Runners preparing their backpacks, pinning their race numbers on the shirts, filling water bottles and camelbaks, brushing their teeth, hurrying to the breakfast room, stretching, searching for their headlamps, enjoying a coffee. It was a unique atmosphere. Over the last few days, the runners had gotten to know each other, had made friendships, and were now embarking on this adventure run together. After lots of high-fiving and pre-race photos, the runners headed outside to the start line, where MS2S co-organizer Zvoni performed a spontaneous “We shall overcome” before the countdown began.

At 4:30am, the 20th edition of the Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset started, and the runners headed into the dark forest for the first two kilometers. This is a tricky part of the trace, especially in wet and muddy conditions: Because of slippery roots, trunks and bushes, the runners needed to be very careful. After 2km, the participants exited the dark forest and arrived on a lake-side road for the next 10km. While runners in other years were able to enjoy a breathtaking sunrise behind the Lake, the weather conditions this year did not allow the same: There was still some rain, it was quite cold and cloudy.

The first major uphill battle started right after the 12km aid station: Chichee Pass. Ascending in steep serpentine, the runners got a first glimpse of what they would see throughout the course: seas of wildflowers just next to the race course! At the top of Chichee Pass, a Mongolian horseman race marshal was positioned to guide the runners to the correct downhill path. The downhill was technical and treacherous: loose rocks, steep grasslands, slippery roots.



Horseman Tom Baatar was guiding the runners on Chichee Pass.

Wet feet, high spirits

After descending from the first mountain and while running on the single trails in the lowland it quickly became clear that nobody would finish this race in dry shoes. Because of heavy rain in the days before the race, many parts of the race course were marshy and wet. At the 25km aid station, runners refreshed themselves with tea, water, tomatoes, potatoes, Mongolian donuts and sweets as well as fruits, before heading into the next valley and toward the second big obstacle – Khirvesteg Pass. This part is surely one of the most beautiful of the entire race course: A horseman guided the way to a fairytale forest with soft, mossy ground. The runners needed to search their way from marking to marking, from tree to tree. After the steep, pathless incline, they finally reached Khirvesteg Pass. On the top of the pass is one of the shamanic Ovoos. To ensure good luck during the run, the participants circled the Owoo three times clockwise, before descending. Just as the downhill from Chichee Pass, also the second downhill was very steep and demanding. Hidden stones or roots were a potential risk on this slippery part of the race.

Once back down from the mountain, the race course leads towards Lake Hovsgol and on a dirt road to Camp Toilogt – the finish line for the marathon contestants, and an aid station for the ultra-runners. Altogether, runners of the marathon distance overcame an accumulated altitude gain/loss of no less than 2.255 meters – for the 100km ultra runners, the altitude gain/loss summed up to 3.365 meters.

Fast Mongolian marathon runners!

In the 42km distance, the first five places were held by local Mongolian runners. There was a photo finish of the first two athletes – Otgonzaya Uudus finished slightly ahead of Tuguldur Tselmegsaikhan in stellar 4:37 hours. From the international participants, Bernhard from Austria ranked on sixth place after dropping out of the ultra-race at 55km, and Toshiyuki from Japan ranked on eighth place after finishing his quest for 100km at 65km. Noa from Japan finished his first marathon – at the age of 15 our youngest participant – a great accomplishment! Nirmalan from Australia also chose this difficult race for his first marathon and completed it successfully. US-American Scott managed to finish the tough race as well. Congrats!

Among the male 42km veterans, John from New Zealand was fastest in 7:06 hours, followed by MS2S co-organizer Steen from Denmark, Walter from Switzerland, Peter from New Zealand, Stephen from the USA, Murat from Turkey, Hans from Switzerland and Tiberiu from the USA. The MS2S evergreens Zvoni (Germany) and Yasufumi (Japan) finished the difficult and exhausting 42km successfully as well, and so did the US-Boys Mark, Rickey and Glenn!

The fastest lady on the marathon distance was Cynthia from the USA – in great 5:56 hours! Other international female runners that successfully completed this big challenge were Chika from Japan (dropped out of the ultra-race at 65km), Amanda from France, Amy from China/Britain, as well as the two Singaporean starters Bernice and Felice. Well done!

Three ladies started in the “veteran” 42km category, and all of them finished the marathon! Dora from Switzerland won in 9:16 – on the Swiss national day! Jill from Australia and Jane from the USA finished second and third.

The ultra-challenge

While some of the 42km finishers decided to cool their muscles in the lake, or enjoyed a well-deserved beer, the ultra-runners needed to head out again for the second – even longer – loop of MS2S. Until the next aid station at kilometer 55, the course is relatively flat. But as soon as the runners left the lakeside road and entered the forest, the path again proved to be difficult: deep,

marshy, wet. After the 55km station, the third and last major incline waited: Jankhai Pass. With the legs getting more and more tired, the uphill section in the forest can be really difficult, both physically and mentally. But the following downhill is all the more rewarding: A gentle downhill in a meadow full of blooming Edelweiss. **Runner's high.**

The course lead further South all the way to the 76km aid station, which is located close to the southern tip of Lake Hovsgol. From here, the participants turned North again and headed along the lake all the way to the finish line. Right after the aid station, the participants entered a lakeside single-trail in a beautiful forest, directly next to the shore of Lake Hovsgol – this is widely considered to be one of the most spectacular parts of the race.



Winner: Jun Matsumoto from Tokyo, Japan in amazing 12:37 hours!

Only 12:37 hours after departing in the early morning hours, the Japanese runner Jun arrived at Toilogt Camp and secured his victory in the 20th anniversary MS2S 100km race. Congratulations, champ! 50 minutes later, Ochiroo from Mongolia arrived to claim the second place, followed by Christian from Germany, Lawrence from Hong Kong and the British birthday boy James, who received a birthday cake and a Happy Birthday song directly at the finish line. Koji, the father of 15-year old Noa mentioned above, completed his 100km run with a strong finish. After sunset, in the rain and in the dark, Steven from Australia managed to beat the 18-hour cut-off time with great willpower.

Among the 100km veterans, Hansmartin from Germany was the fastest in 13:30 hours, followed by Jamie from the UK, Michael from Australia and race director Nicolas from Switzerland.

The fastest female ultra-runner was Conny from Austria – she arrived at the finish line after 16:04 hours to the sound of the Austrian national anthem. “Silver” and “Bronze” went to Annapurna from the USA and Colleen from South Africa.



Organizers Nicolas and Steen with the two ultra-ladies Conny (Austria) and Colleen (South Africa). (Not in the photo: Annapurna/USA).

Celebration with big smiles

The day after the race was all about celebrating the outstanding achievements of the MS2S participants. Under a blue sky, the runners took the chance for a boat ride on Lake Hovsgol, circling a gorgeous little island with hundreds of seagulls and exploring more of this stunning area. Some of the participants, under New Zealand leadership, combined two of their passions and organized a “beer mile run” – lots of fun! After the award ceremony in the evening, the amazing camp staff had prepared a buffet feast for the whole team – the celebration ended late at a bonfire at the lakeshore. What a night!



The MS2S 2018 crew.

The next day, it was time to say goodbye to Camp Toilogt. Via Murun, the participants travelled back to Ulaanbaatar, where another big celebration dinner was the worthy final to an outstanding week. It was time to say good-bye – or better “see you soon”, because many new friendships had been formed. From Ulaanbaatar, the MS2S 2018 crew travelled back into the whole wide world – packed with lots of positive emotions and unforgettable memories. **See you soon, everyone!**

A very big **Thank You** to our race doctor for many years, Dr. Ben, for his great support. In the future, Konstantin from Russia will be the MS2S race doctor – welcome to the team!

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