

Mongol Derby offers sight to cataract sufferers

Simon Pearse (51), CEO of Marriott Asset Management, has signed up for the 1000km Mongol Derby for the benefit of Right to Sight, an international charity founded in Ireland, that works towards securing a sustainable supply of eye surgeons in Africa and providing accessible affordable eye care for all. It has acquired a pioneering technique to significantly reduce the cost of cataract operations, thereby making them more accessible.



Pearse and 35 men and women from all over the world completed a three-day prerace training session and set off on horseback on 10 August 2012 on a 10-day marathon through this remote and unforgiving territory. Fortunately, the horses are the same breed that carried the all-conquering Mongol warriors across half the world. Mongolian horses are diminutive, sturdy, fearless, wild and unbelievably tough. Their people revere them.

In the months leading up to the derby, the organisers select and prepare about 1000 horses belonging to local nomadic herding families and breeders along the route, or "unroute" as they call it as there is no marked course. There is simply an impressive network of horse stations at 40km intervals that have been likened to "a recreation of Chinggis Khan's legendary empire-busting postal system."

Welfare is a priority

Each station, or "urtuu," houses a small collection of "gers" (canvas and felt tents that the nomads live in), a supply of fresh horses, a veterinary team and a few nomads. Basic meals are supplied here, largely "airag" (mare's milk) and mutton. Use of the "gers" is optional and riders may choose to sleep alone on the steppes beneath the star-studded sky.

It is up to each individual how they navigate between stations and a GPS is allowed. The organisers have made sure there is enough water available en route and horses are changed at every station. Competitors must weigh less than the race limit of 85kg and may carry just 5kg of essential survival kit. Mongolian horses are small and their welfare is a priority from start to finish.

"There are no showers, no packed lunches, no stabling," says Pearse. "It's just you and your team of horses pitted against your competitors and the Mongolian wilderness."

All riders are expected to finish the course by Sunday 19 August and, after the closing celebrations, will be transferred back to Ulaanbaatar by vehicle the following day.

400 000 blind South Africans

"At the company, we have become aware of the plight of more than 400 000 South Africans who are blind

In KwaZulu-Natal alone, which is where I live, there are 120 000 people who, with a 20 minute cataract operation, would not be blind."

The company has committed to supporting Right to Sight by helping it with administration and fundraising in South Africa, starting with the ride in the Mongol Derby. Anyone wishing to contribute to the charity can do so online at www.righttosight.co.za. Old Mutual has agreed to match all donations Rand for Rand.

His riding progress can also be monitored on this website, on [Facebook](#) and Twitter [@simongolderby](#).

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