

# THE STEPPES OF UNBRIDLED JOY

Lured by the idea of galloping across an unlimited expanse of land, Mavis Teo joins a horse-riding camp in Mongolia and has an unforgettable experience





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A HORSE AND THE SPACE TO RUN FREE”**



**I**n the soft afternoon sun that filters through the foliage, wood chips kicked up by hooves look like sprinkles of fairy dust in an enchanted forest. After having stood patiently in a small clearing while saddles and equipment are packed on them, our horses are raring to go. We set off, waving goodbye to the nomads in the Darkhad Valley in Gorkhi-Terelj National Park, 90 minutes away from Ulaanbaatar by car.

Our departure must have been quite a sight. Over 20 horses are spread out on grasslands fringed by mountains of larch and pine forests. Some are saddled with camping equipment, some are running bare and loose while others have riders on them. The riders are a motley crew of different nationalities, riding abilities and professions. Among the guests, there are two university professors,

a banker and a diplomat. There are also two brave souls who have signed up for this 10-day horse-riding camp with Stone Horse Expeditions despite having very little riding experience.

All of us, however, are animal and nature lovers who are seduced by the idea of spending time in Mongolia’s remote vastness and connecting with wildlife. Since it was on horses that Genghis Khan and his army had set off to conquer much of Asia pushing as far as Austria, seeing the country from the back of a horse seems like the way to go. Because we are on the move, we will sleep in tents every night (save for one night at a ger camp). Although we cannot be further removed from the usual references of luxury travel, such as Frette bed linen or even a bathtub, the experience proves to be priceless.

**From top left:** Rock formations fringe the Baruun Bayngiin Gol Valley; the Black Lichen Lake in the Khan Khentii Strictly Protected Area is connected to the Gorkhi-Terelj National Park and is covered in Stone Horse Expeditions’ longer trips



Clockwise from right: A herder's winter campsite in the Dund Bayangol Valley; the riders enjoy snacks and drinks before dinner, moving the table and chairs into a communal tent when the air turns nippy; a horse relieved of its rider and saddle, takes a siesta under a tree



ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME

Throughout the 250km we cover over eight days of riding (the first and last days are for packing and unpacking), we are exposed to diverse landscapes and wildlife. On our first afternoon, we trot through a sandy plain that seems bereft of life. Then we pass over a ridge and suddenly, like a piece of theatre, another world opens up. This one is lush and green with bleating sheep and grazing cows.

Another morning we canter up and trot down an undulating valley full of wildflowers of all colours imaginable. The alpine air is pungent with edelweiss and sweet grass crushed by the hooves of the horses. We ford rivers, climb hills and thread through forests, filling our pockets with pine cones to throw at one another – just like children. Spotting a marmot gets us excited every time. Silence falls on the group when we see a grizzly's paw print in the woods, suddenly mindful of the dangers that lurk behind these magical scenes. We forget quickly when we see a herd of horses in a glade, manes and tails flapping in the wind. I feel giddy with happiness after every long gallop.

By the fourth day, even the beginner riders are confident enough to sit through a canter (Stone Horse's western-style saddles allow them to sit more securely), while the

experienced riders are galloping at every opportunity. Choosing the right operator is important. Sabine Schmidt and her husband Keith Swenson are the team behind Stone Horse Expeditions, who have more than 30 years of experience running wilderness expeditions and conservation programmes around the world. Their 18 years in Mongolia means an in-depth knowledge of the terrain. Guiding us on this trip are Sabine, who makes the saddles, and three Mongolian staff. So far, there's nothing our curious minds can ask about the land that the very well-read German-born Sabine, who has a PhD in earth sciences, doesn't know.

BEYOND THE ORDINARY

While Mongolia's population is sparse, her history is rich. In the Dzuun Valley, Sabine tells us stories of Mongolia's history, pointing out burial mounds erected during the Bronze Age. She also leads us to the ruins of Princess Temple built in 1740 in memory of a Manchurian princess married to a Mongolian king.

Although lunch is simple – usually a picnic of cold cuts, bread and dried fruits, breakfast and dinner are quite grand. With German precision, Sabine serves every cooked meal on time, turning out flavourful lentil curry one day and moreish Mexican fajitas the next. As if she can read our minds, Mongolian stir-fried noodles appear on the table when we start craving Asian food. There is minimum wastage. Leftover diced cucumber and tomato go into our omelettes the next morning. After restocking at the ger camp, Sabine makes a hearty beef goulash that night which we polish off with rice and sautéed root vegetables.

PHOTOS: STONE HORSE EXPEDITIONS



Conversations flow with bottles of an easy red that she has carefully packed according to a dietary restriction and wine preference list that guests submit beforehand. When the wine runs out before the end of the trip (because there are people who turn out to be much heavier drinkers that they admitted on the list), there is a Klean Kanteen of Scotch.

After she’s done with her chores, Sabine joins in our conversations. She keeps us city folks enthralled with her adventures in Antarctica where she met her husband, and regales us with past antics of the horses, hounds and horsemen whom we get to know better on the trip. We learn that Byambaa is an excellent singer, and off-season, Hundag goes home to the west to help his herder parents comb and collect wool from their cashmere goats. The fibres are bundled with other herders’ production and sent overseas to the processing plants of brands possibly the likes of Loro Piana and Hermès.

Post-dinner, we sometimes linger outside our tents under Mongolia’s canopy of stars. But on most nights, we go straight to bed. On the first night, we hear wolves howling and sleep fitfully. Sabine assures us the next morning that they are actually hiding far away in forested mountains, steering clear of humans in numbers. Some nights, we fall asleep lulled by a brook’s babbling and the sonorous snoring of horses, and occasionally, their chomping on grass right outside our tents. Relaxed horses means there is no imminent danger.

BORN FREE, RUN WILD

After a few days of travelling on our steeds, we imagine ourselves to be born for a life with nature. “I think I can live this way,” I declare, “I don’t need a lot to be happy. Just give me a horse and the space to run free.” Heads bob in agreement, in tandem with the riders’ trotting horses.

Returning every summer seems more practical for a city girl from the tropics than moving to Mongolia. Especially if the temperature in Mongolia nosedives from the 20s to single digits at night, even in August. On some days, the sun is out in full force making it a must to plaster on SPF50 sunscreen and a relief to wash under a makeshift shower strung from trees by the wranglers (with tarpaulin walls to protect our modesty) or bathe in a stream. After sunset, we pile on the layers. The next morning, we wake up to find a film of frost on our tents.



WHY YOU SHOULD GO TO MONGOLIA IN 2020

If the land of the blue skies is on your bucket list, think about making the trip soon as tourist numbers are expected to rise in the near future. “The New Ulaanbaatar International Airport is projected to open in May 2020,” says Surenbaatar Nergui, Director of Business Development at Juulchin World Tours (juulchinworld.mn), Mongolia’s largest travel agency.

With this opening, there will be more direct flights into the capital. More highways are also expected to be ready in 2020, improving accessibility to rural areas. In the meantime, tour operators like Juulchin World Tours, which owns luxury ger camps in Gorkhi-Terelj National Park and Orkhon Valley, are expanding on experiences offered to tourists. Besides horse-riding expeditions in Terelj, Stone Horse Expeditions (stonehorsemongolia.com) also runs Gobi Desert tours and conservation trips to Khan Khentii Strictly Protected Area.

Returning is something we talk about a lot. “I rode elsewhere one summer and I found myself thinking of Mongolia throughout the trip,” says the banker from Hong Kong who has ridden with Stone Horse Expeditions four times in five years. And most of Stone Horse’s clients are repeat ones, booking for the next season in advance.

As we thread through our last pine forest in the trip, Byambaa who has repeatedly shied from our requests for a folk song, starts to sing softly, his spirits lifted by the prospect of seeing his young family. Encouraged by the palpable silence of approval from around, his voice soars. We don’t understand a word, yet it resonates with us. We imagine his song sailing across a sea of grass. Our hearts swell to become as expansive as the vistas we have galloped across, and we want to relive this feeling. 📷



Clockwise from top left: Panoramas of Mongolia’s landscapes are everywhere, giving keen shutterbugs plenty of photo opportunities; Stone Horse Expeditions’ trips are usually accompanied by one of their dogs to round up stray horses and humans who have wandered off; Princess Ger Camp where the riders spend a night in traditional Mongolian gers