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ON THE TRAIL OF Genghis Khan



With only a dog and three hardy Kazakh horses for company, Australian Tim Cope followed the trail of Genghis Khan.

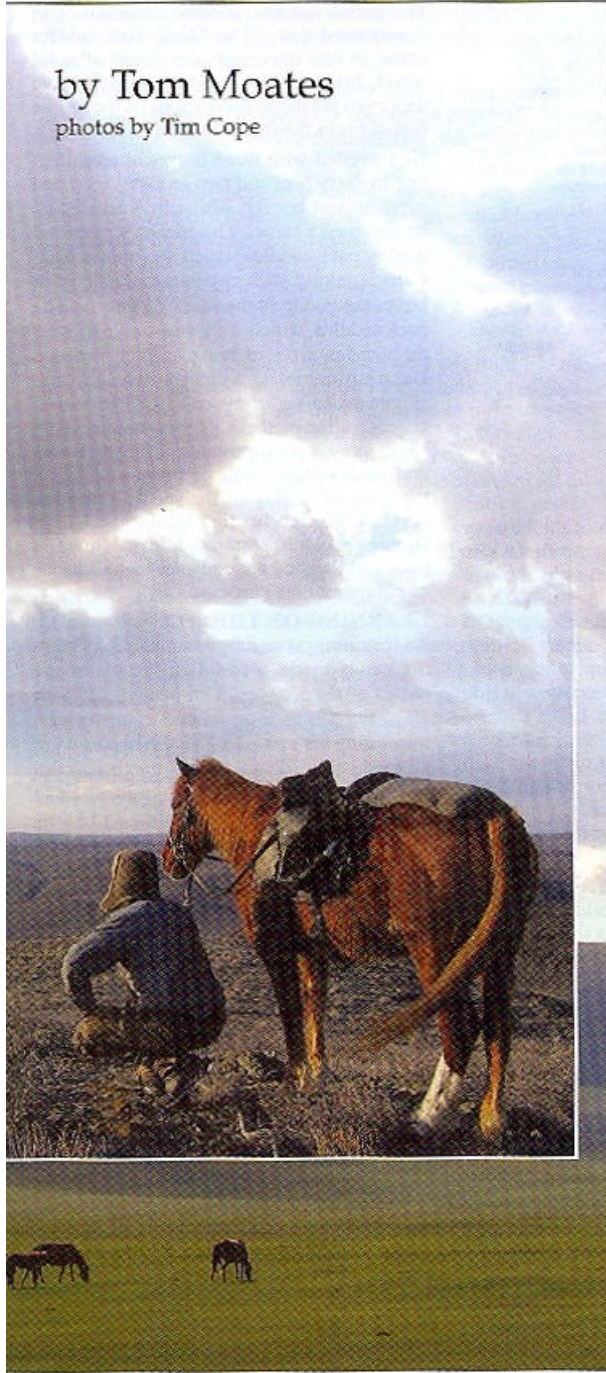


An epic 10,000 km journey on horseback.

The name Genghis Khan conjures up images of a bloody equestrian warrior, but to Australian Long Rider Tim Cope, the Mongol warrior/emperor is a worthy guide, even now. Tim completed a 10,000 kilometre journey, retracing the hoof prints of the westward expansion of the infamous Mongolian nomad, on 23rd of September 2007. The adventure took just over three years to complete, and marks the first time in modern history this trail was ridden on horseback.

by Tom Moates

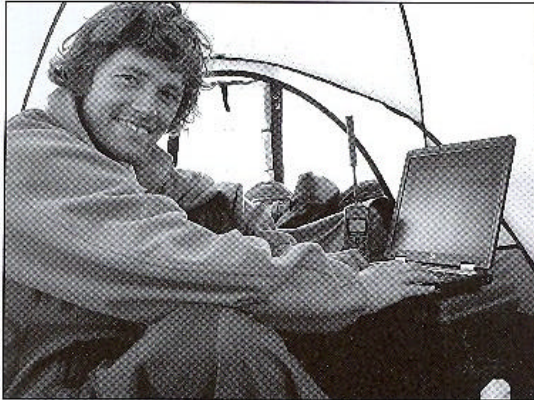
photos by Tim Cope



Stretching from Kharkorin, Mongolia to Hungary, is the land over which the world originally was introduced to the first weapon of mass destruction - the Mongolian cavalry equipped with short bows. Beginning with a few men, in just 80 years the Mongols, led by Genghis Khan, established the largest land empire ever on earth covering 12 million square miles, including over 100 million people, and encompassing essentially everything from the Pacific edge of China to the Danube River in Europe, by the year 1279.

Continued

On the Trail Of Genghis Khan cont....



Left:
Tim in his tent in Russia catching up with the world via computer.

Right Top:
Winter in Kazakhstan

Rights Below:
Summer in Siberia

Below:
Tim, his horses and Tigon - his faithful friend.

Photographs by
Tim Cope

The nomadic equestrian lifestyle of the Mongolian conquerors necessitated that they possess very little in terms of objects and be incredibly in tune with their horses. Far less is known about them from the lack of written and archaeological remnants of their existence than that of the sedentary cultures they conquered, with their books, stone castles, many artifacts, and cities still in existence today. Historically speaking, what better way to understand some of this fascinating history than to hop on a horse and ride across the same, nearly unchanged sections of the earth that the Mongolian cavalry did, suffering the same challenges and meeting direct descendants of the same peoples? And, on the personal side of the adventure, the 28 year old Long Rider is clearly not content to just consider the wonders of the world from a distance, but is determined to experience them in real time with all five senses, just as those ancient Mongolian horsemen did (minus the sacking and bloodshed, of course).

Before saddling up for this equine adventure on May 31st, 2004, Tim was already a seasoned expeditionist, having rowed a boat

4500 kilometres the length of the Yenisey River through Siberia to the Arctic Ocean, and rode a bicycle for 14 months through Russia, Mongolia, and China. In 2002, he made an award winning documentary, *Off the Rails, On the Back Roads to Beijing*, and co-authored an accompanying book. What Tim hadn't done previously, was ride horses! He looked to the Long Riders' Guild for assistance using their resources to the fullest when planning his trip (www.thelongridersguild.com). The Guild facilitated many aspects for him, from organising gear to negotiating political situations.

ALL-IMPORTANT GEAR

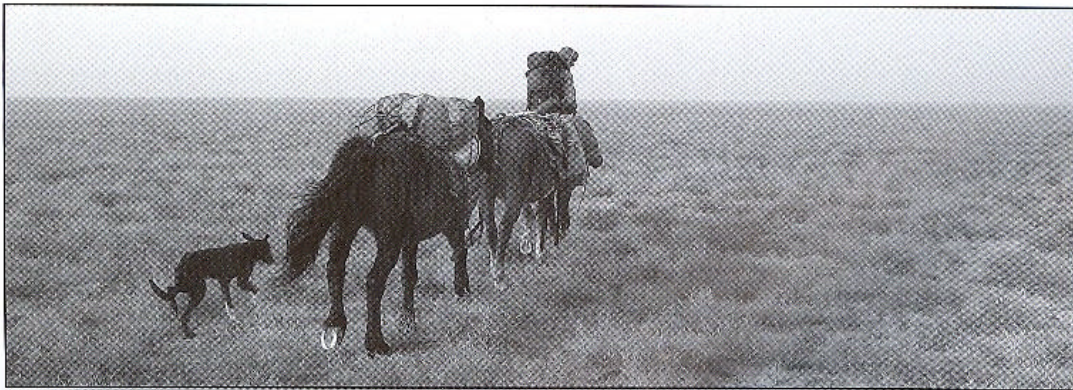
When choosing suitable saddles and gear for the journey, there were a few important factors to consider - due to the need to use several different horses of varying type the size of the horse/s was unknown, gear would need to be strapped to the saddle, and the saddle would need to be comfortable for both horse and rider. Eventually Tim chose a Bates Stock saddle with Cair panels and changeable gullet which, compared to the Russian and

Mongolian saddles, seemed luxurious. Tim commented that, "The Mongolian saddles come in one universal size made of solid wood. Just to make it more uncomfortable they even put metal decorations on the saddle that dig into the inner thigh!"

He travelled with three horses at any time, one to carry him and two to carry feed and supplies and briefly, whilst in Kazakhstan, he also used a camel. This meant he required quality pack saddles which he acquired from Canada, along with two large plastic pack boxes tapered to fit the shape of a horse. The pack saddles, which were adjustable to meet the varying sizes of horses, (even fitting a Bactrian camel!), were lightweight and simple to use, yet strong enough to withstand horses rolling on them. Ropes, halters and a hackamore were supplied by Nungar Knots and these weathered the journey well, being the envy of many of the locals along the way! A Wintec bridle, Mountain Horse leather chapettes, cotton saddle pads and felt pack saddle pads were also essential pieces of equipment on Tim's journey.

LEARNING ON THE JOB

As for riding, after a few saddle basics from his newly-made Mongolian friends at the outset of the journey, Tim headed off with all of Eurasia to bang around in to work on improving his seat! His Kazakh horses were a breed called Zhabi, a very tough Kazakh horse that, like all steppe equines, have evolved to endure all conditions and know very little of hay or grain. On the steppes the temperature ranges from -50 degrees celsius to plus 50, and in most areas the pasture is very, very scarce. The earth ranges from pebbly to sandy, and there are generally large distances between water. The nomads have always adapted their lives to that of the natural horse, moving with the seasons in search of pasture. With this in mind, in the winter of 2004/2005, when stuck in the middle of an area called the 'starving steppes', Tim set his horses free for almost three months in conditions that ranged from blizzards to minus 40 degrees and below. His



horses joined up with one of the two herds belonging to locals, which were roaming the region. Come spring, they had actually put on weight!

The winter is in fact a much easier season than summer, because in summer the temperature reached 54 degrees Celsius and there is no shade. During summer Tim rode only during the night.

Despite the fact that these Asian horses were not accustomed to grain or hay, Cope explains, the extra work load of hauling him and his gear meant going to extreme lengths to carry some feed at all times. Sometimes, corn could be found; other times barley or wheat. Getting grain, however, often meant paying a person with a 4 wheel drive truck to go hundreds of kilometres to buy it.

For the majority of the time, the horses were not shod. "As a steppe breed, their hooves were extremely toughened. When I did have them shod, farriers had real trouble trying to get the nails through without them bending first. I shod the horses in the Altai in the first winter with special studs to grip on ice. I then shod them in the Ukraine. I noticed that upon arrival in Ukraine on the black soils where there was lots of sweet grass, the horses began to crave salt (they never craved salt in Kazakhstan), and their hooves softened. I could only conclude that the natural salt and minerals in the semi-arid steppe regions was enough to balance the horses' diets and make their hooves harder." said Tim. As well, throughout the journey, he picked out their hooves and cleaned up the frog.

Tim's other companion was Tigon, meaning 'hawk' or 'fast wind', a black and white hunting dog given to him as gift in Kazakhstan, whom he now hopes to take home to Australia.

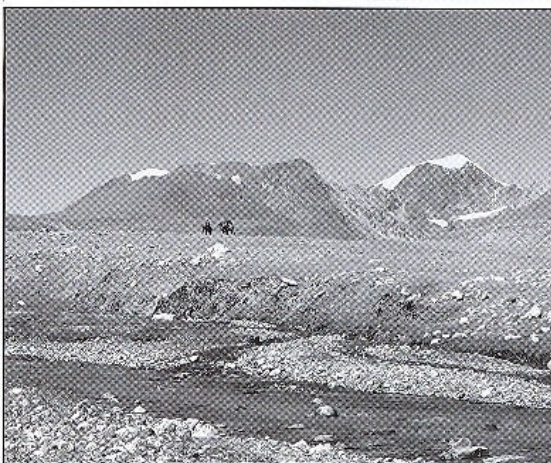
CARE OF THE HORSES

Alone with ones horses for hundred of kilometers at a time, medical care was certainly a concern. Luckily, Tim was set up with a satellite telephone and on-call access to a vet—Dr. Sheila Greenwell, BVSc, from Margaret River in Western Australia. He also carried a huge first aid kit, including a range of anti-biotics, eye creams, anti-inflammatories and bandages etc. The horses were wormed every three months, and apart from an abscess on Taskonir's back hoof neither he nor Ogonyok suffered leg or hoof problems, showing no signs of lameness on the trail.

The difficulties and exuberant moments of the journey that made it into diary entries are too numerous to list. There were heartbreaking moments such as when one of his horses, Kok, stepped on a nail while Tim was away and his caretakers did not administer antibiotics left there with the horses for such an instance. The anguishing decision had to be made to leave him behind and continue with the rest of the small herd, and another when the horses were nearly ruined by a modern product scam - a 'no sweat saddle pad' that now has been proven to be an international distribution of an abrasive floor mat product (for the full facts go to <http://www.thelongridersguild.com/doorat.htm>). "The synthetic pads stripped the hair and skin away from large patches on the horses' backs and sides," Tim says, nearly putting an end to his journey in the course of a single day.

Tragedy struck in November of 2006, after arriving in the fertile lands of the Ukraine when Tim received news that his father had been killed in a car accident. Putting his journey aside, he found a place to put his horses and went home to mourn with his family, returning in March 2007 to head into his fourth consecutive summer of this Long Ride.

In total, thirteen horses traveled with Tim at one time or another during the adventure. Two horses, Ogonyok, and Taskonir, were with him for almost three years of the journey, making the trip from the Altai Mountains to Hungary. These horses



Tim eventually gave to an orphanage in Hungary where they have now set up a riding program for the children.

Tim's adventurous spirit and work reporting his experiences and findings back to the rest of the world has brought him two great honors, in 2005 he was made a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, and then in 2006, Tim was named Australian Geographic Adventurer of the Year. Arriving at his final destination, the Hungarian town of Opustaszer, Tim paid tribute to the animals saying that they, along with the numerous people who had welcomed him into their homes, were the 'real heroes' of the journey.

Such recognition is an honour to this intrepid traveller, but his motivations to endure in the face of such a massive challenge as tracing Genghis Khan's route across Eurasia are perhaps better summed up in his own words during the trip, "When I sat outside last night cooking up the dried beef, taking cover from the wind, peering into the depths of the mountains beyond and at the way my horse stood - tail blowing in the wind - I felt that life here is timeless."

You can see more about Tim's journey on the website: www.timecopejourneys.com