

Runners embrace desert challenges



In September 2003, a new race format was launched. Called the Gobi March, it was a seven-day, self-supported race over 250km of inhospitable desert terrain. Over the next three years, its creator Mary Gadams, and her company RacingThePlanet, added more desert races – in the Atacama, the Sahara and in the ‘white desert’ of Antarctica. Together these races comprise the 4 Deserts series.

The combination of remote, forbidding locations and extreme challenge have inspired people all over the world to try one or more of the races. Singaporeans are no exception: as of the end of the most recent Atacama race in March, more than 40 natives had taken part

in at least one of the races, as well as dozens more foreigners resident at the time in the city. Dane Anders Jensen who lives in Singapore is the reigning Sahara and Atacama champion, and Denvy Lo, a Singaporean who presently lives in Hong Kong, won the women’s category at the Gobi March 2010.

Thaddeus Lawrence, a corporate trainer in the city, recently joined a very select club by completing a full set of the four races. He says curiosity to find where his limits lay led him to try his first race, also the Gobi March in 2010. “I took it quite conservatively,” he says, “not so much to race but to finish.” He was surprised to find himself well within what he felt he could achieve.

Going on to race in the other deserts, he thrived on the camaraderie: “Even though it is a competition, everyone wants everyone else to win . . . their own race with themselves,” he says. Like many who finish a 4 Deserts race, he credits mental approach especially: “Physical condition may be at a peak but mentally there may be a limiting belief . . . a lot of the obstacles are mental,” he says.

Among the Singapore-based competitors at this June’s Gobi March are Frenchwoman Bertille Tillot and her compatriot Joachim Lumbroso. They will be among the youngest competitors, at 25 and 26 years old respectively and for both it will be their first ultramarathon.

Talking to previous entrants, Tillot has been impressed by the way they spoke of the experience: “We have been very impressed by how happy they came back from the race and how addictive it was for most of them! It seems that it has changed their ability to believe in themselves and engage in other challenges. They also say that the race is very hard but this is not the main memory they are sharing when they come back. They mostly talk about the landscapes, the moments shared with the other competitors . . .”

