

The Magic of Mongolia

By Shawn Hamilton



A Mongolian herder's son.

During a ten-day horseback trek in Mongolia, the simplicity and beauty of the country's people and culture touched my soul.





Mongolian stallion

In a country more than twice the size of Texas, but with a population only the size of Houston, one finds open land, peace, and serenity. Just over an hour's drive outside of Mongolia's capital city, Ulaanbaatar, a piece of paradise waits to be discovered from the saddle.

The Mongolian horses live in an almost wild state. They have an incredibly smooth gait and seemingly endless endurance. These horses are kept as nature intended, living outdoors year-round in temperatures ranging from 30 degrees C in summer to minus 40 degrees C in winter, and finding their own food by grazing. The herdsman share a silent connection with their horses, passing down their unwritten traditions through the generations. On horseback is the perfect way to experience this country.

The Mongolian people of the countryside live off the land in a tough yet peaceful, sustainable lifestyle. The herdsman live as nomads, moving their portable round house, called a *ger*, to greener pastures when needed. The wooden accordion style sides of the *ger* fold up, the centre columns that support the roof slats all come apart, and topped by the felt or canvas shell it lays neatly on a wagon that is often pulled by a yak. Young children fetch water from the river; women milk mares and ferment the liquid to make the famous alcoholic drink, *airag*. Yogurt, cheeses, curds, and other dairy and meat staples are made from yaks, sheep, cattle, and goats. Cashmere is spun from goat hair.

I watch a herd of 40 horses cross the river that runs through the ranch owned by my hosts, Baagii and his wife, Saraa, of Horse Trek Mongolia. A mare tied to her foal coaxes it across. Instantly falling in love with this country, I would soon discover that the people are as genuine as its beauty.

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Baileys Muddslide ridden by Tanya Jenkins
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Crossing the river to our first campsite.

The Horses

I arrived at the ranch a day early with a Canadian, Julie Veloo, and her husband, Chelvan. Julie met Baagii and Saraa many years ago while living in Mongolia and paired up with them to organize horseback riding adventures where 30 percent of the profits would go to the Children of the Peak Sanctuary, a kindergarten built in the Ger district of Ulaanbaatar (see sidebar, page 62).

At the ranch we were treated to a lovely breakfast of eggs and sausage before packing up to ride to Turtle Rock where we will meet the other riders. Bugiin, Baagii's eight-year-old granddaughter, came out of the house with a bright green sash and asked him to tie it on her *deel*. Pronounced "dell," the traditional robe-like coat worn by the herdsman is made of brightly coloured silk and held together by a long thin sash tightly wrapped around the waist.

With Baagii and local guides Lkhauga and Tsengel, plus a few extra horses in tow, we mount up, cross the river and head north through an enormous valley dotted by large herds of horses. Cresting the hill, we watch the guides, true horsemen in action, round up and corral one of the herds, then rope a few of the horses to add to our string.

After meandering through huge rock outcrops and forests, we find ourselves in a bog. My little 12.2 hand horse, Hongur, is up to his chest in mud and can't seem to get out of it with me on him. He falls to the side and off I go. Baagii laughs, and other than a little mud on my elbow all is well and I hop back on, my pride slightly tarnished.

Julie tells me that when you fall off your horse, the Mongolians say you have been "born onto the ground." I accept that.

Arriving at Turtle Rock, an interesting rocky outcrop in a tiny tourist town — equipped with a camel for tourists to ride — we meet the others who will be joining our group. Once presented and clothed with our own personal *deels* — mine so tight I can hardly breathe — Julie gives us a short briefing about the Mongolian horses we will ride.

"These horses live practically in the wild when they are not being ridden so they are spooky, something that helps them survive," she explains. "Only approach them on the left; never approach them when in a tie line in a group; do not mount or dismount your horse unless a guide is holding your horse; watch for holes, of which there are many; and do not take your jacket, scarf, or *deel* off while riding. Simple movements like that can spook the horse," she says.

We mount up again and head off to Ariyabalin, a spectacular Buddhist monastery perched high on a hill. The long, upward climb rewards us with outstanding views.

After lunch in the shade of the trees, we head to a private farm where some of us sleep in tents and others in the private *gers*. Hot mutton soup called *khorkhog* warms us inside as the setting sun brings the cool of the night.



Baagii and Bugiin crossing the river.

A Photographer in Paradise

The song of the cuckoo bird echoes in the morning air as I stretch by the flowing river. A young boy herds his cows through the water while a yak, which we later get a chance to milk, munches breakfast nearby.

Later on the trails, I stand up in my stirrups and call out "tuk tuk" causing Hongur to go into a tolt-like gait that could last for miles. The English tourist saddle I am using is comfortable in comparison to the traditional wooden Mongolian one I tried. Mongolians ride with incredibly short jockey-style stirrups and stand straight up in the saddle as they glide along with their horse's gait.

Buddhist temples are scattered along the trails and we are instructed to ride around them three times clockwise for luck. As we pass private *gers* we are conscious to abide by the etiquette of keeping our distance at a walk, minding the dogs that run out, and trying not to ride through the burning dung — wise advice.

White, puffy cumulus clouds hang over the ridge where we stop to take in the view and have lunch. I lie in the grass and listen to the grasshoppers as wind rustles through the trees. A Demoiselle crane soars overhead. I wander into the woods seeking shade and discover a herd of mares and foals peacefully grazing, backlit by the midday light.

We get back in the saddle to continue our



PHOTO: KATHERINE SIMONSEN

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The race at the Naadam festival.



The Mongolian saddle.

PHOTOS: CLIX PHOTOGRAPHY



Kids collecting water from the river.



Children of the Peak Sanctuary

BY SHAWN HAMILTON

Julie Veloo, a Canadian who lived for a time in Mongolia, discovered through an interesting course of events that approximately 200 Mongolian families were forced to leave their nomadic countryside lifestyle six years ago. In the winter of 2009-2010, a severe cold snap called a *dzud*, with temperatures plummeting to minus 46 degrees C for many days, caused the death of over nine million animals and destroyed the way of life of many herdsman. These families were displaced to what is now called the Ger district of Ulaanbaatar, forced to change their homes in the mountains and lush green valleys of the countryside for a small plot surrounded by a fence. These people, who were not born in the city, were therefore not licensed to work there, and their children were unable to attend school. This unfortunate situation forced these families to scavenge in the city's dump and to live off what they could scrounge and sell. The worst sufferers were the children who were forced to either tag along to the dump or be left home unattended in the

cold temperatures of the winter with no fuel to keep their *ger* warm.

Veloo changed the lives of these children forever by raising money through The Veloo Foundation and creating The Children of The Peak Sanctuary, a kindergarten at the dump. Parents can now drop their children off to be washed, clothed, fed, and educated in a warm comfortable loving environment. At the time of writing this article, three of the

kindergarten's graduates have been accepted into private schools in Ulaanbaatar and almost all of the rest have places in the public system.

Horse Trek Mongolia donates 30 percent of their profits from their horseback riding tours to the sanctuary.

The Veloo Foundation is a family-run charity registered in Canada and a not-for-profit organization in the US. Their mission is to help orphans and other similarly disadvantaged children in the developing world through a series of educational, vocational, and health and hygiene development initiatives. Their website states they help over 400 children in Mongolia and Malaysia.

For more information and to find out how you can help by donating or sponsoring, visit:

www.veloofoundation.com/children-of-the-peak-sanctuary.html

ride and stop at a river to set up for the night. Saraa has driven a *khainag*, a yak-cow cross, to meet us with a *ger* ready to assemble. We change into our bathing suits and jump in the chilly yet refreshing rapids. Sipping wine after dinner by the fire, the sun sets behind the river. This is a photographer's paradise.

The next morning, after disassembling the *ger*, we mount up and head out. A young boy on his horse, covered in a colourful blanket, rides past. We are told he is training for the Naadam.

The Naadam festival is Mongolia's national fair. Spectators and competitors come from all over to watch and compete in wrestling, archery, and for what the country is best known for — horse racing where jockeys range from six years old and up. To win a Naadam race brings pride to the family.

Riding into the small town of Erdene Soum for the Naadam Festival there were horses everywhere and the people were dressed in their finest *deels*. After the colourful opening ceremonies of dancers, singers, fiddle players, and demonstrations, we headed to the finish line of the race to watch countless kids, some riding barefoot, galloping to the race's end in a cloud of dust. Julie is pleased to see that all of the jockeys are wearing helmets, even though one is using his helmet as a whip to hit the sides of his horse during the race.

To learn more about the Mongolian culture and try on traditional costumes we spend a day



Having fun with Mongolian costumes.



PHOTOS: CLIX PHOTOGRAPHY

A Mongolian horse family.




riding to a rebuilt thirteenth century town comprised of various villages within a half hour's ride of each other. After visiting the shaman, artist and education villages, we lunch at the King's Palace while serenaded by a fiddle player and traditional throat singer. Music plays an important role in Mongolia and the sound of the famous throat singers and double-headed horse fiddle can take your breath away. Finishing the day with the military village, Baagii and Saraa put on the traditional winter *deels* and mount their horses for some photo fun.

Making Memories

At the end of the day, as we sip wine and watch the sun set in the distance, a huge herd of horses crosses a ridge to come and drink from a nearby pond. A herdsman in a brightly colored *deel* gallops by to fetch his herd, kicking up dust in the evening light.

Riding together for ten days turned complete strangers into lifelong friends, and we were sad riding back to the ranch, knowing that our trek together would soon end. The refreshing hot shower and massage at the spa down the road eased our sorrows.

The beautiful scenery of Mongolia is endless, but the hearts of the people, their simple lifestyle, and horses everywhere you look are what I will remember most. If you have a love of horses, a love for the land, and enjoy the company of truly unique and sincere people, then this is a country you must experience, and from a saddle is certainly the best way to do it. 

For more information visit:

- > www.horsetrekmongolia.com
- > www.veloofoundation.com/children-of-the-peak-sanctuary.html

Shawn Hamilton is a freelance equine photojournalist based in Ontario, Canada.



The herd in camp at sunset.