

The Gobi Challenge: 240 km self-sufficiency in 6 day stages in the Gobi Desert, Mongolia.

By Caroline Richards

Event website: www.sand-baggers.com

Funds raised to Hospice in the Weald on www.justgiving.com/carolinerichards2

Facts and figures:

Ave height above sea level: 1550 metres

Water provided: 1.5 litres per 10km

Liquid drunk per day: 6-7 litres

Electrolyte tablets consumed per day : 3

Daily calorie intake: 2700 approx

Weight of backpack with 1.5 litres water: 9kg

Weight of 6 days food: 4.2 kg

No of blisters: Zero - PPPhhewwwwww!

Safely back home now after the desert experience, thankfully without any visible damage in the foot department, any blackened toe nails being discretely hidden under nail varnish.

Our six days of running just under marathon distance daily at altitude was surprisingly varied and scenic. After our small plane journey from Mongolia's capital Ulaanbaator to the Gobi Desert outpost of Dalanzadgad we had a couple of hours to settle in at camp and acclimatize to the higher altitude while our routine safety checks and safety medical briefings were carried out.

The first two days were based within the foothills of the Gurvan Saikhan mountains and the first day we had to navigate our way through an ice gorge passing herds of grazing yak and horses and numerous little desert gerbils which scuttled over the tracks in front of us. We ran down a barely visible path beside a mountain stream to emerge from the gorge onto undulating foothills where the temperature soared. Back at camp it was a challenge to find shade in which to rest.

The second day saw more dramatic mountain valleys and wadis to emerge again into a high and hot relentless plain where our second camp was located close to a nomadic settlement. Here we gave gifts to the children and were invited in to meet the families in their gers and to sample their vodka. Dubious hydrating fuel indeed for us runners!

The third day was characterized by high steppe and searing heat, the monotony broken only by the odd herd of Bactrian camel or the sight of a horseman racing across the distant dunes. One athlete was forced to pull out before the start of the day due to painful blisters over the soles of his heels leaving him barely able to walk, and the only other female in the group also had to retire due to blisters. Another athlete passed out on arrival at camp. A fierce sandstorm picked up and blew away the toilet screen and threatened the tents. We are now forced to walk further to relieve ourselves.

The fourth day seemed long and I ran on my own as usual reminiscing various chapters of my life and reliving distant memories to distract from the unrelenting slow uphill drag in very strong wind and rain (we could be in Britain!). The terrain took its toll as I struggled through kilometres of thick sand, one step forward and half a step back, before the most spectacular scenery unfurled. Nestled in a high sided mountain ravine was our camp for the fourth night, which was also haven to all sorts of wildlife whose noises reverberated on the rock walls around us. The stream that trickled through provided water for passing camels and horses, and for the runners, a soothing tonic to our aching feet. This was a truly inspiring location.

Day five started with a short stretch through the gorge then opened up into some sand dunes which were particularly energy sapping, then followed by a seemingly endless period of gravely sandy track to arrive at our camp at the base of Asia's highest sand dunes. Here again wind dominated and threatened to destroy our camp, and we had to re-secure our tents with large boulders to prevent them flying away. Tonight the medics were kept very busy nursing foot injuries.

Day six and I was told that there was only 6 minutes between myself at number 2 position and Walter at no 3 position. Walter is an extremely fit-looking individual with a core of steel, a real force to be reckoned with as he glides up the dunes with Germanic efficiency clasping his ski poles. This final day would require a gargantuan effort on my part to climb Asia's highest dunes (1800 metres) and keep Walter from usurping my 2nd place. The day was long and on the long plain I tried to keep my eyes on him but he disappeared into the distance amongst the rising waves of heat. Eventually, the sheer wall of sand-dune appeared in front and there was Walter making his way up, I followed on deciding to take the non-recommended sheer route to the top, with cascades of sand falling round me like an avalanche as I struggled on all fours on to the ridge in the heat of the midday sun. The race was on! Nearly two hours later as I crossed the finish line I learnt I had managed to maintain the gap between us ensuring my position to the end. Walter gallantly said that there was no one more deserving than me, which touched me greatly.

The race over (2nd place and 1st female), we celebrated with a feast of goat stew which didn't exactly appease the hunger after the day's toils and was exacerbated the following day, when we had a long bumpy day's travel back through the Gobi Desert in aged Russian vehicles, revamped by their proud Mongolian owners into "pimpmobiles" with leopard skin seat covers and satin curtains; the drivers were vodka fuelled at the wheel and had to swerve erratically to avoid frequent deep ruts in the dusty terrain. The vehicles periodically broke down leaving us waiting disconcerted for long periods in this barren land while the engine was dismantled. If we survived this long day we were home and dry!

All in all it was a memorable experience and thank you those of you who contributed to my chosen charity Hospice in the Weald on www.justgiving.com/carolinerichards2