

# GENGHIS KHAN ICE MARATHON

**Bitter sub-zero temperatures and icy conditions weren't the only challenges faced by nine runners taking part in the first Genghis Khan Ice Marathon – they also had to contend with wolves** Words **GEORGE WINTER**

**G**enghis Khan would have approved. On 27 January, in the icy wilderness of Northern Mongolia's Gorkhi-Terelj National Park, nine adventurers from Australia, Brazil, England, Holland, Scotland and Slovakia displayed true warrior spirit, battling the elements during the inaugural Genghis Khan Ice Marathon (GKIM). Sections of the course forced competitors on to the frozen river Tuul. Teams of huskies, who followed the competitors around the course, made noise to keep wolves at bay.

It was fitting that the event was organised by David Scott, Honorary Consul of Mongolia in Scotland ([mongolianconsul.com](http://mongolianconsul.com)), who has led more than 20 expeditions to the country. Scott, director of Sandbaggers ([sand-baggers.com](http://sand-baggers.com)), the company behind the event, said: "The idea arose after chatting with my old friend Andrew Murray after crossing the Namib Desert last year. I suggested a solo effort across frozen Lake Khovsgol, but we settled on the GKIM. This year was a pioneering event, and its main aim was for competitors to push themselves and get over the line safely."

And spare a thought for adventure photographer Johnny Graham of Digitalpict Photography ([digitalpict.com](http://digitalpict.com)): "One of my biggest challenges was keeping the camera batteries

warm while not in use. The extreme sub-zero temperatures can make a full battery last minutes instead of hours."

## LIVING LONGER

Johnny recorded the arrival of winner Dr Andrew Murray, Merrell ambassador and Scottish international ultrarunner, who said: "With competitors huddled against the cold before the start, the race began in the

**"The main aim in this event is for competitors to push themselves and finish safely"**

shadow of the iconic Genghis Khan statue on the frozen plains east of the capital Ulaanbaatar."

Almost exactly a year previously, Murray and his running partner Donnie Campbell became the first to run 500km across the Namib Desert in temperatures of plus 40° Celsius, but for now it was ice, not sand. "After some 20km," said Andrew, "I had a 14-minute lead over Australian Doug Wilson and I finished in 3hrs 07mins, to be

welcomed with some warming fermented mare's milk."

Murray, in his capacity as a sports and exercise consultant physician at Edinburgh University, is a zealous advocate of the benefits conferred by physical activity: "If you go from being a couch potato to regular walking or exercise," he said, "you will live seven years longer on average. Perhaps surprisingly, Scotland is one of the few countries worldwide where levels of exercise are sneaking up, but there is still a lot to do."

Meanwhile, runner-up Doug Wilson clocked 3hrs 42mins, with Paul Dunstan third in 4hrs 12mins, and in fourth place (4hrs 19mins), was Lucja Leonard, the first female finisher.

## RISING STAR

For novice runners, Lucja Leonard, is an example of how running can be life-changing and life-enhancing. The 37-year-old Dutch-born Australian, who is general manager of Edinburgh's Crowne Plaza Hotel, is one of the ultrarunning scene's up and coming stars, and she told *Running Fitness* how a fondness for food and wine had brought her to a turning point in 2004, after moving to the UK. "I realised that things had to change. Unhealthy habits turned into good ones through following a more clean-eating lifestyle plus exercise, including "wogging" – a walk with a jog in between."

In 2008, Lucja signed up for her first 10km race and was soon hooked. "A competitive spirit kicked in and the next thing I was running half and full marathons. Not only was I enjoying running but I'd lost more weight, felt great, had fewer sick days, and looked better for it too. But I've changed from running to lose weight to running for the sheer joy of it."

Five years after her first 10km run, Lucja completed her first ultra in May 2013, followed by her first multi-stage ultra – the Kalahari Augrabies Extreme Marathon – in October 2013, comprising 160 miles. "I went back for a second year," Lucja said, "finishing sixth overall and second lady. It's amazing

## LUCJA LEONARD'S PRE-GKIM TRAINING

I built up by working on a training plan that included weekly speed sessions, hill work and long runs with my average weekly mileage ranging from 40-60 miles. I incorporated twice-weekly strength and conditioning Crossfit workouts to ensure my body would be strong and flexible to handle the impact of running on an icy surface. I did last minute snow-running in the Pentland Hills south of Edinburgh before the race.



Dr Andrew Murray was the first to finish



Lucja Leonard was the first female to cross the finish line

**HOW THE GKIM'S FIRST FEMALE WINNER LUCJA LEONARD COPED WITH THE COLD**



Such extreme cold brings with it dangers. At -40° Celsius you feel the cold in your lungs, and touching your blood; it's hard to take deep breaths without coughing; and it doesn't take long for exposed tissue including inner nostrils and eyeballs to freeze.

I have Raynaud's Disease, which reduces circulation, giving me numb fingers even in cool conditions, so I wore base layer gloves under Kappa down mitts from PH Designs, and took Little Hotties hand warmers, without which I would have suffered. I wore two layers of X-Bionic bottoms; three layers of X-Bionic tops; a Soma Stormcap face mask; a buff; two pairs of socks, plus ice grips over my Brooks Pure Grit shoes



Dr Andrew Murray during the marathon



The nine competitors, and supporters

what your body will do when pushed.”

As for the GKIM itself, Lucja said: “The weather conditions on race day were near perfect with clear skies and only a light wind, with a starting temperature of -34° Celsius. To keep the competitors as safe as possible the route started and finished at our nomadic camp following some trails before turning on to the ice river surrounded by mountains.”

However, there were some sounds that Lucja found a little unnerving: “Hearing the ice shifting and moving underneath me, and with the occasional crack of ice where my foot dropped down an inch were enough to bring my attention back to full focus. I saw an occasional local on horseback or small herds of cattle, but I don't know who stared more; me at the locals in their

fur-clad costumes, or they at me in my X-Bionic snow outfit. I was always aware of the threat of wolves but the howls of the huskies alleviated that.”

And Lucja's race plan? “I held a steady pace and ran comfortably within myself. Surprisingly, the temperatures were not the hindrance I initially thought they would be, especially as far as my fingers were concerned. But of greater concern was the altitude of 1,500m mixed with the frozen vapour and nose secretions that made breathing difficult. However, the day before the race Dr Andrew Murray advised me to cut a mouth hole in my X-Bionic Soma Stormcap face covering, and this definitely helped.”

In the days following the race, Lucja and her fellow competitors were surprised not to feel the usual aches

that can often occur after running on hard-impact surfaces such as ice. “I put this down to the sub-zero temperatures acting to help prevent our muscles from becoming inflamed,” speculated Lucja.

“The GKIM is more than an event,” Lucja said. “It's an entire adventure undertaken in a vast and rugged landscape, put together by the fabulous team at Sandbaggers. Strong bonds have developed between us. It's an experience to challenge your mind and body and be rewarded with everlasting memories of a beautiful country.”

And for runners considering next year's GKIM, David Scott says: “It's harsh, dangerous and stunningly beautiful. There's nowhere to hide for pseudo-adventurers, and anyone who takes it on will achieve something to be genuinely proud of.”

