



# Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset 100K Ultramarathon

Running Free joins Nicky Redl on her magical journey across awe-inspiring Mongolian countryside, sharing all the pain, pleasure, agony, and euphoria she experienced over the gruelling, yet wonderful, 100 kilometre Sunrise to Sunset course.

Words by Nicky Redl  
Photos Courtesy of Gregory MacIssac, Kenneth Koh and Nicky Redl

It was still dark as we gathered at the start banner of the Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset race. I hopped from foot to foot to stay warm, struggling to take in the reality of where I was. I'd been fevering towards this moment for so long, horrified when I developed a foot injury, and eternally relieved when, a couple of months beforehand, it subsided.

I'd originally only signed to the shorter, 42k, marathon race. But last evening I'd spontaneously, madly, changed my registration to the 100k, ultra race. I can't say what made me change my mind, 42k was the farthest I'd run before. Perhaps I just got carried away by the atmosphere in our camp. The runners doing the 100k amazed me and I desperately wanted, at least for a while, to feel I was one of them. Those down for the marathon are not allowed

to continue past 42k. To give myself the choice I joined the 100k batch.

## Running in the dark

At 4 AM we were off. Flash lights flickered between the trees as we entered the dark forest, carefully stepping over tree root, the trail still wet from overnight rain. The drums that had woken us that morning still played in mind, and I let them, anything to avoid facing the fact that I'd have to keep going for the next 17 hours.

The Sunrise to Sunset race is often described as the world's most beautiful ultramarathon, and I certainly can't imagine a more picturesque route. It runs along Lake Hovsgol in northern Mongolia, near the Siberian border - Mountains, lush, green forest, and grasslands

surround the lake making the National Park a paradise for runners.

I kept to a slow pace from the off, thinking of the two long, steep climbs later in the course. Once out of the trees it became lighter and the going was easier for about 10k on a level track through green fields with trees to both sides. The lake shimmered through the trees and chatter and laughter rose up among the runners, who, like me, seemed in good spirits, full of energy amid the magical surroundings.

I got chatting to the runner alongside me, Henning Voss from Germany. We kept a steady pace with the help of his GPS watch. It stopped us surging ahead and wasting energy we'd need later. Together we approached the first climb, up to Chichee Pass, as the sun rose over the lake. The road wound its way up the



mountainside, revealing more of the lake below, reflecting the early morning sky. It was breathtaking. And chilly. The wind was hitting us directly now and I was glad I'd worn tights under my running pants.

## Watchful horsemen

Every so often there'd be a Mongolian horseman at the roadside noting our race numbers, or pointing us in the right direction. We'd sing out the Mongolian greeting, similar sounding to 'sun benno', which always raised a wide smile.

I took a salt capsule every 45 minutes and lots of sips of water. The cookies at the aid station were disgusting, so I stuck to energy gels from my backpack. As the road became steeper and the trees sparser I used a tip from one of the runners back at the camp, 'Never take slower steps on hills, just shorter ones'.

I had trained over hilly terrain back home and I made good progress over the pass. It was the down-hills that worried me, and what they'd do to my knees and ankles. I slowed down to put the least stress on my joints and imagined myself running like jelly. My joints seemed grateful for my vivid imagination.

## Wet feet

In the valley we were greeted by a muddy trail through the woods. All jumping over big puddles and sinking into wet ground, drenching my shoes. Looking out for the green dots on tree trunks marking the way, we ran and slid through the mud. Then I slipped and fell full length into it. "You should have told me you

were going to do that! I'd have taken a photo", shouted Kenneth Koh from Singapore who had a camera with him. I burst out laughing. The joke gave me a lift and, once again, I felt in good company, having fun, and it was good to realise that 25k were already behind us.

A short stop at the aid station in the valley, and then off again over green grass, avoiding horse and yak dung. We were running through larch forest along the dried out bed of the Ongolog River, which lies between the two mountains on the course. I could feel the strain the downhill run had put on my quads and was jogging very slowly.

## Circling the Ovoo

Once the trail crossed the dry river bed, we had to find our way through undergrowth, and then the second climb began. It seemed relentless. Tree trunks and thorny bushes blocked the narrow trail and the mossy ground seemed to absorb all the momentum of my step.

Running was impossible, so I kept a steady walking pace. I knew I'd soon feel so out of breath that my head would tell me I couldn't finish. And I knew I needed to trust I'd recover once I made it over Khirvesteg Pass just ahead. The mountain views were spectacular and got more beautiful the higher we climbed, but I could only concentrate on my breath and



thought of little else. Once at the pass though, I couldn't help but admire the view stretching far across the mountain ranges surrounding the lake.

Here some runners stopped to walk three times around the Ovoo, which is little more than a mound of twigs and rocks placed by locals to mark the pass and honour the mountain. This Mongolian custom is said to bring luck, and we needed as much of that as we could get.

Halfway down the other side was another water station where grateful runners gathered for a quick drink. Ahead, meadows and soft hills stretched to the horizon. We were past 30k now and what was officially the hardest part of the ultramarathon was behind us.

I waved Henning good-bye when I saw him flying down the slope. I had overtaken him on the hills, but he had been faster on the slopes and there were no steep mountains left to catch up with him again.



**"The drums that woke us still played in my mind, and I let them, anything to avoid facing the fact that I'd have to keep going for the next 17 hours."**





### ▶ **The marathon mark**

The trail was flat now, but the long track back to the camp, where the 42k course ends, was tiring. Part of it was through forest, most through fields sprinkled with flowers and the occasional group of horses watching our efforts along the way. The group I was running with soon became too fast for me and I ran on my own for a while. Then co-organiser of this race, Dr Tyler Pike, caught up with me. A Sinologist at Sydney University and manager of a yoga studio, he was part of the small group of friends that set up this non-profit event ten years ago.

The race money is invested in environmental projects protecting the national park the trail runs through. I love the way the race was created to open the beauty of Mongolia to



runners from around the world, while helping to protect this unique part of the planet for many more to experience.

That first 42k took me six and a half hours - three hours longer than my Sydney marathon time, which I was pretty disconcerted by. Tyler, on the other hand, was still raring to go. He asked if I was going to carry on, or leave it at the 42k. "For a little while, see how far I get," I told him and we continued through the gate together.

### **Leaping mental barriers**

Some soup and dry socks later I decided I had enough energy left to keep going a little longer. I set my sights on the 50k mark at most. The day was perfect, a little cloudy, not too hot, and dry. The lake was to my left now and the road wound its way along the water. I was still running with Tyler, and we chatted away as birds twittered around us.

I usually train alone and I enjoyed having company for a change. 55k came and went and I was surprised to find myself still going. I was lucky to have Tyler with me, having organised and run the race every year, he knew the course by heart. I'd been worried about getting lost in a forest that is also home to wolves. Now I had a guide and a very experienced running buddy with me.

As we reached 60k, keeping going was getting seriously tough. I tried to focus on the smell of the grass and bushes, the deep green of the trees, the fresh air. The hardest part was not the physical challenge, I felt surprisingly well. But my brain was convinced that I should not be able to carry on. I reminded myself of something I'd once read: 'People who say something cannot be done should not disturb those who are doing it.' and kept trying to distract my mind to allow my body to continue. Every time I pushed through a wave of exhaustion, I found new energy, in the scenery, in the sounds around me, or the words of my running buddy.

### **A day out in the sun**

At 70k I hit the worst energy low yet. I couldn't even imagine doing another kilometre. That was when Tyler reckoned it was time for a little sprint. I knew I'd done better than I ever could've dreamed. But this seemed laughable, against any form of common sense! But I didn't want to fall behind Tyler's positive and relaxed attitude had made it easier for me to pretend that I was not really doing an ultramarathon, but having a nice day out in the sun and I didn't want to part with him. I gave it a go and amazed myself by being able to keep up.

We were running between bushes, along a soft grass trail, past the occasional nomad tent. Sometimes dogs followed us for a while, barking, and dropping behind when we didn't show intention to approach their homes. I kept my eyes on Tyler's shoes in front of me to remind myself of what I was supposed to do, run. All I had to do was put one foot in front of the other. My mind could only operate on the time span it took to lift one foot, and let it touch the ground again. I had no idea what reserves Tyler was drawing on to make it look so effortless.

After 80k my body seemed to settle for a sense of constant pain, while my mind had found its peace in the situation. There were some hills to clamber up, but the track was fairly easy, sometimes across lush meadows or through forest where the smell of wood and the constant birdsong provided pleasant distractions. I felt happy, content with having very few thoughts drifting randomly through my head. Tyler had developed hip pain, but it didn't seem to faze him.

### **Being watched**

I continued to force my legs into an awkward hobble and somehow managed to keep up. I had blisters and, not having expected to get this far, hadn't deposited fresh socks at any of the aid stations. Tyler kindly gave me his spare pair. Sometimes, when I was struggling along trying to catch up, a young boy on a horse would follow me to make sure I was alright. It was nice to know people were looking out for me.

It was like nerve signals between brain and muscles had to fight their way through thick jelly and would occasionally manage to bubble through. Every time they did, my legs just gave in. But still the sights around us kept me going, like the rainbow that suddenly spanned across the lake through the evening sky. It seemed a good omen, for the first time I began thinking I

might actually finish this race.

Yaks had been a reliable audience throughout, but now, so close to the end, I found myself worried that they wouldn't stay as peaceful as they seemed. Some of them were right next to the trail near the water and their impressive horns made me uncomfortable. I imagined the ridiculous situation of making it to 95k just to get run over by a yak.

Then I saw something that blew me away. White reindeer. They were calmly standing at the lakeside as we passed. Resting under tall trees, it seemed unreal, like a fairy tale. I was in awe and full of gratitude to have seen something so beautiful. I asked Tyler if he'd seen them too, to make sure I wasn't hallucinating.

### **Journey's end**

The last few kilometres seemed like a whole marathon, even though we slowed to a walk for most of it. We made our way over fields, along the water edge, the lake to our right looking dark in the evening light. The sun had set now, and the cold added to exhaustion. I was immensely glad to have company, fearing that, if left alone, I might just be overcome by the temptation to curl up at the roadside and sleep.

Finally, camp came in sight. I could hear cheering. "Let's start running again," said Tyler. "Forget it", I laughed, assuming he was joking. "The trick is to run faster than you think you can" Tyler said. And it worked. We crossed the finish line running and interlocking arms for the last steps.

I checked my time. 17 hours exactly. When someone told me I was the first woman to finish I could barely believe it. Other runners and the support team gathered to welcome us and the hugs they gave us seemed the most well earned embraces ever. I was bursting with pride and yet felt incredibly vulnerable at the same time.

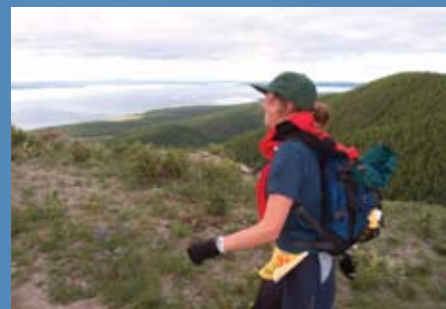
My journey was at an end. I'd achieved something I'd never thought possible in a land so beautiful it felt like a dream. And now, at last, I could rest. **RF** ▶





# UP FOR THE CHALLENGE?

**The 2009 Mongolia Sunrise to Sunset will be held 18th-25th July, the race itself on the 22nd. It is a non-profit event and fees go towards environmental projects and campaigns in Hovsgol National Park.**



## Race fees

One week race package leaving from Ulaanbaatar costs £900 for bookings before March. Flights to Lake Hovkol, accommodation, food, and activities like horse riding, kayaking, and fishing included. All payments must be made in US Dollars.

## Getting there

Return flights from London, via Moscow, Paris, Beijing, or Frankfurt, are currently priced at £1000-£1400. Contact your travel agent or the race organisers for the latest information.

The organiser for Europe is David Bernasconi. Email: [information@ultramongolia.org](mailto:information@ultramongolia.org).

## Visas

30 day entry visas for Mongolia are usually available without invitation letter from the Mongolian consulate in your country, but you can also request a letter from the race organisers, if needed. Embassy Address: Mongolian Embassy, 7 Kensington Court, London W8 5DL, Tel - (0171) 937 5238

If you are traveling via Beijing you may need a transit visa, check with the Chinese consulate well before race date.

## Safety

Medical checks will be conducted by the race doctor before the race and medical care available during race day.

You'll need for the race:

- Liquid container holding a minimum of 1.5 litres
- Torch
- Any medication you may need (There are no particular vaccination recommended for Mongolia at this stage but check with your doctor)
- Rain gear, including rain pants

## You'll be provided with:

- Water proof course map
- Emergency kit containing emergency blanket, compass, emergency food, note pad, and pen, water disinfectant tablets, whistle.

## Recommend extras to take along:

- Plenty of spare socks and another pair of running shoes to change during the race. You can leave them at certain aid stations.
- Salt capsules or tablets, and vitamin supplements.
- Energy gel and other nutrition you use for training. The aid stations only provide biscuits, potatoes and a sort of fried bread roll.
- Gloves/hat, the start of the race can be very cold.
- Something to prevent chafing and blisters like BodyGlide or Vaseline.
- Anti-inflammatory to get through the day after the race.

Visit [www.ultramongolia.com](http://www.ultramongolia.com) for more information on the course, maps, travel information and safety tips.

