



MAGICAL MOMENTS IN MONGOLIA

A RUN FOR ADVENTURERS

By Bernhard Hagen

The Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset is more than just a beautiful 100km ultra marathon in a remote mountain area. It is like being an explorer, experiencing a traditional culture far removed from the modern world.

Three am. Traditional Mongolian folk music wakes me up. Encouraging flutes, drums and a gentle string instrument. The fire in the stove crackles and keeps the Mongolian “ger” cozy and warm. I open my eyes, my three ger mates are already awake. Running shoes, backpacks, flashlights, a compass – the running gear is prepared on the table in the center of the yurt. The big day has come.

A few minutes later I walk through the picturesque ger camp on the shores of mighty Lake Hovsgol, the “dark blue pearl of Mongolia”, as it is known among locals. The sky is full of stars – more than I have ever seen in my life. At three am it is as dark as in the middle of the night, but the whole camp suddenly seems busy. Runners are preparing their backpacks, stretching their muscles and lacing their running shoes.

The breakfast room has transformed into a buzzing race preparation site. I sip my hot black coffee while other runners take selfies, warm up or do a last equipment check. A long and remarkable day lies ahead: 100km in the wilderness of Mongolia – the Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset (MS2S), one of the most beautiful runs on the planet. An accumulated elevation gain/loss of 3,365 meters. Windblown lowlands, lakeside single trails, craggy mountain passes, mossy forests, dry riverbeds.

As we wish each other luck for the run, I realize how many new friends I have found in the days before the race. I look into faces that are tense, filled with excitement but also joyful anticipation. After arriving in Camp Toilogt four days ago, the seventy participants have enjoyed the untouched nature and acclimatized to the altitude of 1,600 meters above sea level. In the days leading up

to today, we went hiking, mountain biking, and kayaking. We enjoyed a Genghis Khan beer or two at a bonfire at the lakeshore. We circled shamanistic Ovoos three times clockwise to ensure good luck for the upcoming race. Those who are not afraid of the cold even swam in the crystal-clear Lake Hovsgol. And we met incredibly friendly and hospitable locals: Mongolian horsemen, who guided short horseback riding tours along the lake. Nomadic families, who invited us into their yurts and offered us Airag, the fermented horse milk that the locals like so much. The team in the camp, always smiling and offering a helping hand. We also met park rangers and garbage truck drivers, who work to keep the National Park clean. The MS2S is organized on a nonprofit basis – all proceeds go into environmental and cultural projects for the National Park and its inhabitants.

The summer nights in Northern Mongolia can be quite cold. It’s raining a little, and it is windy. Regardless, I decide to start out in shorts and a T-shirt. As we gather at the race start site, I spot the Russian vans in the field next to us. The drivers have lit up the car headlights to enlighten the scene. The drivers, holding cups with hot, salty milk tea, stand near their vans and chat. A few days ago, we had met them for the first time, when they picked up the runners at a gravel runway also known as Hatgal Airport. We had climbed into the vans and started our bumpy journey North, racing across these incredibly vast steppes, passing by herds of yaks, wild horses and even some camels. It was the first of many Mongolian moments that left me speechless and amazed. It is not easy to describe the impressive Mongolian nature, the wildness, the solitude.

INTO THE DARK FOREST: Four am. Finally, the big race starts. Seventy runners from twenty-one different countries, some of them tackling the 42km marathon and others the 100km ultra marathon. We head into the forest for the first two km. It is pitch dark. Most of the runners start out slow, carefully checking out the narrow forest

path for slippery roots and trunks with their flashlights.

It feels good to start running and warm up. After two km we get out of the dense forest and onto a lakeside dirt road. It is still pretty dark, and apart from the runners there is no noise at all. I feel okay, but I am concerned about my back. Just a week before flying to Mongolia, I had a mountain bike crash in Austria, somersaulting in the air and landing on my back. Bruised all over, I was lucky not to be severely injured. But my back muscles ached, and in the days before the run I wasn’t sure whether I would be able to run or how far I would make it. The race doctor encouraged me to give it a try, and so I did.

As we approach the first aid station at twelve km, the rain has stopped and the sun starts to rise behind the majestic lake. The sky in the East turns red. A stunning view. As if he had been waiting for exactly this moment, I see the Mongolian race photographer Khasar next to the road taking pictures of runners against the backdrop of Lake Hovsgol and the sunrise. I suddenly realize that I don’t feel my back muscles at all. No pain. Maybe because of the movement, the warmth or simply the adrenaline? I don’t know, but it’s a good sign.

At the first aid station, we are greeted with applause by the cheering volunteers and local helpers. We get warm tea, water, boiled potatoes with salt, tomatoes, cucumbers, apples, Mongolian doughnuts. With the warm tea and food, the sun coming up and with my back seeming OK, I feel great. We don’t waste too much time at the aid station and start the ascent. The biggest of three mountain passes awaits – Chichee Pass. Steep winding roads uphill, always with a stunning view of Lake Hovsgol and the sunrise. We overcome 700 meters of altitude gain. Spectacular views of the Siberian mountains in the North are the reward when we reach the 2,300 meter high Chichee Pass. A Mongolian horseman, a blade of grass in his mouth, smiles and takes notes of our race

numbers on a small piece of paper. A few meters away stands his brown mare, watching us curiously.

The downhill is steep and slippery, and the following marshlands are wet after last night's rain. We cross a dry riverbed, run through a herd of yaks, follow a single track through a fairy tale forest and enjoy refreshments at the twenty-five km aid station, before the second ascend starts. The route leads into a spectacular valley, with dark green fields full of purple flowers. A horseman leads the way to cross a small river just before it gets really, really steep. The trail leads through a dense, mossy forest up to Khirvesteg Pass. Exhausted, we make it to the top and see one of the shamanistic Ovoos – wooden sticks and branches, blue flags and stones that are used as shrines in Mongolian folk religious practice. They are often found on mountain-tops such as this one, and are there to enable believers to worship the spirits. My heart still pounding heavily from the steep climb, I am happy to circle the Ovoo three times clockwise and add a stone for good luck. I would need it.

An hour or so later we reach the forty-two km mark at Toilogt camp – the finish line for some of the runners. I have decided that I will continue – and for the first time in my life run farther than forty-two km. A good running mate from Germany tackles the ultra as well, which makes the whole crazy idea a little bit easier. We head out of the camp and follow the lakeside road to the south before heading into another remote valley.

KITSCHY SEAS OF EDELWEISS: At about kilometer sixty-five I experience one more of these magical, unforgettable moments. We had just overcome a climb up to the last pass, Jankhai Pass. On the uphill, my legs felt very tired, my muscles sore. But I knew that this is the last major climb. And then: A gentle downhill in a beautiful meadow with thousands of Edelweiss. More kitschy than the Sound of Music. So here I am, running at sixty-five km in one of the last truly remote areas of the world, and I am still feeling good. It is the best running moment of my life.

"I have huge blisters on both feet", says my companion as we approach the seventy km mark. He is limping badly. *"I cannot run anymore".*

I also start to get more and more tired and exhausted. There are only a few kilometers between the high-spirited downhill run through the Edelweiss meadows and the uneven walk on the forest road right now. We decide to walk. We are way ahead the cut-off times and should be able to reach the camp and finish in a decent time even if we walk all of the remaining thirty km.

MIND GAME: We start to break down the distances in our minds. Soon we will be at the eighty km mark. Then we'll hit eighty-four, which is two marathons. At eighty-eight will be the last aid station. Then ninety, and only ten km left.

I never would have imagined how far four km could be when you are completely exhausted. Small hills turn into steep mountains. We keep moving, but running is impossible now. After circling a last Ovoo on a small hill overlooking the south end of Hovsgol Lake and a beautiful lakeside forest trail we reach the eighty-eight km aid station. Some last refreshments, a short but comfortable shoulder and neck massage, and we hit the road. As if he wanted to offer some mental support, a shaggy stray dog appears and keeps us company. We name him Boris. As the camp comes in sight, I realize for the first time that I am about to finish the 100km. Everything hurts except my back, ironically. From afar we hear the enthusiastic crowd of fellow runners in the camp, cheering and clapping. It is eight-thirty pm, and the sun is about to set. Together with Boris, we run the last 300 meters to the finish line.

FACTS & FIGURES:

Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset
Annual run held since 1999
Race Week 2017: 29th July-5th August
www.ms2s.org

For the good cause: All proceeds are used to fund environmental and cultural projects in Hovsgol National Park via the ecoLeap foundation. www.ecoleap.org



OPPOSITE PAGE:
Early morning race start.

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Craggy mountains in Northern Mongolia.
Smiling despite the blisters after finishing the ultra distance.
Checking race numbers on the list at the first mountain pass.
An hour into the race, the sun rises behind Lake Hovsgol.

