

Race Report

Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset 2002, 100 km and Marathon 26 June 2002, Lake Hovsgol National Park, Mongolia

This year's event, the 4th annual Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset ultramarathon, was blessed with gentle weather amenable to very fast times on race day and peaceful trekking on the days leading up to and following race day. The 100km course record was smashed by over an hour, and three runners came in under the previous course record. Everything went smoothly once again with no major injuries or incidents, and the race was able to sponsor a new garbage control project in the national park with proceeds and donations from this year's event.

59 racers from around the world sprinted from the start line at 4:30 A.M. on race day, 26th of June. A few hardy souls whose race day began at 2:45 AM with a gentle yoga class by a fire deserve a special mention. Inspired by the beauty and serenity of the region runners showed lots of interest this year in the yoga classes during race week - it must have been people's natural reaction to being in such a beautiful place where nature really does predominate. But to be honest, I was literally dumbstruck when people suggested the 2:45 AM pre-race yoga class.

After yoga finished at 3:15, Tyler and two local musicians launched into what has become part of Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset's traditions - a trumpet and flute wake-up call composed of a traditional Mongolian melody and a song that is made up the night before the race. Runners and supporters started rolling into the dining hall for check-in and breakfast at 3:45. Shortly thereafter the first hint of morning sun lit up the horizon over the lake and everyone lined up at the start banner, took a million photos, counted off to 4:30 and the race was on.

The head of Huvsgul Travel, Purvedorj had suggested that last year's winner Byambadorj from Ulaanbaatar might win this year again, but the race had a few surprises in store. At the first aid station at 12 km, a local runner Enkhtur arrived first in under an hour. The first leg is mostly flat but with the hardest 88km still to go this was a very brave time. He was followed close behind by Byambadorj, and also by the infamous Guragcha who turned 60 this year. The first woman came through shortly after, a strong Mongolian ex-Olympian named Suvdma, and the first non-Mongolian runner at 12 km came in at 7th place more than 10 minutes behind the leaders. This quiet participant, Andy Brooks from England, was another huge surprise, having disclosed very little about his preparation and race background before race day. For all everybody knew Andy was in Mongolia to quietly enjoy the fresh air and nature. This image was quickly to change as the race progressed.

The first mountain climb stared at the runners leaving the first aid station - a challenging 5km climb up to the highest point on the course - Chichee Pass - at 2,300m elevation. As usual, this climb took its toll on many but the 5 or 6 fastest runners somehow kept their pace with Enkhtur extending his lead slightly, coming into the second aid station at 25.5 km in under 2:30. Six people came through this aid station in under 3 hours this year! Andy Brooks kept close to the Mongolian leaders, finishing 25.5km in 2:49. The indefatigable Guragcha stayed just ahead of Andy, and sought to exceed all expectations by aiming for first place in the marathon race. All the other runners in front of Guragcha were signed up for 100km ultra-marathon.

After the second aid station, racers faced a second battle up to Khirvesteg pass which is lower but much rougher and steeper than Chichee. As before, this was the part of the course which received the most curses by runners but the huge meadow of wildflowers at the top led to moans giving way to aahhhs.

Guragcha indeed came into the 42km finish in first place, with a fantastic time of 5:09, his best time in all 4 years of running the Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset. We look forward to at least 40 more years of strong finishes from this 60-year old gentleman with a body made of granite! The first placed woman, as expected, was Suvdma, just behind Guragcha. Ian Smith was the first place non-Mongolian completing the marathon in 5:14.

Meanwhile the 100km race was on. Enkhtur stayed ahead at the 42km mark, which is shared with the 42km event finish. He tore into the aid station and bodily lifted the 75kg race director, Tyler, jumping up and down before tossing him back to the ground. He then grabbed some soup and ran off with a flourish to tackle the remaining 58km. The 42km event course record of 4:45 set by Chogsom in 1999 still holds, but unofficially this time was smashed by Enkhtur this year (who was running in the 100km race). Just behind Enkhtur Andy Brooks had made up a few minutes and was now running in second place within 20 meters of Byambadorj. They greeted each other amicably and sat together in the aid station tent changing out of muddy shoes before charging off.

Runners who have run the race before, will know that the second loop of the 100km is more gentle than the first 42km as the course follows the lakeshore, leaving it only once to gradually climb to the 2,000m high Jankhai Pass. In past years the travails of the long distances have seen almost all runners slowing to a walk at some points. This year, however, Enkhtur ran nearly every meter of the course, never faltering from his pace. At the 55 km aid station he was 20 minutes ahead of Byambadorj and Andy and at the 65 km aid station he was 30 minutes ahead. Enkhtur kept this 30-minute lead through the Modot Bulan aid station and only slowed down slightly in the next leg, coming into the final aid station 16 minutes ahead of Andy and Byambadorj. But Enkhtur's courage shone through in the final 12 km leg which he ran in an incredibly fast 72 minutes - a time good enough to earn back 15 minutes on his chasers and seeing him crossing the finish line with a new course record of 11 hours and 12 minutes. This record shattered the previous record held by Tsogtbaatar Norov and set in 1999 of 12:22.

Andy Brooks and Byambadorj ran the second 58 km within a few minutes of each other, sometimes running together and attempting some friendly communication, and other times leapfrogging each other. Byambadorj ran ahead of Andy in the final sprint finishing in 11:42, still 30 full minutes ahead of the previous course record. Andy was the first non-Mongolian runner in the race and by far the fastest non-Mongolian to ever finish.

The first place female runner for the ultramarathon, Dr. Cath Worth, finished fast in 15:16 with blood caked all over her leg from a good fall in the very first 1km of the race. She survived and was up and running the next day.

Overall it was a beautiful day, with mostly comfortable cloud cover and only a little light rain.

A number of participants deserve honourable mentions. Firstly, Marc Progin from Switzerland via Hong Kong, who mountain biked to lake Hovsgol all the way from Ulaanbaatar. He covered the 700km plus distance in nearly 8 days with a few over-100km days. By race day he was lean and strong for the ultra and it in 6th place overall in 13:56, and first place in the senior (over 50) age category. Batbukh, a local park ranger who had never run before the race also deserves a special mention as he finished the marathon in a very impressive time of 6:17.

As many visitors to Hovsgol National Park have witnessed, tourism is bringing more and more disposable items into the park, which are often discarded randomly. The use of non-local products is also increasing among the nomads resident in the park. The result of these two trends is a continuous increase in inorganic garbage every year. Proceeds from this year's Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset were devoted to contributing to the Hovsgol National Park Garbage Control Project that Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset put together with the Hovsgol National Park staff and the Ministry for Nature and the Environment. This project includes several new initiatives including the creation of two new park ranger positions who will be fully devoted to garbage control in the park. They will make full use of the 'garbage truck' donated by Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset two years ago.

Next year's Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset takes place on 25th June 2002.