

MONGOLIAN

Horse Riding Adventure

PROFILE



TEXT AND
PHOTOS BY

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Legend

1. View of Lapis Sky Camp (photo credit Peter Danelo)
2. At *Naadam*, dressed in our Sunday best in *Deels*
3. High Ho, Brownie! Away!

July this year, I joined a Mongolian horse trek organised by National Geographic and had the adventure of my life. Although there were many Mongolian horse riding tours available, I chose the tour by National Geographic as their website stated “no riding experience is required”.

With six hours of horse riding lessons under my belt, I boarded a plane to Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia. From there, I joined 13 other adventurers on a 400-odd km bus ride to Lapis Sky Camp, which was located in a protected area in the Bulgan *sum* (district) of the Arkhangai *aimag* (province) in the mountain steppes of Outer Mongolia.

We got off the bus, picked up our backpacks and started to descend into the valley. As our campsite came into view, I teared up, moved by the beauty of the place.

“Okay, folks,” our guide, Thomas Kelly, said. “We are officially off the grid.”

For the next seven days, there would be no electricity and Internet or phone connection, except via the satellite phone meant for emergencies. We would live among the nomads, like the nomads, who rely on solar panels to power their television and lamps and charge their electrical devices. Our bathing and part of our drinking water would come from the river that flowed next to our campsite, sterilised via boiling, and our *ger* (a traditional Mongolian

tent) would be warmed up by wood stoves. The daytime temperatures ranged from 20 to 30 degrees Celsius and could drop to 0 degrees at night. I heard it has even snowed there before in the middle of summer.

“Great,” one of my group mates said. “Now we can argue all night.” What he meant, though, was that with no Internet, arguments would be won by logic, and not settled abruptly by someone checking the facts on the Web.

We were soon introduced to our horses, brought from the nearby valleys by their horsemen who would take care of us over the next week. Mine was a chestnut gelding. Like the rest of the Mongolian horses, he was small, sturdy, strong and fearless. He reminded me of an English butler: he was professional and did his job but didn't fraternise



with me. Over the next seven days, my respect and affection for this horse grew. I marvelled at how he carried me over mountain passes, rivers and streams, nary missing a step or slowing, his ankles never turning, and never complained.

My travel mates joked that he was the overachieving horse with an underachieving rider. Not feeling really confident about riding at the start of the trip, I was sort of cantering by default by the end of it. Brownie, which was what I decided to name him (Mongolian horses are usually not given names), didn't like being at the back of the pack or separated from the rest of the herd because of his slow rider (namely me), so he would fly and I would hang on. My heart would be in my throat, but, that was truly one of the most joyous, exhilarating experiences of my life. On the last day of our ride, when I knew I would probably never see my steed again, I asked Dawanym, my horseman, for

a memento of Brownie. He yanked a few strands of hair from Brownie's tail for me. Holding those strands now is a tangible reminder that it wasn't all a dream.

On some mornings before we rode, we would visit the nomads who lived in the valley. Although their work is endless, herding and milking the yaks, mares and goats several times a day, they would warmly welcome us into their *gers* if we came a-knocking. We would be offered *airag* (fermented horse milk) and *aaruul* (dried curds), or a treat of *khailmag* (caramelised clotted cream). A bowl of *arkhi* (homemade moonshine) with an alcohol content of 3% to 12%, made by distilling the *airag*, would then be passed around three times. Each guest is expected to sip, or better yet, empty the bowl, which will be promptly refilled. Singing then follows. The nomads love to sing and we each took turns after drinking. We visitors felt a little shy, even after the alcohol, but were

gently coaxed into rendering a tune, from *God Save the Queen* by Fiona from England to the Hwa Chong Junior College school song sung by my Singaporean travel mate, to loud applause for the exotic sounding Chinese song. What a lovely way to start the day.

We were so lucky to be in Mongolia in July, when the festival *eriin gурvan naadam*, which translates to "the three games of men", or *naadam*, is celebrated, as it has been for centuries. The three games are archery, Mongolian wrestling and horse racing. On that day we rode 10 km from our valley to the nearest town to witness the celebration. We were all given *Deels* (traditional Mongolian clothes) to wear and it felt very festive donning the outfit. Initially, two of the young men in our group wanted to sign up to participate in the wrestling, but later changed their minds. We realised the wisdom of this when we saw the heft of the competitors upon our arrival at the festival grounds; our guys might have been creamed.

Another treat for our group was the chance to meet and speak with a shaman, a religious figure who is supposed to have the ability to communicate with the souls of the ancestors. Since recovering from Soviet domination after the 1990s, a period when the Communists wiped out many of Mongolia's records and physical traces of its past, the shamanic practices allow Mongolians to communicate with the spirit of their distant ancestors and hear fragmented stories about their lives in the past.

Occasionally I still dream that I am there, waking to the sound of a yak munching grass outside my *ger* or walking to the outhouse in the middle of the freezing night under a blanket of stars.

Do visit Mongolia before too long. Mongolia's vast steppe is home to the world's last surviving nomadic culture, and I sense fragility to that timelessness. ♦

