

# A Warning to the Competitors and their Families

To: Participants in the Mongol Derby, their families and loved ones  
From: Bonnie Folkins – Equestrian Traveller  
Subject: A warning of the real dangers in Mongolia

Dear Mongol Derby Riders,

I have visited Mongolia six times and the forthcoming Long Ride I am planning will be my seventh trip. The journey will be sufficiently perilous that I will be making the expedition with two highly skilled Mongolian nomad riders.

It is my concern that the organizers of this endurance race, while recognizing some of the dangers, are overlooking some extremely serious problems that are more than likely to take place.

Following, are some of my apprehensions:

## **Water**

My friend Temuujin, who will ride with me in the autumn, is worried about water in two ways:

- 1) Finding drinking sources for the horses.
- 2) Crossing problematic rivers. Also - if there are any big storms with flash flooding, the lives of the riders could be at risk.

## **Horses**

I do not believe the race organizers have been completely clear about the size of the horses. They are very small and simply cannot carry heavy Westerners for any significant distance, even at a walk. The Mongolian people are small and light, and change their horses frequently if they have to travel any distance. The highest recommended weight for a rider of this kind of horse is about 145 pounds. The necessities you will need to take with you will likely include at least 30 pounds of added weight. These horses are more the size of ponies in our eyes.

In addition, Mongolian horses often want to bolt, to return back home. This is very, very common! Or, they try to run off with other horses when they see a group.

At night the riders will need to hobble the horses (tie their front legs so their movements are restrained), - but horses can move as far away as 5 miles in hobbles if they put their mind to it. The riders might wake up without an animal in sight.

Already the weight is adding up for the horses. To re-emphasize: the tent, the hobbles, food, rain jacket, water bottle, sleeping bag. Do you weigh 100-110 pounds (50 Kg)? If so, your "extras" of a 30 pound or so pack, will take the rider to the internationally acceptable weight for a horse of this size. If your weight and pack is **over** the international accepted standard of approximately 145 pounds, then this becomes a cruel and demanding imposition on your small horse. Did the organizers tell you that the typical jockeys in Mongolia are children under ten years of age? This is a fact and as hard as it is for us to believe, it is acceptable in Mongolia.

It could be **very** cold at night, and if the riders get rained out on the first day, they will be wet and miserably cold possibly without a change of clothing. The steppe is windy and those breezes do not come from the tropics!

The only person I can imagine who **could** do this would be someone like my friend Moo Moo who spends the **entire day** in the saddle – year after year, and has done so since childhood. It is the Moo Moos who were the message runners for Genghis Khan.

And to your families, I have this to say. Right now it is fun to fantasize about your son, daughter, or loved one setting off on a mounted adventure. What you don't seem to appreciate is that your child, or loved one, could die, be seriously injured or suffer serious medical ailments if they undertake this race.

## Geography

Mongolia can be a very dangerous place to set out in. The steppe goes on for eternity, and there are no services, no trees, and very few people. If an accident should happen, the consequences could be deadly.

If the racers are going to be followed by vehicles, they will need to move in tandem so as to not lose one another. If a storm comes up, the riders may need to leave the vehicles behind. Conditions in the rain are desperate because, once past the paved highways – one is literally following tracks in the earth. Four wheel drive vehicles are the only ones that can take these trails and even they get stranded. Last June it took us a very long time to get from Kharkhorin to Ulaanbaatar by van (300 miles) in a dreadful rain storm; we saw numerous stranded drivers. One truck we tried to help was impossibly stuck and would not budge, period! It is not like many Western countries where one calls the local Automobile Association for assistance. Away from the roads, there is **nothing** and **no one!** Your life is dependent upon an emergency beacon.

## Hygiene

One thing I can say about nomads that is of great importance is their generally casual attitude toward food hygiene.

They are not as concerned about cleanliness as we are; they have no refrigeration and in my opinion, they usually don't stop to consider our cultural differences. It is impolite to refuse offerings but **if you have to accept food**, you must know when to draw the line - understanding that your body may not have the defense mechanisms necessary to deal with certain bacteria.

I believe the nomads will **not** have much money for hosting visitors and they will not offer generous fare, like the way they prepare for Tsagaan Sar - (the Lunar New Year holiday) - for their relatives. Knowing nomads - they will **not** embrace young people enthusiastically. They do not generally respect young people - only the elders.

The herders are very poor and their lives are difficult and full of hardship. The women work hard from dawn until dusk and, in all fairness, they will not and should not give away their best food and drink to people that they will never see again.

Generally, they offer tea, rock hard cheese, probably boiled meat and airag (fermented mare's milk which often has pieces of grass and animal hair floating in it).

What the racing visitors may not realize is that they can contract serious food poisoning. The illness of considerable concern is Brucellosis (undulant fever) and Mongolia is a high risk area. It is caused by drinking un-boiled milk or eating home-made cheese. The riders will be offered both and will most likely try both. There is not much else to eat! I contracted Salmonella poisoning simply from eating yak butter. Added to the aforementioned are listeria monocytogens and e-coli - along with a host of more than ten other dangerous bacteria which could be present in un-pasteurized milk.

Rabies is a definite risk everywhere and even Bubonic Plague, in remote places. My research strongly urges to never eat marmot - yet marmots are one animal that Mongolians enjoy. This animal can carry the plague.

## **Wolves**

Wolves are also an increasing danger. Should a rider be out alone and sitting by an exhausted or injured horse or isolated - especially at night - a pack of wolves could be a real threat (...unless the rider is carrying a gun and knows how to use it properly). For our ride, this has been a consideration that we have pondered from the beginning. Wolf stories abound in Mongolia. One favorite topic of conversation, when we sit around at meals with a new family, is to say "Chonin twa me twoo? (phonetics here) - meaning "Tell me a wolf story."

More dangerous are "trekking wolves" that travel and hunt alone without the pack. They have been known to roam into settlements where they demonstrate aggression without fear. These violent animals are so much of a threat that warnings are broadcast on the television stations in Ulaanbaatar. They are not like American wolves that have learned to fear men with guns. The Russian and Central Asian wolves appear to show no fear at all.

Finally a word about a subject the organizers are likely to have overlooked. Mongolian people do **not** like killing animals, especially horses, for the purpose of euthanasia. This would be a most distasteful and difficult thing to ask of anyone. As for the riders - if you are alone and presented with animal with a broken leg - are you prepared to destroy the animal? What will you do? Who will be there to help you if you yourself become are stranded? In any emergency, time is of the essence.

These animals have not been trained or conditioned. To participate in this race is cruel to the animals and **highly** risky for the riders. This endurance event is **not** a leisurely walk in the park and to any outside observer, whether knowledgeable or not about the country - is absolutely unrealistic. **I implore you to withdraw from this race**, for your own safety and for that of the small wild horses, so celebrated and loved by the world.

In conclusion, I am available to discuss your concerns and can be reached at [bharpp@yahoo.com](mailto:bharpp@yahoo.com)

Sincerely,  
Bonnie Folkins