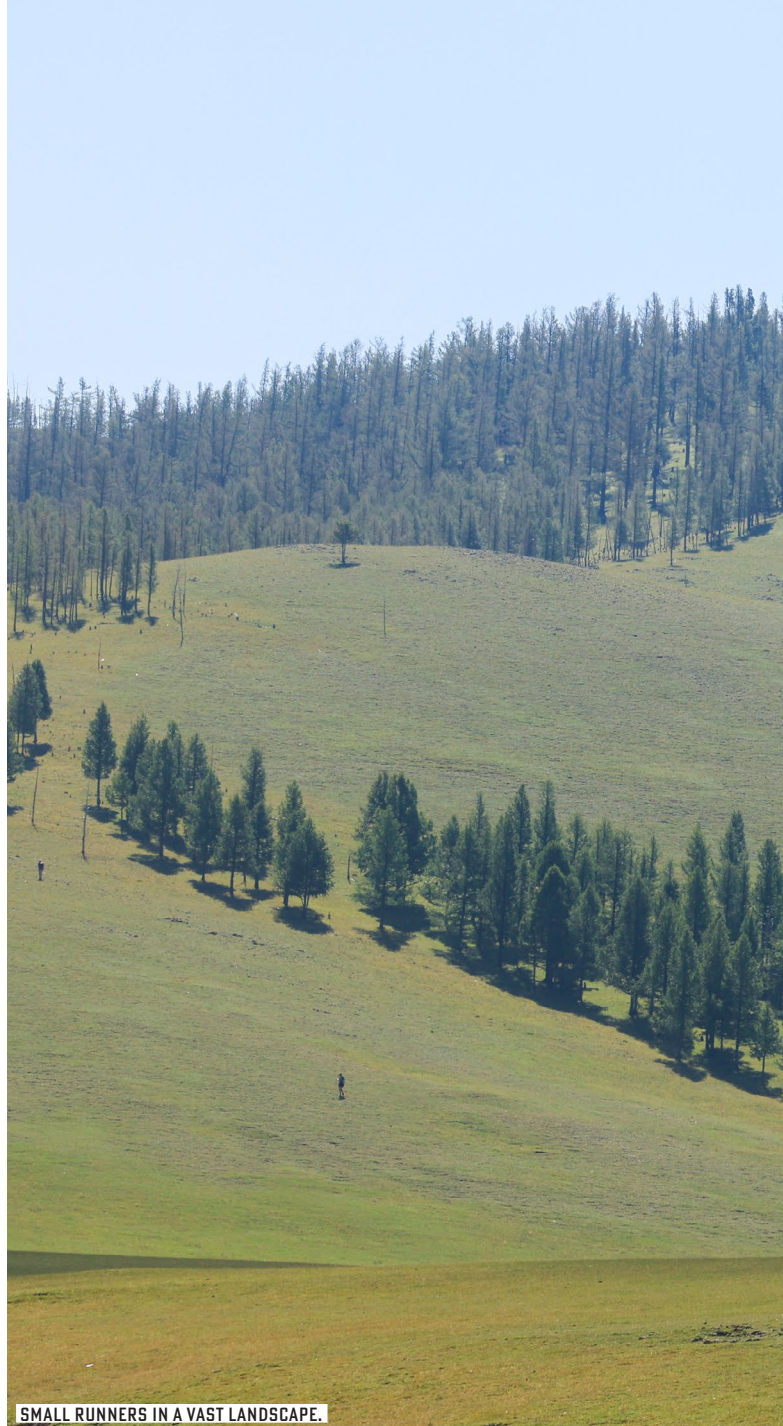


SIX AUSSIES,
SIX DAYS,
ONE
UNFORGETTABLE
MONGOLIA
TRAIL RUN

SOME MIGHT SAY THAT TAKING PART IN A MULTI-DAY TRAIL EVENT COVERING 170KM AND 3,800M OF ELEVATION IS TYPE 2 FUN, BUT FOR MELBURNIAN ULTRA RUNNER **NGÂN HARWOOD**, 6 DAYS OF RUNNING THROUGH THE STUNNING MONGOLIAN LANDSCAPE WAS EXACTLY THE KIND OF ADVENTURE SHE WAS LOOKING FOR TO KICK OFF HER FIFTIES. NGÂN SHARES WITH **ÁNIKA WARREN-SMITH** HOW THIS EVENT CAPTURED HER HEART.

ARTICLE BY: **ÁNIKA WARREN-SMITH**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY: **NATURETIME EVENTS**



SMALL RUNNERS IN A VAST LANDSCAPE.

In 2024, Ngân Harwood and friends were the first 6 Australians to participate in the Mongolia Trail Run.

It was Ngân’s husband who planted the seed for this adventure when he asked her if there was a run in Mongolia that she could do to celebrate her 50th year.

Ngân had always wanted to visit Mongolia but says that, “The question stunned me for a second as the idea of running in Mongolia had never once entered my mind.” That same day, an internet search revealed a relatively new trail event called Mongolia Trail Run (MTR).

After the inaugural MTR in 2019, the event was put on hold like so many others during the COVID pandemic.

MTR was firmly on Ngân’s radar when the second edition was held in 2023, and

she observed with keen interest from afar.

“It had all the hallmarks of what I was searching for,” she says.

“Six back-to-back days of trail running stupid long distances through varied landscapes, and if that wasn’t enough, there was a cultural experience at the end of each day to add to the fun.”

Ngân, a podiatrist who runs her own practice in south-east Melbourne, started trail running in 2013 after adding trails to her training runs for the Oxfam 100km. Since then, she has toed the line in a range of trail and road events near and far including but not limited to: the six major marathons (New York, Chicago, Boston, London, Berlin, Tokyo), TDS - UTMB (Chamonix, France), Tarawera 100 Miles (Rotorua, NZ), Margaret River

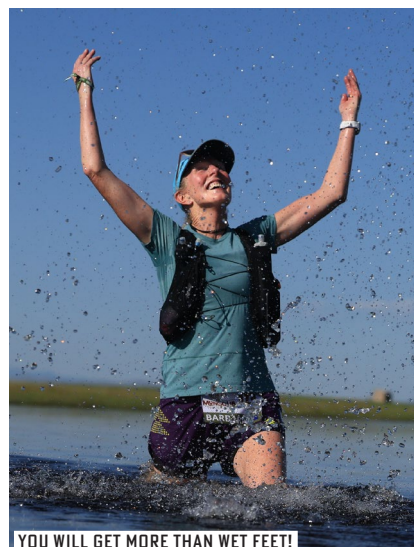
Ultra (Western Australia), Run Larapinta - Malbunka Course (Northern Territory) and the Grampians Peak Trail 100 Mile Stage Race (Victoria).

She has enjoyed many of these escapades with friends, and whilst going it alone was an option for MTR, she explained that inviting running mates would make the experience better.

“I knew a shared experience would make the trip even more special,” she reveals.

“My friends didn’t take long to come back with a big YES when I invited them to come!”

The group of Aussies consisted of Ngân, Emma Morgan, Barb Eastwood and David Williams doing the long course (Khan) whilst Sarah Terrell and Simon Libbis would be tackling the short course (Nomad).



YOU WILL GET MORE THAN WET FEET!



THIS IS THE WAY!



NGÂN RUNNING IN THE 2024 MONGOLIA TRAIL RACE.

TRAVEL & RACE LOGISTICS

Ngân explains that participating in the MTR was incredibly straightforward.

“Everything was seamlessly managed from start to finish, with the race directors doing an exceptional job organising transport, accommodation, and meals for every participant,” she says.

Rather it was the logistics of traveling to Mongolia from Australia and back that required considerably more planning, especially when coordinating a large group of friends to deliver an itinerary that would maximise their travel experience.

“Surprisingly, selecting the right transit country and what to do there proved more challenging than preparing for the race itself!” Ngán adds.

In terms of visas and vaccinations,

Aussies don’t need a visa for Mongolia, and Ngán ensured she was up to date with the basics: measles-mumps-rubella, diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis, and chickenpox.

TRAINING

Having done a few multi-day trail events before, Ngán had a pretty good idea of what training would look like. She says the foundation of her training is to always replicate as best she can the terrain and conditions she’d be facing.

“That meant weeks of back-to-back runs to get my body used to running on tired legs,” she says. “I mixed in long runs with hill work and did plenty of sessions running on sand. Since MTR throws everything at you, I needed to make sure my legs were ready for all of it!”

“IT HAD ALL THE HALLMARKS OF WHAT I WAS SEARCHING FOR,” SHE SAYS. “SIX BACK-TO-BACK DAYS OF TRAIL RUNNING STUPID LONG DISTANCES THROUGH VARIED LANDSCAPES.”

THE MTR EXPERIENCE

After three flights and 30 hours of travel, the group landed in Mongolia for some days of pre-race activities that included a cultural tour of Ulaanbaatar, as well as race registration and briefing where they met the 30 other runners from around the world. The participants were bussed to camp at the base of the Elsen Tasarkhai sand dunes, spending their first night under the stars in a traditional ger (or yurt). There was time for a monastery visit before the dinner feast and race briefing for Stage 1.

A unique element of MTR is the inclusion of at least one cultural experience each day, with race organisers giving participants opportunities to discover the culture of Mongolia. Runners can expect tours of temples, museums and ruins, and there are visits with Mongolian families to give insight into their daily life.

The Mongolian landscape is obviously the other aspect that makes this event special and it was a key highlight for Ngân who will always stop for photos!

“Everywhere you look, it’s just pure nature stretching endlessly,” she explains.

“The peace and quiet, with no noise or concrete in sight, was seriously good for the soul.”

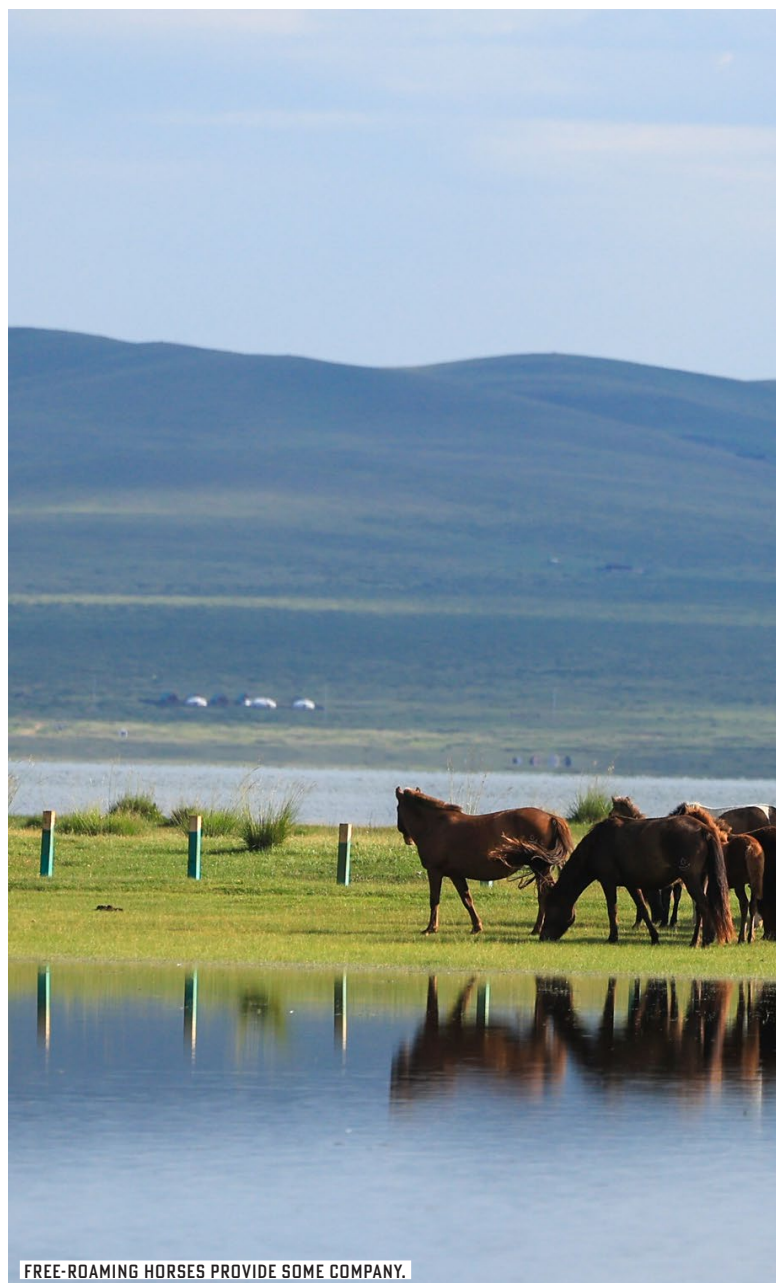
Each stage offered something just a little bit different. During Stage 1 runners experience seemingly endless undulating sand dunes. Whilst not a long stage, tackling the soft sand in 30-degree heat can be a challenge for Melburnians coming out of winter!

Stage 2 sees runners move through a vast and mostly flat valley landscape, with a few river crossings to refresh hot runners along the way.

Stages 3, 4 and 5 are where the MTR ramps up, with runners covering almost 2,500m of elevation over these more mountainous stages, moving through pockets of cool shady forest, lush green valleys and navigating multiple deep river crossings.

Race organisers have cleverly included some TLC at the midway point. For the first two days, runners are transferred between the finish line and next camp by 4WD, but Stage 3 finishes at a campsite that’s located at the Tsenkher Hot Springs. Runners get to relax straight away, soaking weary muscles in the hot springs and even book in a massage. This evening of pampering is followed up with a stay in a glamping tent village at the end of stage 4. After washing in the river, the Aussies feasted on a nomadic barbeque before tired bodies collapsed into double beds with soft pillows and doonas to prepare for the hardest day to come.

The marathon distance Stage 5 consists of six pinchy mountain



FREE-ROAMING HORSES PROVIDE SOME COMPANY.



FINISHING THE MTR FEELS FANTASTIC.



MTR OFFERS DAILY CULTURAL EXPERIENCES.



THE 2024 MTR FIELD.

TIPS FOR THE MTR

For the ladies, get comfortable with squatting and going to the bathroom in the open. There are no toilets on the course, only at base camp.

Look after your feet, six days of running will beat them up! Make sure your shoes are perfect, get sand gaiters, and be ready to tend to blisters.

Since you're on your own for nutrition out there, nail that down during your training. You will also want to consider bringing snacks from home as you won't find much in Mongolian shops that you're used to.

MTR participants are always accompanied by local English and Spanish speaking guides.

DETAILS

EVENT: Mongolia Trail Run

DATE: 2-10 August 2026

LOCATION: Elsen Tasarkhai to Erdene Zuu Monastery, Karakorum

DISTANCES: 170km (Khan), 90km (Nomad)

INFO: mongoliatrailrun.com/

climbs with challenging descents that have runners scrambling. Unfortunately, Barb picked up a tummy bug and was very unwell overnight, to the point she couldn't keep anything down and required an IV drip.

Reluctantly deciding she did not have the energy to run the final 10km stage, Barb says the race medic was not going to accept a DNF!

"The doctor removed the drip 10 minutes before the start time and encouraged me on my way," she reveals.

"He said, 'You've run 160kms and there's only 10km to go to the end.'

"With the medic following the whole way, the support from everyone encouraged me to keep plodding along." And she got her finisher's medal.

If you're not already researching the event, let me leave you with Ngân's final reflections.

"MTR, you have created an event that embodies what our trail running sport should be about," she admits.

"Diversity, inclusivity - access to all despite abilities, gender and age, nurturing camaraderie, enhancing fun, whilst always focusing on safety.

"An event that truly respects the places we traverse, encouraging participants to learn and appreciate the culture, food and landscape every single day. Your event has set the bar very high, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the love and passion you've poured in to make this event happen.

"I've come away richer for having met and connected with so many inspiring humans from all corners of the world, and I'm grateful we were the first Australians who participated.

"I'm sure we won't be the last!"

And they weren't, with four Aussies amongst the field this year in 2025. **RUN**

INSIDER KNOWLEDGE:

Ánika is a Melbourne-based trail runner who is much better at running down hills than up them. With a background in environmental science and long-time love of photography, she stops often for photos and to admire the view. Find Ánika on IG @anikawarrensmith.

