

The Gobi March Diary – by Patrick Rummerfield

Have you ever wondered what it means to run a marathon? Add the fact that the grueling 15-hour race is across the rocky, barren terrain of the Gobi desert. Now add the fact that doctors say you shouldn't be alive, let alone walking, and that your body does not respond to heat and cold the same way as others', because part of your spinal cord is severed.

This is the playing field in which Patrick decided to undertake the "Racing the Planet" Gobi March marathon. His personal log follows; a fascinating insight into this incredible character's mind.

May 23

Modern transportation shrinks this large world. My travels from St. Louis, Missouri through Chicago, Illinois to Tokyo, Japan culminated in my arrival in China 24 hours after my adventure began. We chased the sun to this beautiful country. I arrive a world away from my home. The cities are very large, industrious, modern and friendly. The markets are unique and filled with rare and exotic foods and gifts. The preeminent reason this destination feels so special is the overwhelming kindness of the Chinese people. They smile, welcome and help visitors making this country feel closer to home.

Once off the airplane in Tokyo, the adventure begins. How does one call Barb at home in St. Louis Missouri? Barbara is my better half, my wife and the love of my life. She wants to know I am arriving safely halfway around the world from her. We had no idea the carrier for our phone service at home automatically blocked collect calls. What a surprise to discover our first roadblock to long distance communication came from our own local phone company. A phone card seemed the logical solution, but to purchase one I must exchange US currency for Japanese currency. Once the exchange is complete, it's back to the phone card machine. The 3AM from Tokyo to Barbara call was a most welcome middle-of-the-night intrusion. I managed to get a message through to her groggy, sleepy ears..."I'm OK Honey; I'm on my way to Hong Kong."

Some of us think very little exists that would surprise us anymore during our travels. Frequent travelers stop noticing their environment as they take new places for granted. Everything starts to look the same. The people all seem the same. Why look around? Those who think in this manner should come to China. This exotic destination will transform any traveler's thought process. Wow, what an eye opener traveling can be!

May 24

Hong Kong is a fascinating place. Hustle and bustle all around. My love of sports cars and racing was immediately piqued by some of the nicest sports cars you will ever see idling down the Hong Kong highway. Apparently, speeding doesn't seem to be much of an issue here. The stop and go traffic must keep these adventurous sports car owners in check. I wonder if a group of speed freaks get together to fuel the exhilaration of pure horsepower & the pursuit of adrenalin-induced speed euphoria? Maybe, and if so I wish I could be with them on these early morning adventures. But I am here to pursue another type of racing---Adventure Racing is the ultimate ultra marathon. Racing the Planets Gobi March is where the participant runs 155 miles across the Gobi desert in 6 days. Man, I must be crazy! Too bad one cannot race the Gobi in a Porsche!

May 25

I have fallen in love with this ancient, yet modern civilization of warm, considerate individuals who are always willing to help a stranger to their country. Everything in China seems big; they have the biggest wall and dam in the world as well as many other marvels, modern and ancient. I feel especially fortunate to have had the honor of personally experiencing the big hearts of these noble people.

Today I met with the rest of the Racing the Planet organizers at the China/Hong Kong City Fuyong terminal. From there it was off to Shenzhen by Turbo Jet ferry, then a short 10-minute bus ride to the Shenzhen airport. Once at the airport we flew to Urumqi, a 6-hour flight from Shenzhen. The consistent time throughout China is a blessing. In the US, the time changes depending the part of the country a person visits. A few hours variation in an unfamiliar place can be very confusing for travelers. In China, I never have to worry about changing my watch depending on the city I am visiting. Instead, I can focus on enjoying the sights, the people, the smells and the delicious food. And I am on time!

May 26

Today, after a good night's sleep and with a nourishing breakfast under my belt, it was off to explore Urumqi. With a population of 1.5 million, Urumqi is a crossroad to many in their quest to see the Gobi desert. Urumqi is a large city with excellent accommodations along with many shops and markets. The portion I explored today contained food markets with wide varieties of edible delicacies. Judging by scrutiny from the locals, it's obvious that I'm a foreigner.

Back at the hotel at 2:00pm, the mandatory equipment check designed to prepare the racers for our journey begins. So many things to remember: proportioning foods properly, cap lamp, assembling the appropriate gear for survival in the Gobi desert, learning to use a complicated watch with alarm system to remind me to eat/drink, etc. I hope I don't forget anything in my excitement!

May 27

We left the hotel in Urumqi at noon for the center of the Gobi desert. This would turn into an 8½-hour bus ride watching the scenery and old videos.

Competitors arrived at Camp Heavenly Horse around 7-8:30pm. Camp Heavenly Horse was nestled between two jagged mountains opening unto a wide expanse of grassland. A Gobi pasta buffet was served among the tents while a lone horseman wandered nearby. After dinner it was off to bed with my 7 tent mates.

If you have never experienced slipping into a bed atop ground the consistency of a rough concrete slab with the periodic boulder sticking up than you have never experienced the Gobi hardpan!

May 28

The start line was a grand spectacle of color, complete with dancers, drummers, hundreds of cheering children, local dignitaries in traditional costumes and Racing The Planet CEO Mary Gadams. It was an amazing sight with the rugged snow top mountains in the background, children armed with pom-poms and balloons, and horses to lead the competitors on their journey. The race commenced with a burst of anticipation and an explosion of fanfare. Unfortunately, the pomp and circumstance immediately ended with a brutal climb straight up a mountain. This was my personal Mt. Everest; a 583 ft vertical body of razor-sharp jagged rock. At times it took hands and feet in coordinated effort to scale this face to the summit.

The summit's reward was an incredible view over the expansive salt flats. The ascent was easy compared to descending this formidable mass of rock. Coming off such a monster was one of the scariest times I have encountered since my accident. At one point the loose gravel carried me in a slide atop a steep ledge. Each time I attempted a step, the loose gravel and steep decline carried me precariously closer to the jagged edge, over which awaited a 60-80 foot drop. Realizing I was trapped, the sweepers (Fergusson and Dawber) assisted me off the ledge. Fergusson fell in his effort to help me and almost slid over the top.

Mr. Douglas Fergusson, Chairman of Pramerica Financial, Hong Kong, is a veteran of the Gobi race. He's also a gentleman of uncommon valor, resembling a younger, British-accented Paul Newman. Dr. Emma Dawber is a physically fit, strong-willed woman with whom I had the pleasure of spending many a grueling hour throughout the Gobi march. With the help of Fergusson and Dawber, I clawed my way down the cliff, hanging on by my toes and fingernails. Any missed step risked an unscheduled medical flight back to the US.

Following this adventure, we were off to the Gobi Salt Flats, passing a Han Dynasty era Beacon Tower used for fire signaling 2000 years ago. The Gobi salt flats..... very few have tried crossing this 8-mile stretch of man/animal eater. Individuals, as well as many invading forces, over the past 3000 years opted to forego challenging the salt flats by wisely navigating around for a safer course.



Adventure racers are a rare breed. The difficult challenges are half the fun of the race. Now, I love an adventure, but a flesh eating, body-sucking piece of real estate disguised as a mild mannered stretch of flat land was the most challenging adventure I've ever faced down.

Let me start by describing the aromatic essence oozing upward from the deep bowels of the salt flats after a soaking rain. It smells like a cross between 5 thousand years of Yak, Camel, and horse dung blended with a lot of human sweat.

The smell is enough to turn the strongest of stomachs. Try to imagine walking 8 miles in 6 to 20 inches of hellish sucking mud with random spots that resemble a quicksand-filled bottomless pit! The temperature was fluctuating between 85- 95 F depending on the velocity of the wind that constantly blew around 40 MPH with gusts up to 60 plus MPH. Now toss in the fact that I cannot walk on uneven ground because I have no feeling from the knees down. Visualize the difficulty of planting each foot one step at a time. Step forward with the left foot, let it sink about 12 inches, and then bring the right foot parallel with the left. Let the right sink down, than start the process all over again. One mile = 5280 ft. Eight miles X 5280 ft = 42,240 ft -- each step consisting of pulling up both legs one at a time with all the leg strength that I can muster as well as my arms pulling on my poles.

Roughly this comes out to be 80 thousand plus times (40 thousand per side) I had to pull my legs up and free them from the vacuum grip of the Gobi's salt flats that I know must have claimed a life or two over the past 5 thousand years. After two miles, the mud had crusted on my shoes and added about 3lbs per shoe.

The physical toil and mental toughness one must possess in order to complete this first stage is the type of mentality all spinal cord injured patients must possess to keep focused on their rehabilitation.

I see this spirit in the individuals who participate in our Advanced Restorative Therapy program at the International Center for Spinal Cord Injury at Kennedy Krieger Institute. The expression on my face must mirror the images on the faces of all of my SCI friends going through the monumental, continuous effort necessary to attain movement. These are my brothers and sisters with spinal cord injuries whose progress I've followed through rehabilitation and hope to inspire with my daily efforts.

We were setting a blistering pace crossing the salt flats of about 1-½ mile per hour. One of the sweepers was stuck in a mud hole for over 25 minutes, requiring help to get out. For many the slog was just slow. For others, it meant lost socks and shoes, wading in thigh-high mud and hours spent crossing what looked like just a short distance.



My thighs were burning; they felt as if every muscle fiber was on fire. After about four hours my triceps and my shoulders were sizzling from the unusual exertion of using my arms to help pull and stabilize myself in the slippery life-sucking mud of the Gobi salt flats.

Helpful hint: Jell packs & protein bars are a good way to keep one's electrolytes up. The experimental supplements I am ingesting at the start of each race as well as mixing into my water provide a huge boost of energy & endurance. I would have never made it through the first day without the energy and endurance provided by these

supplements. They gave my body the fuel it needed, just like fueling a sports car!

After reaching the other side of the salt flats it was time to take a break on solid flat ground at the checkpoint station. Here they check on the amazing preventive-blister-taping task designed by Dr. Paul Langer of Minneapolis, MN.

It was a given that I would have numerous blisters and other foot skin damage, due to my feet being wet and muddy for such a long time, but...surprisingly my feet were blister free! Then it was off to the last

checkpoint. The ground had turned to good old Gobi hardpan, level and hard! I was now averaging about 4 miles per hour.

We were coming up to the foothills, uneven ground and more climbing. (My worst nightmare). I followed some nomads with their camels up a number of narrow 10 to 15 ft vertical passageways. Somehow the camels could climb these passageways. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I would never believe that a camel could climb like a mountain goat.

By this time the muscles that stabilize my feet were totally exhausted. With every step my ankles would roll, causing straining and tearing of most of the small and large muscles of the feet and ankles. No matter how hard I tried to hold my feet flat and stable I could not. By the time I finished Stage One it was 1:48:10 AM. I finished 15 hours, 33 minutes after I had started. This day of adventure was over and the physically demanding drain could not deny me the exhilaration of actually finishing Stage One

May 29

Wow, I made it! The first physically challenged athlete to complete a stage in an adventure race. And a stage that was particularly challenging for all the participants. This was the toughest physical event I have ever attempted. My heart & soul goes out to the athletes who are participating in this race. You may never read their names in the press, but these individuals embody the essence and toughness of true athletes. The brutal, physically demanding assault on my personal Mount Everest and the salt flats left my body unable to compete in stage two. My feet swelled three times their normal size and intense pain radiated up both legs in response to the lightest pressure. Today I will stay off my feet and rest, giving support to competitors at various checkpoints. Charlie Engle, a Clint Eastwood type of guy, made a special effort to come by and shake my hand to say what an inspiration I was to him and his teammates. Engles is a great athlete (1st place 2003 Gobi race); Engles' team will be the first to run coast to coast across the Sahara this fall.

May 30

Today I feel I must try to participate in this physical endeavor with my mental will fully engaged against the physical discomfort. My Stage Three will start at the last checkpoint, about 6-1/2 miles from the finish line. This will give me an opportunity to meet and see most of the participants. With Dr. Dawber by my side, we set off at a 1-1/4 mph pace that would gradually increase. Over the next 7 hours it was a battle against incredible pain and a 50 mph wind that I had to fight against just to stay upright.



May 31

Today is another forced day of rest with my feet swollen like tree trunks. The day is very windy and cold, with sandstorms added to the mix. Fixing one's breakfast in the elements is an interesting adventure, but the new, freeze-dried dinners (400 calories per pack) are a two-step process. For a guy who can barely boil water, bagged food works out quite nicely.

The wind is so violent (gusts 60-75mph) that the staff cannot pitch our tents. We ended up spending the next two nights in a Yurt park next to the great Gobi sand dunes. The inside of our Yurt resembles the inside of the bottle from the TV series, I Dream of Genie.



June 1:

Today is a day of rest for all of the competitors. They played on the sand dunes like kids on holiday!

June 2: This was the hottest day of the race that wound down by a lush oasis before climbing through a valley known as the oven.

June 3

IMG_0058_4.JPG (picture of the race's end)

Ahn Byeungsik of Korea finished in first place, what a great effort! I walked the last leg to the finish line accompanied by Dr. Dawber. A bittersweet finish, for I know if it hadn't been for the salt flats' assault on my ankles, I could have competed in more stages of this race. The finish line was a colorful display of local elders, dancers, politicians and best of all -- food!



The 8 hour bus ride back would be an interesting one, with 150 exhausted, calorie-starved, sunbaked and very smelly participants crammed together for the ride home to Urumqi. Thankfully my bus was the first to leave, therefore first to arrive at the random gas stations along the route. Our driver discharged the racers, and like starving animals we swarmed down onto the surprised attendants. We managed to purchase as much junk food, candy and snacks to strip the shelves bare! Our 45 minute head start ensured good positioning in the race from station to station in a quest for sustenance. There was a moment of reflection for our fellow athletes eating our dust. Because, unfortunately, dust was all there

was left to eat after we pulled away from the gas stations. In retrospect, we did them a favor. The banquet at the end of the road was fabulous, but our appetites weren't as big, and junk food is bad for your health. We took one for the team.

Reflections.....

Today I am home recovering from two severely sprained and fractured ankles. The doctors will cast my injuries and I will heal to walk again. My walk in China was the adventure of a lifetime. My greatest dream, outside of racing cars again, is to use my challenges to inspire Spinal Cord Injured patients to keep the faith. Don't give up hope. Make your life a quest for movement. Rehabilitate, as I do now, to participate in life and achieve your dreams. They are never outside of your reach.

Gobi athletes that I met and talked with daily:

Rob James of Hong Kong

A dark haired 5'10" lean, muscular man who is at the top of the board said I was a great inspiration to him. This man could run like a camel at a constant pace all day long.

Robin Dee Fern of Hong Kong

A slender, 42-year-old lady said she started to cry when I crossed the finish line at the end of stage one. Robin finished first in her age group. True determination!

Matthew Nelson of Florida, USA

A 6" tall big guy said he thought about my refusal to give up helped him get through the tough times during the race.

The people of the Gobi were as tough as the elements in which they lived, but their hearts were as big as the Gobi itself.