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‘Weathering’ the run

Meet the B'lurean who plans to run in extreme wind, heat, cold, and dry weather in four beautiful but formidable deserts across the globe



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By Simran Ahuja

Express News Service

BENGALURU: For many, weekends mean a break from working out. But not for Taher Merchant. The city-based entrepreneur looks forward to Saturdays and Sundays so he can clock in the miles that will get him in shape for probably the most extreme footrace in the world – four 250-km runs in some of the most challenging desert terrains on the planet.

The 4 Deserts Ultramarathon takes runners to Mongolia for the Gobi March in June, Chile in September for the Atacama Crossing, Namibia for the Namib Race in October and Antarctica in November for The Last Desert. While each run is held over seven days, Merchant plans to complete all four runs this year.

“It’s going to be a big challenge but that’s exactly what excites me about taking part in this,” says the 39-year-old city-based entrepreneur.

Each of the four deserts present a unique challenge. While Namibia has massive sand dunes, Antarctica’s “White Desert” will set forth the opposite environment; Atacama has salt flats and ice cold slot canyons, and the Gobi has the Mongolian steppes and rock valleys. So, how then, does Merchant prepare for such hurdles in the genteel weather of namma ooru?

“I can’t get any of these terrains here so for now, I put in my miles, train with a 10-

kg bag on my back and watch what I eat,” says Merchant, who even travelled to Ladakh to prepare for the race. “It’s difficult to find the required temperature, altitude and terrain in Bengaluru. But then again, if I did have those here, why would I participate in such events?” he adds.

Merchant has run around 70-75 races, including half marathons, full marathons and ultramarathons (any run over the traditional marathon distance of 42.2 km), since he discovered his love for running in 2013. “I’ve actually lost count of how many events I’ve done,” he says.

He was also the first Indian man to finish the Everest base camp ultramarathon in 2018.

While the pandemic has thrown a wet blanket over many things in the last year, it didn’t stop this runner’s resolve. “I have been training for close to a year now so I’m looking forward to the race. Besides, all the locations, except Namibia, have negligible cases,” says Merchant. He plans to apply for visas closer to each event.

Taking on a challenge of this sort is neither an easy feat, nor a cheap one. The entry fee for Gobi, Atacama and Namib is \$3,800 each and is \$12,900 for Antarctica. While Merchant is covering the entry fee and travel costs, he has two sponsors on board who will look after gear and nutrition.

Support comes in other forms too: Family and colleagues. “They’ve all got my back. What also helps is that I’m so positive that there is no room for anything to go wrong,” says the father of two girls, who is also using this race as an opportunity to raise awareness and funds with Oxfam India to support the education of underprivileged children.

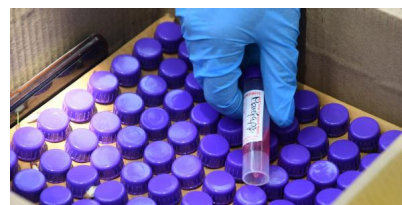
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