

Ice day for it: Runners trek 26 miles across the world's oldest frozen freshwater lake in the Baikal Ice Marathon

- The annual endurance challenge is one of the hardest marathons in the world
- Runners endure sub-zero temperatures and a shifting, unpredictable surface
- The race begins with the runners downing a shot of vodka to please the lake's sprites

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There's no other race quite like it - 26 miles across the frozen surface of the oldest and deepest freshwater lake on earth.

The annual Baikal Ice Marathon is one of the world's toughest endurance challenges, with participants from over 50 countries competing in freezing Siberian temperatures. The event, now in its tenth year, forces runners to endure the biting northern winds and the harsh, plunging temperatures in remote Russia.

The lake's surface is another danger. The course can be hard and uneven because of small hills of ice rubble - while geothermic springs and seismic activity beneath the ice may weaken it to form holes.

A safe course is plotted by a support team, who monitor the course closely, even studying it using satellite imagery to assess existing and potential cracks, while six food and drink stations are set up at regular intervals, along with service teams and hovercrafts.

On the day of the race, competitors assemble at the town of Listvyanka, taking part in the precautionary ritual of 'vodka sprinkling' - starting the race with a shot of vodka - in accordance with Russian tradition. This is believed to help pacify the spirits of the great lake. Lake Baikal is a UNESCO protected site, estimated to have formed 20 to 25 million years ago. It is extraordinarily deep at 1,700 metres, and makes up for 90 per cent of Russia's drinking water.



Glacial beauty: Runners take part in a marathon across Russia's Lake Baikal - one of the hardest events of its type in the world



As well as teeth-chattering cold, the runners must be wary of the lake's treacherous surface. The course is monitored using satellite imagery to check for any dangers to the runners



Hardy bunch: Participants from more than 50 countries compete in freezing Siberian temperatures



Anticipation: The runners await the start of the gruelling race



Snowman: One of the runners is caked in ice from the blisteringly cold wind



Horizon: A safe course is plotted by a support team, who monitor the course closely, even studying it via satellite imagery



Sub-zero: Participants wear extreme cold weather gear for the challenge



The surface is treacherous because of seismic activity and geothermal springs



Stoic: A runner is applauded as she completes the tortuous 26-mile course



Russian majesty: The landscapes seen at the vast lake are breathtaking



Single file: On the day of the race, competitors assemble at the town of Listvyanka



Harsh: The biting conditions appear to be taking their toll on this runner



Icy reflection: Two runners enjoy a quiet moment



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Lake Baikal is a UNESCO protected site, estimated to have formed 20 to 25million years ago



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Brave: A runner smiles for the camera despite the harsh conditions



Biting: Last year's runners faced -12C conditions as they ran the 26 miles



Going for speed: An ice-encrusted participant checks his time



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Lake Baikal is extraordinarily deep at 1,700 metres, and makes up for 90 per cent of Russia's drinking water



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Sustenance: Hot tea and water for the marathon runners was kept in insulated containers to stop it freezing



The clear air and flat terrain means runners can make out the distant finish line almost as soon as they begin - giving them nothing to focus on but how far they are from their goal

Read more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2587275/Ice-day-Runners-trek-26-miles-worlds-oldest-frozen-freshwater-lake-Baikal-Ice-Marathon.html#ixzz3iZeKiw7>
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