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TIM COPE



ON THE TRAIL *of*  
**GENGHIS  
KHAN**



AN EPIC JOURNEY THROUGH THE  
LAND OF THE NOMADS

B L O O M S B U R Y  
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

# DEDICATION

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**In June 2004**, at the age of twenty-five, I set out to ride on horseback from Mongolia to Hungary, approximately 10,000 km, across the Eurasian steppe. I called it the “Trail of Genghis Khan,” referring to the inspiration I found in the nomadic Mongols, who under Genghis Khan set out to build the largest land empire in history. The aim of my journey was to honor and understand those who have lived on the steppes with their horses for thousands of years, carrying on a nomadic way of life.

When I reached the Danube more than three years later, in autumn 2007, one of the common questions people asked me was, “How did you cope for so long alone?” The truth is that I never thought of myself as being entirely alone. With me were my family of horses, two of whom, Taskon and Ogonyok, carried me most of the way. Then there was Tigon, my Kazakh dog, who accompanied me on his own four feet. My animals were on the front line of this journey, bearing the brunt of the extremes of cold and heat, traversing deserts and mountains, and being subjected to the consequences of bungled bureaucracy and even horse thievery. It was through them I came to experience the tapestry of the Eurasian steppe, and in retrospect, I can think of no better explanation for my journey than the reward of riding with my steeds, Tigon running by their hooves, as we sailed over open steppe, where nothing—not thoughts, feelings, time, the earth, or animals—was fenced in.

It is also true that the journey would have been meaningless without the many individuals and families I met, several of whom joined me for parts of the way, and more than one hundred of whom took me and my animals in. Some of my hosts were desperately poor, others were rich, and many were afflicted by alcoholism or even involved in corruption and crime, but most cared for me like I was a friend and shared their food, fodder, and shelter generously—sometimes, as it turned out, for weeks and months. To be welcomed with a smile by a stranger after many days of hard riding, even though I was usually in a state of disrepair, provided a sense of camaraderie and closeness that not only enriched my life but in some cases saved me and the lives of my animals.

All of my hosts also shared the story of the circumstances of their lives, their culture, and their history with great honesty and openness. I realized later on that in some of them I had met the modern guardians of the steppe—those special people who are driving the culture into the future, fueling the pride of the nomad, saving the traditions, and keeping the memory of their ancestors alive.

This book is dedicated to all of these people I met on the Eurasian steppe, and to my animals.

Before us now stretched Mongolia with deserts trembling in the mirages, with endless steppes covered with emerald-green grass and multitudes of wild flowers, with nameless snow peaks, limitless forests, thundering rivers and swift mountain streams. The way that we had traveled with such toil had disappeared behind us among gorges and ravines. We could not have dreamed of a more captivating entrance to a new country, and when the sun sank upon that day, we felt as though born into a new life—a life which had the strength of the hills, the depth of the heavens and the beauty of the sunrise.

—Henning Haslund

*Mongolian Adventure: 1920s Danger and Escape  
Among the Mounted Nomads of Central Asia*

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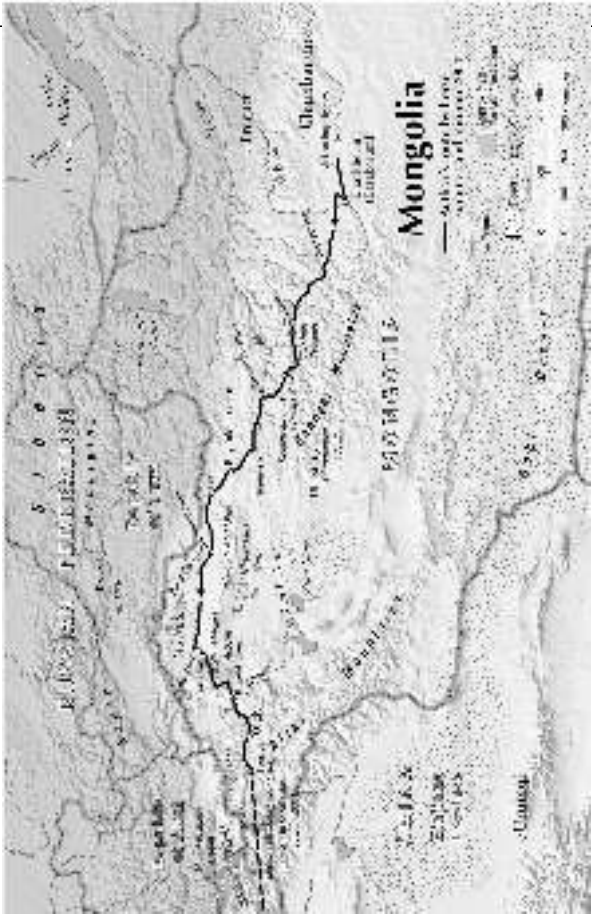
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# MONGOLIAN DREAMING

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**Only ten minutes** earlier we had been bent forward over our saddles, braced against the near horizontal rain and hail, but now the afternoon sun had returned and the wind had gone. As I peeled back the hood of my jacket, details that had been swept away by the storm began to filter back. Nearby there was the rattle of a bridle as my horse shook away a fly; around us, sharp songs floating through the cleansed air from unseen birds. The wet leather chaps around my sore legs began to warm up, and the taste of dried curd, known as *aaruu*, turned bitter in my mouth. Ahead, my girlfriend, Kathrin, sat remarkably calm on her wiry little chestnut gelding. Below, the rocking of my saddle as my horse's hooves pressed into soft ground was steady as a heartbeat.

In a land as open and wide as Mongolia I was already becoming aware that it took just the slightest adjustment to switch my attention from the near to the far. With a twist in the saddle my gaze shifted to the curved column of rain that had been drenching us minutes before, but which now sailed over the land to our left. Pushed out by the wind in an arc like a giant spinnaker, it crossed the valley plain where we were skirting and continued to distant uplands, fleetingly staining the earth and blotting out nomadic encampments in its path.

During childhood, I had often watched clouds such as this, feeling envious of the freedom they had to roam unchecked. Here, though, the same boundless space of the sky was mirrored on the land. Scattered amid the faultless green carpet of early summer grasses, countless herds of horses, flocks of sheep and goats, shifted about like cloud shadows. For the nomads who tended to them, nowhere, it seemed, was off-limits. Their white felt tents, known as *gers*, were perched atop knolls, by the quiet slither of a stream, and in the clefts of distant slopes. Riders could be seen driving herds forward across open spaces, and milling by camps. Not a tree—or shrub, for that matter—fence, or road was in sight, and the highest peaks in the distance were all worn down and rounded, adding to the feeling of a world without boundaries.

Clutching the reins and refocusing my sights on the freshly cut mane of my riding horse, Boris, I wavered between this simple, uncluttered reality and the trials of a more complex world that were slipping behind.

For the past twelve months I had been preparing for this journey in a third-floor apartment with a static view over the suburbs of inner-city Melbourne, Australia. In theory, the idea of riding horses 10,000 km across the Eurasian steppe from Mongolia to Hungary was simple—independent of the mechanized world, and without a need for roads, I would be free to wander, needing only grass and water to fuel my way forward.<sup>1</sup> One friend had even told me: “Get on your horse, point it to the west, and when people start speaking French, it means you have gone too far.”

In reality, there were complexities I needed to plan for. I knew, for example, that bureaucracy—getting visas and crossing borders with animals—would likely be a major obstacle, and taking the right equipment could mean the difference between lasting two hundred days on the road or just two



Perhaps more significant were the challenges ahead that remained unknown, and of a type unfamiliar to me. At that point, early in my planning, not only was the scale of the journey beyond my comprehension, but the sum total of my experience as a horseman amounted to ten minutes on a horse almost two decades earlier, when I was seven years old. On that occasion I had been bucked clear and shipped to the hospital with a broken arm. I was still deeply scared of these powerful creatures, and couldn't quite picture myself as a horseman—a feeling shared by my mother, Anne, who was a little bewildered when I first mentioned the idea.

Notwithstanding the uncertainties, I had pressed ahead with plans, and by the spring of 2004 I felt reasonably well prepared. With valuable direction from the founder of the Long Riders Guild, CuChullaine O'Reilly, I had studied the realities of traveling with horses and gathered together a trove of carefully selected equipment. I had also managed to make contact with people in embassies, visa agencies, and those who had promised to help me on the ground.

Not all preparations had proven fruitful. I hadn't managed to raise enough money to reach my target budget of \$10 a day (for a journey I expected to take eighteen months), and assurances I would receive long-stay visas were vague at best. Since planning had begun, it was also true that I had not accumulated as much experience on horseback as I had hoped. In addition to that disastrous long-ago ride, I had managed to join a five-day packhorse trip through the Victorian Alps in southeastern Australia—courtesy of the Baird family, who were kind enough to take on the white-knuckled novice that I was—and a three-day crash course with horse trainers and an equine vet in Western Australia. Nevertheless, I was buoyed by the firm belief that because the difficulties of the journey ahead would prove to be of a scope beyond my imagination, not even another forty years of planning would have been enough. And besides, who could possibly be better teachers than the nomads of the steppe who would soon be among?

From the time I booked my air tickets and canceled the lease on my apartment, there had been no turning back. Life as I knew it was disassembled, and I went through the process of farewells with my family. After saying goodbye to one of my brothers, Jon, I slumped up against the wall in my empty apartment in tears. Setting off on such a long journey as the eldest of four close-knit children, I felt as if I was severing ties, and it frightened me to think how much we might grow apart. Finally, at Melbourne airport my existence was stripped down to an embrace with my mother. The longer she lingered in her arms, the more strongly I felt that, as a son, I was doing something that bordered on irresponsible.

After making my way to Beijing, and from there by train to Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar, I had spent a few weeks persuading Mongolia's Foreign Ministry to grant me a visa extension (and very nearly failing), gathering together additional equipment, and, finally, searching for the horses that would be my transport, load carriers, and traveling companions.

A young English-speaking Mongolian man named Gansukh Baatarsuren had taken me to the home of a nomad family 300 km southwest of the city, where he promised to find me "hero's horses." The process had proven tricky. There was a general belief among nomads—in my case warranted—that "white men could not ride," and upon discovering the buyer was a foreigner, several previous offers to sell had been rescinded. No one wanted to be responsible for exposing a foreigner like me to danger, let alone risk maltreatment of their prized horses.

In the end I had been helped in my quest by a stroke of luck—there had been a general election, and voting was an opportunity for nomads to ride in from all corners of the steppe to socialize. Gansukh had gone to a polling place and put word out that he was looking for three good mounts. The following day, while I hid in a ger, he covertly negotiated with sellers on my behalf. In this way I had managed to buy two geldings and had purchased a third from the nomad family with whom we were staying.

Just six days ago I had assembled my little caravan and taken the first fragile steps, albeit most ~~them on foot, leading my little crew. Since then I had rendezvoused with Kathrin, who planned to ride with me for the first two months of the journey.~~

Lifting my eyes again to the steppe between my horse's ears, I felt the stiffness in my joints ebb away. Perhaps it was just the effect of *airag* seeping in—alcoholic fermented mare's milk that Kathrin and I had been served by the bowlful during lunch with nomads—but for the first time since I climbed into the saddle, a sense of ease washed over me. With reins in hand, compass set, and backpack hugging me from behind, all I could think was that ahead lay 10,000 km of this open land to the Danube, and across all of these empty horizons, not a soul knew I was coming.

**When the sun** began to edge toward the skyline and the heat wilted, I watered the horses, then chose a campsite halfway up a hillside that overlooked the country we had ridden through. As would become my regular evening routine, I set about hobbling the horses and tethering them around the tent using 20 m lines and steel stakes. The camping stove was fired up, dinner was boiled, and Kathrin and I rested up against the pack boxes to watch herds of sheep and goats pouring over troughs and crests on their way back to camps scattered below. The sweet smell of burning dung and calls of distant horsemen carried through to us on the breeze, and when our dinner pots had been scraped clean, we lay down on mattresses of horse blankets listening to the crunch of horses chewing through grass. Thereafter the prospect of unbroken weeks and months of travel held me lingering in a dreamy state of semiconsciousness.

I must have eventually fallen into a deep sleep, for when I opened my eyes again, the bucolic scenes of evening had vanished. In their place the tent clapped and bucked in a roaring wind. Something had woken me, and although I wasn't sure just what, I crawled out of my sleeping bag and clutched blindly for my flashlight. When I failed to find it I lay still, held my breath and strained to listen for my horses.

Minutes passed. There were no telltale jingles of the horse bell that had been tied around the packhorse's neck, or indeed any other sound indicating the horses were grazing. I tried to convince myself I was experiencing a moment of paranoia and that the horses were sleeping, but then from somewhere beyond camp I heard muffled voices and the thunder of hooves. I forced my way out and ran barefoot to where I had tethered the animals, only to find my white riding mount, Bor, alone pulling at his tether line and madly neighing into the black of night. Somewhere beyond the perimeter of camp the sound of galloping was fading fast.

Holding Bor's tether tight, I stumbled my way farther until I felt the other two tether lines between my toes. When I reached the end of one I fell to my knees clutching the only remaining evidence of the other two horses: the bell and a pair of hobbles.

Even as Kathrin woke and came running from the tent with a flashlight, warnings I'd brushed aside from seasoned nomads in recent days came flooding back: *What are you going to do when the wolves attack? When the thieves steal your horses? Are you carrying a gun?* In response I had naively pointed out my axe and horse bell. Sheila Greenwell, the equine vet in Australia who had so kindly helped me prepare, had suggested that if I put the bell on my horses at night I would wake up if thieves drew approach, because the horses would become nervous and sound the bell. In reality, the sound of the bell as the horses grazed in the dark had led the thieves straight to my camp. They had quietly slipped off the bell, untied the horses, and made their escape.

As futile as it might have been, Kathrin and I continued to trawl the steppe in the hope we might have missed something. But by the time we returned to the tent, frozen, there was no denying that on just the sixth day of my journey some of my plans needed revision. In fact, I thought, perhaps the

whole journey needed a rethink.

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**The vision of** riding a horse on the trail of nomads from Mongolia to Hungary had been incubating since I was nineteen. At the time I'd abandoned law school in Australia to study wilderness guiding in Finland. There I'd learned about the travels of Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim—the legendary Finnish general and explorer who began his career in the Russian Imperial Army and went on to lead Finland to independence, eventually becoming Finland's president during the final stages of World War II.

At the age of thirty-nine, in 1906, he set off on a two-year ethnographic expedition from St. Petersburg through Central Asia to Beijing, the last part largely on horseback. In truth, Mannerheim was not the ethnographer he was dressed up as, but a covert spy for the Russian tsar. Nonetheless, he impressed me as someone interested in the continuity between the ethnic groups of Central Asia and the origins of the Finnish people. The Finns are part of the Finno-Ugric group of peoples, and are related to many different indigenous peoples that stretch right across the belt of forest and tundra regions of Russia and Siberia, as far as the Pacific. The story of Mannerheim's journey inspired in me the idea that connections between cultures, based on a common environment and way of life, transcend modern state boundaries.

After completing the wilderness course in 1999 I canceled my return ticket to Australia and set off with my friend Chris Hatherly to ride recumbent bicycles from Karelia, in European Russia, to Beijing. It was to be a fourteen-month journey during which we lived on a budget of \$2 a day, surviving by camping in the forest, drinking from roadside ditches, and being rescued by kind villagers who took pity on us. The world expanded with every new challenge, from frostbitten toes to the dark clouds of mosquitoes that came with summer in Siberia. But most of all it was the people who left an impression on me. In the throes of the traumatic times of post-Soviet Russia and the more recent 1998 economic collapse, the people were resurgent with pride in their many varied origins, whether they were Buddhist Buryatians or the lesser-known Udmurtians of the pre-Urals. Above all, I found it astonishing that in the midst of an adventure I experienced more comradeship and connection with many of these people than with those where I had grown up in Australia.

It was more by necessity than by desire—it was the most logical and shortest route from Siberia to Beijing—that Chris and I found ourselves in Mongolia in the autumn of 2000.

While pushing our bikes through the sands of Mongolia's Gobi Desert we would pause, exhausted, and watch as horsemen materialized from the horizon at a gallop, their long cloaks flying, eyes trained forward, and sitting so composed it was as if they were not moving at all. After stopping to take a look at the two young Australians, bogged in the sand of the only track in sight, they would remount and gallop off in whatever direction they pleased.

I was struck by their world: unscarred by roads, towns, and cities, it was a place where even humans left impermanent marks on the land. Free of fences and private land ownership, the natural lay of the earth was unhindered, defined only by mountains, rivers, deserts, and the natural ebb and flow of the seasons. What's more, with little more than a thin piece of felt to protect them against annual variations in temperatures that spanned more than 82°C, the nomadic people had a connection to the land I had never dreamed existed in modern times.

Until that point of our travels, bicycles had been freedom machines for Chris and me, allowing us to break away from the pull of a conventional path in life. But it began to dawn on me that because we were confined to roads and wheel tracks, the realm of nomads was off-limits to us. I was merely a tourist passing through.

**Our journey to Beijing** was over rather quickly after reaching the Chinese border, and within a month of dropping down from the Gobi Desert to China's bustling megalopolis, my bike was gathering dust in my parents' garage. The memories of Mongolia still burned bright, though, and from that point on I not only craved to return to Mongolia but grew enchanted by the history of the Mongolians' ancestors who had once ruled supreme under the leadership of Genghis Khan.

Drawing on the same hardy qualities that enable the nomads and their steppe horses to survive the harsh environment of Mongolia today, horsemen of the thirteenth century had trotted out of the vast Mongolian steppe and thundered into Poland and Hungary, crushing some of Europe's most prestigious armies. I was captivated by stories of these warriors who were renowned for mounting up in the dead of winter, smearing fat on their faces against frostbite, and drinking blood from the neck of their horses when food supplies were low. The Mongolian armies were able to travel a remarkable 80 km a day, and among many military accomplishments they defeated Russia in winter—something neither Napoleon or Hitler could achieve. Later, when they conquered Baghdad in 1258, they also managed in one attempt what the Crusaders had been trying to do for more than a century, and which wouldn't be repeated until the 2003 American invasion.

Just as impressive as the military prowess of the Mongols was the ability of Genghis Khan and his successors to make the transition from conquering and pillaging to governing and administration. They established an empire that remained more or less intact for a century, and which left a sophisticated model of government and military that long outlived the Genghisid dynasty. Many contemporary historians point out how taxes levied by the Mongols during their reign were by and large used to serve the diverse people they ruled. They implemented legal codes, funded public works projects, patronized the arts and religion, and promoted international trade and commerce. Under their stewardship, trade routes and communication lines across Eurasia were perhaps safer and more efficient than they had ever been, enabling the first direct relations between China and Europe.

It is remarkable to think that at the zenith of Mongol power nomad herders of the little-known steppes of East Asia ruled an empire that included some of the most populous cities on earth and stretched from Korea in the east to Hungary in the west, the tropics of South East Asia in the south—the Mongols even campaigned in Java, Indonesia—and the sub-Arctic in the north. Western Europe could have become yet another corner of their lands if it weren't for a stroke of fate. In 1242 when Mongolian scouts reached Vienna, the great khan in Mongolia died—at that time it was Genghis Khan's son and heir, Ogodei—and the army packed up and went home to elect a new leader. Ambitions to rule western Europe were never revisited.

As I learned about the scale and significance of the Mongol Empire, I began to think the only thing more astonishing than the achievements of the Mongols was how little I'd known about them, not to mention my ignorance of the broader history of mounted nomads on the steppe.

When Chris and I were en route by bicycle to Mongolia, many ethnic Russians we met had hardly been enlightening. We'd been warned time and time again that Mongolia was an impoverished and backward country where the "primitive" and "uncivilized" people who still relied on horses would surely bring an end to our journey. There was a permeating sense of disbelief that these people who "didn't even know how to build a house" could ever have ruled Russia, let alone many of the great civilizations of China, Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East. And yet at a time in history when most medieval Europeans were still limited to the distance they could walk in a day—the original meaning of the word *journey* in English—these Mongolian horsemen had been galloping across the globe, expanding their knowledge as rapidly as their empire assimilated the religions, technologies, and cultures of those they conquered.

Significantly, the Mongols were not some kind of isolated nomad phenomenon. To the contrary,

they reflected a historic trend of nomadic empires that had begun thousands of years earlier with one of human history's most significant yet unheralded turning points: the domestication of the wild horse.

Recent discoveries suggest that this revolution began around 3500 BCE in what is now the northern steppe of Kazakhstan. There on the primeval plain where the steppe mingles with the southern edge of the Siberian forests, hunter-gatherers first began to tame, breed, milk, and ride this four-legged creature with which they had shared the land since time immemorial.

On the sweeping, largely waterless tracts of land on the Eurasian steppe the marriage of human intelligence and equine speed enabled flat-footed hunter-gatherers to gallop beyond the known horizon and prosper in ways previously unimagined. Free to search out better pasture, water, and game, they rapidly expanded their concept of the world and revolutionized the way they communicated, farmed, traded, and waged warfare. As Bjarke Rink puts it in his book *The Centaur Legacy*, the union between man and horse represented “a qualitative leap in human psychology and physiology that permitted man to act beyond his biological means.” In other words, the horse liberated humankind from its own physical limitations.

Over time the domesticated horse gave rise to nomadic societies from Mongolia to the Danube River in modern Hungary. The Greek historian Herodotus dedicated his “fourth book” to one of the first such known horseback people, the Scythians, who rose to prominence in the eighth century BCE and ruled the steppe from the Danube to the Altai Mountains.

The realm of the Scythians was at the very heart of what would become the platform for the countless nomadic empires that followed them—the ocean-like plain in the heart of Eurasia, where the horse had evolved over millions of years. On the northern shores of this land lay the boreal forests and tundra of Russia and Siberia, while to the south it was rimmed by the baking deserts of Central Asia and Persia, the great walls of the Tien Shan and Pamir ranges, and, farther to the west, the Caucasus and the shores of the Black Sea. Some areas of the steppe were rich grasslands and others semi-arid zones, deserts, high plateaus, and even forests, but far away from the moderating effect of any ocean it was all characterized by a harsh continental climate.

For settled people who lived beyond the boundaries of this realm—clinging to the safety and protection of more-fertile soils, river systems, and plentiful forests—the steppe was a mysterious, inhospitable, and almost impenetrable world. For nomads such as the Scythians, however, who relied on grazing their herds of sheep, goats, cattle, camels, and horses, the steppe formed a corridor of pasturelands that linked Asia with Europe, and Russia and Siberia with Asia Minor and the Middle East. Apart from the Altai Mountains in the east and the Carpathians in the west, it was largely free of natural obstructions, and the east-west axis meant that despite vast distances the conditions varied comparatively little. Nomads could therefore apply very similar principles of pastoral farming in Mongolia as they could in Hungary.

It was inevitable that, once domesticated, the horse would carry nomads beyond the shores of the steppe and into conflict with sedentary society. Nomads, after all, could not survive exclusively on the milk, meat, and skins of their animals, but to a degree were dependent on trade with, and plunder of, the earth-tilling societies in the lands that bordered theirs. The horse gave the nomads a crucial military advantage, and a pattern of conflict began that would endure as late as the seventeenth century: nomads would make raids on settled lands and retreat to the steppe with their spoils.<sup>2</sup>

Among the many nomad powers to follow in the wake of the Scythians were the Sarmatians, Huns (who under Attila rocked the foundations of the Roman Empire), Bulgars, Avars, and eventually the Magyars, who founded the modern nation of Hungary in 896. Two hundred and fifty years later the greatest nomad force of all time, the Mongols (also known in the west as Tatars), were at the height of

their powers.

Even after the breakup of the Mongol Empire in the fourteenth century, Turkic-Mongol people with nomad heritage took over much of the fallen Genghisid dynasty. The much-renowned Tamerlane modeled himself on the Mongols and went on to carve out his own empire of historical renown.

It wasn't until the advent of the musket in the seventeenth century that nomads began to go into permanent decline. The last great migration of nomads across the steppe took place in 1771, when the ethnically Mongolian Kalmyks migrated from the Caspian region in Russia to China and Mongolia. The final descendant of Genghis Khan to hold power was Alim Khan, emir of Bukhara, who was deposed in 1920.

**Over the months** and years following my bicycle journey I continued to read about the Mongols, and nomads more generally, and became struck by two disparate and rather extreme images of the steppe people.

On one hand, there was the entrenched stereotype of Mongols as primitive barbarians who, in the time of power, had senselessly pillaged, raped, and murdered before returning on their horses to the east. It is a reputation that, it should be acknowledged, is not without some justification. The Mongol tactic of conquest was brutal, designed both to decrease the population to prevent rebellion and instill fear so that future enemies would surrender without a fight. There are, consequently, cities across Central Asia, Persia, the Middle East, Russia, and China that suffered irreparable devastation. When the city of Merv surrendered, historical sources suggest, nearly the entire population was put to death. Urgench was famously submerged by the waters of the Amu Darya after the Mongols broke dam walls. In Iran, the Mongols are still bemoaned for the destruction they wreaked on life-sustaining irrigation networks that took centuries to rebuild; the famines caused by the devastation probably caused more people to die than did the initial conquest. There is even evidence to suggest that the early destruction by the Mongols under Genghis Khan left a problematic legacy for his successors. In China, Kubilai Khan—Genghis's grandson, who went on to become both grand khan and emperor of China—spent decades struggling to reconstruct towns, cities, and agricultural lands that had borne the brunt of the initial Mongol invasion.

Passing moral judgment on the Mongols based on their violent conquests is nevertheless not a fair way of interpreting the nature of the Mongol Empire or the Mongols as a nomadic people and culture. As historian Charles J. Halperin writes, "Empire building is an invariably destructive process unwelcome to the conquered," and in this regard the Mongols were "no more cruel, and no less," than empire builders before or after them. It is important to consider that the history of the Mongol Empire was predominantly recorded by the vanquished, and filtered by religious ideology. Nomads were often judged on the premise of being pagan infidels and presented as harboring some kind of innate depravity. In 1240, the year before the Mongols crossed the Carpathians into Hungary, the renowned English monk of St. Albans, Matthew Paris, described the Mongols as "the detestable people of Satan who were 'inhuman and Beastly, rather Monsters than men, thirsting for and drinking blood, tearing and devouring the flesh of Dogges and Men.'"<sup>3</sup>

Such typecasting was not limited to the Mongols. The Roman soldier Ammianus Marcellinus described the Mongols' predecessors, the Huns, as "so prodigiously ugly and bent that they might be two legged animals, or the figures crudely carved from stumps which are seen on the parapets of bridges." Of the nomadic way of life, he wrote: "They have no home or law, or settled manner of life but wander like refugees in the wagons in which they live. In these their wives weave their filthy clothing, mate with their husbands, give birth to their children and rear them to the age of puberty. As late as the seventeenth century some Europeans still believed the myth—as recounted by the

French traveler Beauplan—that Tatar babies were born with their eyes closed, like dogs.

On the other hand, the achievements of the Mongols, military and otherwise, have been widely lauded as evidence of a highly sophisticated and worldly people. The Mongols created not only the largest contiguous land empire in history but an empire that, despite the terror it raised, initiated broad social programs, showed remarkable religious and cultural tolerance, and ushered in a relatively stable era of economic prosperity. During Khubilai's reign over China he attempted to introduce public schooling, encouraged the widespread use of paper money (which was later used as a model by his Mongol counterparts in the Ilkhanate of Persia and the Golden Horde in Russia), provided grain for widows and orphans, and instigated the development of granaries across the country to ensure against famine and natural disasters. He set up governmental institutions to protect and promote the interests of traders, artisans, farmers, and religious faiths, and he used some of the tributes collected from conquered lands for state projects, such as the extension of the Grand Canal—a venture that never fully succeeded but employed an estimated three million laborers.

Mongols also administered urban centers of culture and commerce that are inconsistent with assumptions that Mongols—as uncultured “barbarian” nomads—conquered and ruled exclusively from the saddle. The purpose-built capital of the Golden Horde, Sarai, which lay on the Volga River, was a flourishing city exhibiting paved streets, mosques, palaces, caravansaries, and running water supplied by aqueducts. Khubilai's capital in China, Khanbalikh (also known as Ta-tu or Dadu), was symbolic of the way Mongol rulers amalgamated the diverse cultures, beliefs, and skills of the domains. In it were built a shrine for Confucians, an altar with Mongolian soil and grass from the steppes, and buildings of significant Chinese architectural influence. As historian Morris Rossabi points out, Khubilai “sought the assistance of Persian astronomers and physicians, Tibetan Buddhist monks” and “Central Asian [Muslim] soldiers.” One can only imagine it must have been a city of grand cosmopolitan dimensions.

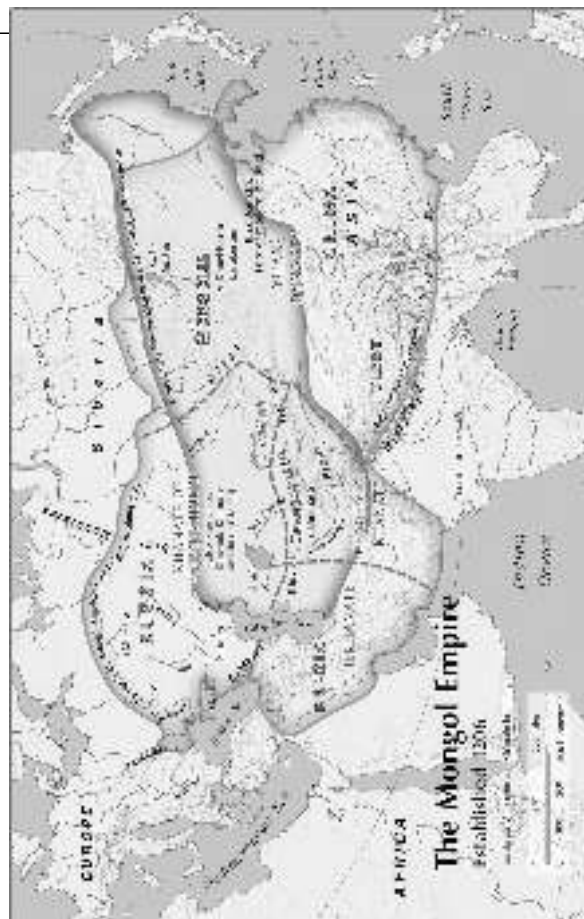
To me, these two somewhat conflicting portraits—the cruel barbarians bent on wanton destruction versus the empire builders with governing and administrative genius—were surely two sides of the same coin. But time and again I reflected that neither image bore relation to the hospitable herdsman and herdswomen I had met in the Gobi.

Whenever a map of the world was in front of me, I couldn't help but be beguiled by the vast swaths of fenceless land at the heart of Eurasia that stretched from Mongolia to the Danube River in the heart of eastern Europe. The history of empires aside, who were the people who had once roamed across this land? What must their lives have been like? What would it have been like for a young Mongol man to climb into the saddle and ride halfway across the world into Europe?

It was in 2001, about six months after arriving back home from my cycling expedition, that it first occurred to me to ride a horse across the steppe. Over time, the idea took shape and form, and I was excited by what appeared to be a very simple concept: using packhorses to carry my equipment, and camels where necessary, I would start from the former capital of the Mongol Empire, Kharkhorin (also called Karakorum), and make my way west through the heart of the Eurasian steppe until I reached the Danube. While this was a similar route to that taken a thousand years earlier by the Mongols under Genghis Khan and his successors, it wasn't my intention to follow any one trail, and I was not interested in visiting old battlegrounds, following a warpath, or even venturing to cities in the sedentary nations that once had been vassals of the Mongols. By climbing into the saddle, I wanted to discover the human face of the nomadic cultures, which seemed to have been lost in so many of the superlative-filled histories. The end goal of my journey, the Danube, represented the western boundary of the Mongol Empire, but more important, it was the very western fringe of the steppe, and therefore the end of the traditional nomad world.

From the beginning of my planning I was very conscious that I wasn't the first traveler to attempt ~~ride by horse across the Eurasian steppe. Apart from the untold thousands or perhaps millions of nomads who had crisscrossed the steppe through time, there were several standout examples of intrepid Europeans who had made the journey at the peak of Mongol power.~~<sup>5</sup>





Among the more intriguing of these was a mysterious Englishman employed by the Mongols as chief diplomat and intelligence adviser. A renowned linguist, he had accompanied the Mongol army during the conquest of Hungary in 1241 and was eventually caught by the Austrians during the Mongolian siege of Wiener Neustadt—where, remarkably, he was recognized by Austrian royals from the arena of the Holy Crusades more than twenty years earlier.<sup>6</sup> Had the Englishman been given an opportunity to write about his experiences, he would have been uniquely qualified to present history from the point of view of a nomadic regime at the height of its power. Unfortunately, he was hanged in Vienna, and the only glimpse we have of his life is from the writings of a heretic French priest who survived the siege of Wiener Neustadt.

Shortly after the death of the Englishman came the first two European travelers to make it to Mongolia and back to Europe and write accounts of their experiences—Italian friar Giovanni di Plano Carpini and, later, Franciscan friar William of Rubruck.

Carpini, who set out in 1245 from France with the Pope's blessing, traveled first to Kiev, where he was told to leave his European-bred horses because "Tartars have neither straw nor hay nor fodder and they would all die." With various Mongolian entourages he carried on east through the steppes of what is Russia and Ukraine today, then onward to Mongolia through the Kazakh steppes, traveling an astonishing 3,000 km in just 106 days. No doubt still wrapped in the bandages that had apparently helped keep his body intact for such an exhausting ride, he arrived in the "Golden Tent" of the Khan in July 1246 and wrote:

So great was the size of the tent which was made of white fabric that we reckon it could hold more than 2,000 men ... they called us inside and give us ale because we did not like mares milk in the least: and so did us a great honor. But still they compelled us to drink so much that we could not stay at all sober, so we complained that this bothered us, but still they continued to force us.

Only five years after Carpini's miraculous return to Europe, William of Rubruck—on a mission to convert the Mongols to Christianity—set out on a route similar to Carpini's and became the first European to reach the capital of the Mongol Empire, Kharkhorin. His description of an animated debate that he participated in between representatives of the Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian faiths—and which was hosted by the khan—has gone down in legend.

Upon returning to Europe, both William and Carpini brought a wealth of information about the mysterious Mongolians, and their accounts are still a valuable resource offering historians and anthropologists a firsthand look at the inner workings of Mongolian society of the thirteenth century. It is also true, however, that as Dominican friars traveling from west to east, they inevitably interpreted the nomads and their way of life through the prism of their Catholic faith and their upbringing in sedentary Europe.

What I wanted to do on my journey was, in effect, the reverse. Leaving my Western baggage behind as much as possible, I wanted to start in Mongolia as an impressionable novice horseman, immerse myself in the lands and ways of the nomadic people, and travel steadily west to arrive at the far end of the steppe in Hungary, where I would try to view Europe firmly through a nomad's eyes.

In the twenty-first century a westward trajectory was all the more important for another crucial reason: the Eurasian steppe, and the western half in particular, was no longer the realm of nomads it once had been. In recent centuries the Russian Empire had reversed the trend of their subjugation and had come to dominate the vast bulk of steppe societies. The land between Kharkhorin and the Danube, albeit fenceless and much of it wild and remote, was now carved into modern states. To the west they included Hungary, Ukraine, and southern Russia, and in the east Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and those regions less relevant for my journey, western China and the Central Asian nations of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. With the exception of China these were countries emerging from the shadows of Soviet rule, during which the people had been largely uprooted from their traditional way of life.<sup>7</sup> Only Mongolia, as a satellite Communist state, had been spared the full brutal effects of Stalin's collectivization policy. Partly by virtue of this, and the inherently isolated nature of Mongolian geography, the Mongols had managed to retain a vibrant nomadic culture, whereas their cousins in countries to the West had lost theirs.

Given this reality, the purpose of my journey wasn't just to understand how nomad life had once been on the steppe. I wanted to know whether there were still living, breathing connections between the nomadic and formerly nomadic peoples now scattered across Eurasia. Were Hungarians, for example, conscious of their nomad roots at all?

Even more important, what had happened to the nomadic societies during the violent upheaval of Stalin's industrialization campaign, and what did the future hold for them in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union? In the long run, would the nomadic way of life survive?

To have any hope of recognizing living traces of nomad heritage, I first had to come to understand it. And in reality, that was what had led me to Mongolia in the first place.

**It was hard** to know how many hours had passed since the horses had been stolen, but eventually my faith in the journey, like the dullest of predawn light, began creeping back into the world. Still, I needed to do something. So I did what any modern adventurer might when in a bad situation: I picked up the satellite phone. The person I called for advice was my longtime friend Tseren in Ulaanbaatar.

"Well, Tim," she told me, "here in Mongolia we say that if you don't solve your problems before sunrise, then you will never solve them. You better get on that last remaining horse of yours and start looking!"

At 5:30 A.M. I pointed Bor into the pale hues of the eastern sky. Smoke had begun curling its way out from the outline of the nearest ger, and people were already emerging to milk the goats. Sitting high and straight in the saddle, I put on the most intimidating look I could muster and willed the horse into what I imagined was a gallop but was probably no more than a trot. As we approached the first ger, a large dog shot out, Bor reared, and I struggled to hold on as we followed it back the way it had come. Visits to other camps proved more elegant, but all brought little more than shrugs.

Then, around 8 km from camp, a woman waving from her ger caught my attention.

“Hello!” she called in English.

No sooner had I dismounted there came a herd of horses thundering over a rise, throwing clouds of dust into the path of the sun. Squinting hard, I could just make out the shape of two horses trailing behind, and beyond them a horseman. As he maneuvered the herd down toward us, I looked closer. More horses!

The herder, who was in fact the husband of this woman, approached, and I explained that two of those horses were mine.

“I know,” he said. “They came to me themselves this morning. You must have tied them *really* badly.”

In my poor Mongolian I asked him to explain how it was that my horses no longer had any halters or lead ropes. He shrugged. It was irrelevant now.

I was invited in to share a drink of fermented mare’s milk while new halters were made from rawhide. The herder sat on the dirt floor looking me over, then said something in Mongolian. “Tanilgui hun algiin chinee. Taniltai hun taliin chinee.”

With the help of a pocket dictionary I was able to translate: *A man without friends is as small as a palm. A man with friends is as big as the steppe.*

It was an old Mongolian adage, and in hindsight I would be left to wonder whether indeed the whole drama had been an intentional lesson. Gansukh even suggested that it could have been the original owners of my horses who had tracked me down and stolen them just to prove the truth of the warnings. Whatever the case, it didn’t really matter now.

With the horseman from the family riding by my side, I cut a trail through the lingering dew of the morning in high spirits. Somewhere during the search for my horses I had left my worries of the past twelve months behind. What mattered now was that my family was intact—I had been given a second chance—and I was returning to Kathrin and camp with two bits of newfound wisdom: if I camped alone I was fair game, and if I was to have any hope of making it another 100 km, let alone 10,000 km, my horses were not to be taken for granted.

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# THE LAST NOMAD NATION

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“To the mounted nomads who rode and resided along the Equestrian Equator [Eurasian steppe], possessions were for using, not hoarding. Life to them was a bridge; one should cross over it, not build a house on it.”

—CuChullaine O’Reilly, F.R.G.S.,  
 Founder of the Long Riders’ Guild

**As I came** riding back into camp with the reclaimed mounts, Kathrin emerged from the tent, her blond hair all wispy and her blue eyes aglow in the morning light. It was those eyes that had caught me on guard some nine months earlier. Two years older than I, she was a schoolteacher from Germany who had been living in Australia for a year to work and travel. We shared a passion for travel, and I’d been drawn at once to her down-to-earth humor and warmth. Our relationship got off to a quick start after she responded to an advertisement to rent one of the two bedrooms in the Melbourne apartment where I was living. For me, then twenty-four, it was the beginning of the most serious and important relationship of my life until that point, and in the time since we had met she had become the person who knew me better than anyone else probably ever had.

At the same time, it remained the case that our paths had crossed after I had set my sights on riding from Mongolia to Hungary. I had also long dreamed of traveling alone. Solo, I reasoned, I would be able to render myself more vulnerable, and therefore pledge a much greater trust in the humanity of strangers. With no familiar companion or culture to lean on, I would be forced to appeal to the better side of human beings no matter who they were. Doing so would offer me the kind of immersion—the landscape and in the lives of people—that I craved.

Kathrin was aware of my plan and initially did not intend to join me, but she probably didn’t expect the degree of my preoccupation in the intense six months of planning leading to departure. Kathrin felt neglected, and questioned at times what she was doing living with me, commenting that she might have been better off traveling around Australia, as had been her original plan.

Eventually we had decided to travel together for the first two months, until the end of August, when she was due to return to Germany to start a teaching job. It would be an opportunity to share this first part of the adventure and spend some precious time together after my prolonged “absence” at home.

Beyond these first two months together lay what I expected to be another sixteen months in Hungary, during which time we had rough plans for her to join me during her summer holidays. In the end, that’s not what prevailed. The following summer Kathrin would be diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, Cushing’s syndrome, triggered by a brain tumor that required surgery, and it would take me three and a half years to reach the Danube. By the time I was riding the last kilometer in the saddle, she would already be married. For the time being, though, that was all in the future.

Five days prior to the horse theft, Kathrin had emerged from a dusty van and dropped her bags on the dirt in the town of Kharkhorin—the once proud capital of the Mongol Empire that lies in the upper Orkhon River of Central Mongolia. The following morning her humor helped me through a rather shaky start when my horse, Bor, went into a spin as I tried to mount. In front of a crowd assembled

send us off, I fell forward with my butt up and my face planted in Bor's mane. When the horse calmed down I leaped to terra firma and followed Kathrin's lead in towing my horse on foot out of tow. Since then I had come to appreciate her presence and optimism, which made the trip's initial problems somewhat easier to bear.

**The misadventures of** our beginnings were hardly becoming of a journey in the spirit of the great horse people of the steppe. We could take heart, however, that we were setting out from a region of esteemed nomad heritage.

Even before the time of Genghis Khan, the upper Orkhon River valley—in which Kharkhorin was built—had been the fabled seat of imperial power for successive steppe empires. Such was the veneration felt for the Orkhon that the Turkic Gokturks, who reigned over much of Mongolia and Central Asia between the sixth and eighth centuries, believed that he who controlled the Orkhon region had a divine right to be grand leader of the Turkic tribes. Later the Uighurs—who at one stage claimed to rule from the Caspian Sea to Manchuria—usurped the Gokturks and built their own capital at Khar-Balgas, on the same site, the remains of which still lie just 30 km from Kharkhorin.

Part of the significance of the Orkhon lay in a belief that a special power resided in the sacred mountains through which the Orkhon meandered. A glimpse of a map provides a more obvious strategic importance. Draining the gentle foothills of the Khangai Mountains, the upper reaches of the Orkhon lie near the geographic heart of Mongolia, where the main east-west and north-south routes pass and the three dominant land types of the Eurasian steppe very nearly intermingle—the deserts to the south, the forests of the north, and the grasslands of the center. With a plentiful supply of water and its own relatively mild microclimate, the Orkhon River valley transforms in late spring and early summer into a carpet of olivegreen grasslands where all five of the prized types of steppe livestock—horses, bovines (yak, cattle), sheep, goats, and camels, the five known collectively in Mongolian as *tavan tolgoi mal*—are grazed in abundance. In particular, the horse has always thrived here, roaming in the kind of free-running herds that one might imagine existed before its domestication. As such, the Orkhon has always been a cradle of the quintessential nomadic, pastoralist way of life once aspired to by peoples across the steppe.

Befitting a man who would create an empire that overshadowed all others on the steppe before him, Genghis not only designated the upper Orkhon the administrative capital but fought here one of the most important battles of his long path to consolidating power.<sup>1</sup>

In 1204, as the ruler of the tribes in the eastern half of Mongolia, Genghis had become aware of a plot against him by enemies in the west—the powerful Naiman tribe, which had formed an allegiance with, among others, his childhood friend turned archenemy, Jamukha. In anticipation of attack, Genghis rallied an army in the spring and set out west in a daring preemptive campaign. To reach the vicinity of modern-day Kharkhorin, they had ridden across vast distances, risking their horses becoming fatigued at a time of year when pasture was scarce and all livestock were at their weakest. His men were also greatly outnumbered by the enemy, who were under command of the leader of the Naimans, Tayang Khan.

Using tactics that would become associated with the Mongol Empire for centuries to come, Genghis ordered that every man light several campfires at night, therefore fooling the enemy as to the true size of his army. In the future, the Mongol army would also go to the additional effort of placing human-like dummies on reserve horses, thereby appearing to be at least two or three times their real number.

When scouts brought word of Genghis's advance to Tayang Khan, the Naiman leader considered retreating to the more familiar territory of the Altai Mountains in the west. Had the Naimans followed

through, Genghis and his men would have had to pursue them for about 1,000 km, which could have proven disastrous given the weakened condition of their horses. However, Tayang Khan's son, Kuchlug, dismissed the idea as cowardly and convinced his father to commit to battle.

It was a fatal decision. The Naimans were cut down in vast numbers, Tayang Khan was mortally wounded, and Kuchlug, together with Jamukha, fled west into what is modern-day eastern Kazakhstan where they were eventually hunted down.

Following defeat of the Naimans and the subsequent folding of the western tribes, Genghis Khan, now forty-three years old, was both reaching the end of a lifetime of struggle to unify the tribes of the Mongolian plateau and on the cusp of founding the Mongol Empire.<sup>2</sup> To come this far Genghis had overcome almost unthinkable odds. Twelfth-century Mongolia, into which he had been born, was a land engulfed in perpetual conflict as nomad tribes of mixed Mongol and Turkic origin engaged in a long-age-old series of tit-for-tat raids, as well as broader power struggles that were defined by ever-shifting alliances and an endless narrative of revenge and betrayal.

Genghis, originally known as Temujin, was a member of the Borjigin clan, which practiced a mix of hunting and pastoralism in the northern reaches of Mongolia where the southern rim of the vast Siberian taiga, the coniferous belt of subarctic forest, greets the open steppe.<sup>3</sup> Around the time of Genghis's birth, his father, Yesugei, was known to have killed a chief from an enemy tribe, the Tatars—in fact, it is believed Yesugei named his newborn Temujin after the slain Tatar.<sup>4</sup>

It was a killing that would have consequences.

When Temujin was but nine, Yesugei was poisoned by Tatars and died. Temujin's widowed mother, Hoelun, was abandoned by the other Borjigin families, beginning a tenuous existence in which Temujin fought with his elder kin to become head of the family, narrowly escaped violent raids, and experienced multiple spells in captivity.

Genghis Khan—whose new self-chosen title approximately translates to “grand leader of all”—had dealt with many enemies since that time. It was emblematic of how far he had come that just three years prior to the defeat of the Naimans, in 1201, he had exacted revenge on the Tatars, wiping them out as a future threat. According to various sources, male Tatars were put to the slaughter and the survivors distributed among other various tribes. And although the term *Tatar* has endured to the present as a general term for nomad people of the Eurasian steppe, European visitors to the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth century were told that the Tatars had once been a people, but that the Mongols had conquered them.

On a personal level for Genghis, the Upper Orkhon valley must have been a gratifying vantage point from which to survey this remarkable path to ascendancy. To the north and east among the mixed forest, mountains, and steppe lay his spiritual home, where he had spent his formative years and proven his ability as a charismatic leader. Southward from the upper Orkhon stretched the Gobi Desert, which spoke more of future aspirations. It was home to various nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples, including the Uighurs, from whom Genghis would eventually borrow a script for his previously illiterate tribe. Beyond all that sand and arid steppe also lay China—a land of immeasurable riches that would be the first in his sights once Mongolia had been consolidated. Genghis would eventually die in 1227, after falling from a horse during one of many campaigns to conquer his southerly neighbor.

For a shrewd leader such as Genghis Khan, though, who frequently implied that his rule was mandated by Tengri, the great god of the sky, it was the symbolic importance of conquering the upper Orkhon that would have been at the front of his mind. As long as he held sway over the Orkhon, he would have both an omnipresence among nomads that would help to keep the Mongolian tribes in unity and a strategic gateway to the corners of his growing empire.

Such was the significance of the conquest of the Naimans in the Orkhon River valley, in fact, that just two years later, in 1206, he had the confidence to declare himself the leader of the Mongols, or more specifically, “The leader of all those who dwell in felt tents.” Steppe history is complex, but of everything I’d read, it was this line about felt tents that gave my journey its primary sense of direction and purpose. Understood in the context of the modern day, this reference would only include Mongolians and a few scattered nomads in China, Russia, Kazakhstan, and other former states of Soviet Central Asia. In the thirteenth century, however, it would have applied to the plethora of nomadic tribes that inhabited the Eurasian steppe. While the vast majority of these nomads would never have heard of Genghis Khan or the Mongol tribes at that time, the unification of the Mongols was to lay the foundation for an empire that would eventually encompass the steppe as far as the Danube and fulfill Genghis’s audacious claim to sovereignty.

Therein lay my journey: I wanted to ride from the symbolic cradle of Mongolian nomadism, where Kharkhorin still stands, through countries and cultures that shared a landmass and a common way of life. The end goal of my journey, the Danube, not only represented one of the approximate boundaries of the Mongol Empire but, more important, the very edge of the steppe, and therefore the farthest people who ever lived in felt tents.

**In 1204 Genghis Khan** might have been able to unite the warring tribes of Mongolia, but eight centuries later on the same land, Kathrin and I were content to successfully navigate our way out of the horse-theft valley intact. We spent the night camped hidden between the folds of some hills, waking regularly to check on our trio. At dawn the shadows, like our fears of thieves, began to retreat, but the sunrise only seemed to illuminate the scale of the task at hand.

In this first leg of the journey there lay approximately 1,400 km of steppe, desert, and mountains to the Altai Mountains in the far west of the country, and horse rustling was just one element of the greater challenge. To see out a single day safely we needed to learn to see other, less obvious threats, such as an ill-fitting saddle that could fast injure a horse. Without supplementary feed such as grain and hay, we knew one of our main tasks would be learning to recognize and search out grasses that were nutritious for the horses, not to mention learning steppe etiquette and mastering riding. Viewed in this light, the coming three months of summer were a narrow window to earn my nomadic credentials. Beyond Mongolia, if I made it, I would face the less forgiving conditions of winter and the prospect of countries where nomadic life and wisdom had long been in decline.

At the heart of the steep learning curve was coming to terms with the nature of the horse. Although all Mongolian breeds are stocky animals that survive the winters by digging through the snow to find feed, they apparently fell into two broad categories. The first included horses with a calm temperament; these were known as *nomkhon*. The second comprised wild, untamed horses that could nevertheless tolerate humans. Two of our horses—my old white gelding, Bor, and the chestnut gelding, Sartai Zeerd (the name meant “moon crescent chestnut”), were definitely of the latter variety. Just the touch of a brush or a blanket could send them into a wild display of bucking and rearing, or pig rooting—an Australian expression that describes the behavior of a horse when it kicks out with its hind legs while keeping the head down and forelegs planted. Grooming, blanketing, and saddling each morning were therefore nerve-racking procedures. Packing the gear was another art unto itself. Even a small difference in weight between the pack boxes could risk saddle sores and injuries. The boxes subsequently had to be meticulously weighed using hand scales before being hoisted up onto our little bay gelding, Kheer, who by virtue of his calmer nature had become our designated packhorse.

A year would pass before I had learned enough to begin taking the rigors of riding and horse care in stride, and in these first few days it required all our energy and focus just to cope with getting from

one camp to the next. The situation wasn't helped by a regime of night watch shifts that Kathrin and I had decided on. Nonetheless, the predatory feeling to the land did seem to fade with each passing day, and as the horses tired, they became slightly more agreeable.

After a week of straight riding, I found myself reawakening to the romance of the land and settling into a rhythm that was intimately involved with the moods of summer. Casting off from camp down onto a wide treeless plain on what was our twelfth day out from Kharkhorin, I felt the sun's early rays gently warming us from behind, while the pink hues of the western sky gradually flooded with incandescent blue. Ahead and around us the steppe spread out in vast sheets of luminescent green, appearing utterly empty until the sun revealed the white flecks of gers nestled at the base of tall mountains on the plain's perimeter. The agent for the changing of the guard from morning to middle was a breeze that came whispering over the young, supple summer grass, bringing a sort of cloud of the shadows of which bent and twisted gracefully over the curvature of the earth. Also drifting across this sea-like grandeur were nomad riders sitting high in the saddle, their horses' legs a blur.

In a pattern that would become familiar, the climbing heat of mid-morning coincided with a rising symphony of cicadas and the melting of the horizon into a haze. Herds of cattle, yaks, sheep, and goats disappeared in search of shade and water, and at the sun's zenith, when the temperature exceeded 30°C, the few horses we passed stood nodding their heads and swishing their tails. Nomad camps meanwhile, appeared abandoned and lonely. Swept up in pungent clouds of dust and fine particles of dried animal dung, the only sign of movement came from foals lying flat, tied to tether lines, and by woolly guard dogs that lay low in whatever sliver of shadow they could find.

Come late afternoon, the sun had burned a path from our backs over our left shoulders and now dangled from the western sky before our eyes. Like the incoming tide, herds converged and piles of smoldering dung were placed around camps, keeping the swarms of mosquitoes at bay. Looking for a place to spend the night, we fixed our course on two nearly imperceptible gers that lay below a rounded peak in the distance.

By the time we reached the gers, the land was basking in golden evening light and the family camp had been watching us through a spyglass for a couple of hours. Even before we could dismount, children came running with fresh bowls of yogurt, directing us to a place where we could set up our tent. While the horses were taken to a spring-fed trough, a team of young and old descended to help us unpack.

Ever since the horse-thieving incident we had been somewhat wary when it came to getting to know the people, but imbued with the magic of the day's ride, we happily surrendered. Our ensuing stay became typical of much of our time among nomads in the coming months, but particularly characteristic of central Mongolia, with its abundance of animals and summer dairy production.

With about eight pairs of helping hands, our tent was soon set up and the family piled in. An elderly man wearing a silky green *deel*—the universal long cloak of the nomads, fastened at the waist with a tightly bound sash—inspected the zips, fabric, and poles, then lay down on its floor as if he were a prospective buyer. Next he inventoried our horse tack and was particularly fascinated by our saddles and rope halters. Much to his disbelief, we had come riding in without a bit in the horses' mouths, instead using a rein tied to the rope halter. This was a technique the Watson family—who had given both of us our crash course in horsemanship—had encouraged us to do because it allowed the horses to eat and drink freely. The old man shook his head and waved his finger at this bitless riding technique, and was equally unhappy about the packsaddle with its heavy boxes. Horses were considered the aristocrats of the steppe, and by loading mine with deadweight, treating it as a beast of burden, I was breaking an ancient taboo. Today, just as in the time of Genghis Khan, horses were used only for riding, the task of haulage strictly delegated to camels, cattle, and yaks.



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