

# Six Hundred Miles



# for Children's Smiles

## *Former international endurance rider Susi Sadler takes us through the Mongol Derby 2010*

After much planning, a huge fundraising effort and lots of press and publicity, not to mention many hours running and riding to get physically fit, it was finally time to pack my bags and head for Outer Mongolia, the venue for the second-ever Mongol Derby. The Derby is a 600-mile horse race, ridden on local horses, which revives the ancient postal system of Genghis Khan, attracting adventure-seeking riders from all over the globe.

A fall while breaking in my part-bred Akhal Teke horse, Rudi, and the extensive facial surgery needed to make a recovery, had inspired me to enter the world's longest, toughest horse race and raise money for Operation Smile. I'm glad to report that I'm still here, and I smashed my £5,000 target; raising over £6,100, enough to pay for forty children to receive life-changing cleft palate surgery.

It was with very mixed emotions that I packed my bags. I was incredibly proud that I had reached my fundraising target but the fear had set in the day before I left, when a quick trip to the supermarket to stock up on last-minute essentials had precipitated a near full-on panic attack. No amount of training, preparation, list-writing, bag packing and kit-weighing was going to help me feel any more prepared. Could I really ride six hundred miles in a week? On semi-wild horses? With no back-up and only five kilos of kit? I was about to find out...

Arriving in Mongolia, I was pleased to discover I wasn't the only one wondering what I'd got myself in for. The start camp, a day's bus ride on unmade roads from the capital Ulaan Bataar, was alive with a mixture of competitive pride, last-minute nerves, excitement, enthusiasm and fear (as well as the odd bout of dried-sheep-for-dinner-related nausea). While we packed and re-packed our tiny saddle bags, sorted and prioritised essential items of underwear, first aid, pain relief, energy food, sleeping bags, electrolytes—and in one case, make-up—we compared notes on fitness regimes, riding experience and navigational know-how.



*supper of noodles, goat meat and  
sour milk 'biscuits'*

For those who were feeling the pre-race nerves, the best way to prepare for the following day's mass start was partying with the locals into the wee hours. A goat was cooked on the open fire, and soon everyone was enjoying the traditional Mongolian 'hospitality' which, of course, involves the two main staples of the Mongol diet: vodka and airag (airag is an alcoholic drink made from fermented mares' milk, drunk by the bowlful and is definitely what you would call an 'acquired taste').

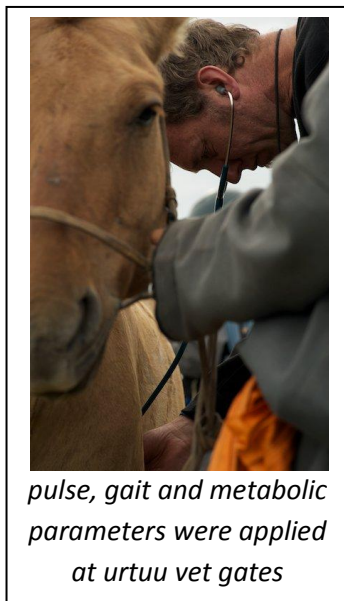
At dawn the next day, riders weighed in, to ensure we wouldn't be too heavy for our sturdy but diminutive mounts. All the horses had a final vet inspection and it was time to hit the Steppe. We had a healthy respect for our semi-wild mounts and the serious environment we were heading into. We'd had a sharp reminder just two days before, when one of our number had taken a fall on the first practice ride, breaking her collarbone and destroying her Derby dreams. Not only could a fall in the middle of the Steppe result in serious injury, but we could be hours from the emergency medical team and, as we were reminded in our briefing

(in between instructions on how to re-set a broken femur and stem arterial bleeding), help would only be on its way if we could stay conscious long enough to press the emergency button on our satellite tracking devices. Even if one was lucky enough to be unhurt in a fall, we quickly discovered that catching a loose horse in the middle of a vast, unfenced wilderness can provide many hours of entertainment; not always what you want when you're racing the clock to get to shelter, food and water before sundown. Despite being the only rider in the race to wear a body protector for the entire race, I think it was more by luck than by judgement that I managed not to have a single fall. I was still very glad of my KAN though, which did a fabulous job of distributing the weight of my rucksack across my back and preventing sore shoulders, which I know some riders suffered from badly.

The Mongol horses might not have been big (standing anywhere between 12 and 14 hands) but what they lacked in size they made up for in resilience. I rode twenty-seven of them in the course of the race (run over forty-kilometre sections with a fresh horse for each leg) and, despite many having a distinct lack of brakes and/or steering, every one was quick on his feet, tough, feisty and perfectly adapted to his natural environment. I rode exclusively geldings and stallions, since the Mongols prefer to keep mares for breeding and milk and only an exceptionally talented mare will be produced for the national sport: horse racing. I left with an immense respect for these horses, who not only tolerated our strange saddles, our unusual western riding style and our lack of navigational ability (taking them up mountains, through rivers and deserts, over rocky ground, through bogs and across grassland pitted with gerbil and marmot-holes) but also carried us willingly, and often at great speed, always bringing us safely to the next 'uurtu' (horse station).

Most nights we made it to an uurtu before riding hours (daybreak to sunset) expired and, after the horses passed the final vetting, we were welcomed into a local herding family's home: a wonderfully well-insulated, felt-lined yurt called a 'ger'. Here we would be presented with the best home-cooked food the family could offer, often noodles with goat meat or mutton, cooked in a big flat pan on the stove which took central place in the ger, warming us as the outside temperatures dropped. Despite, or perhaps because of, frequent offers of vodka (it's exceptionally rude to turn it down!) we were often tucked up in our sleeping bags on the ger floor by 9pm, catching some well-earned rest before another 5am start.

There is nothing quite like waking up, having slept no more than a few hours on a hard wood or earth floor, accompanied by a range of creepy crawlies (mostly grasshoppers, often moths and beetles and occasionally spiders) to see the ger door open on to the vast open landscape of the Steppe. It took my breath away every single day. Ablutions were basic to say the least; a hole in the ground sufficed, but dignity was protected by a three-sided construction of wood or plastic that, if you were lucky, came up to thigh-height. Water is a scarce resource, and not to be wasted; baby-wipes, on the other hand, became extremely valuable. I can't explain the joy on the one night we arrived at an uurtu to find it had a tin bath, and a fellow rider lent me a bar of soap to wash my feet and socks! On one very memorable occasion I jumped fully clothed into a large, fast flowing river to refresh myself on one of the hottest days (over 40°C) only to see the Derby's resident Mongol racehorse expert standing on the bank with a sachet of shampoo. Heaven!



*pulse, gait and metabolic parameters were applied at urtuu vet gates*



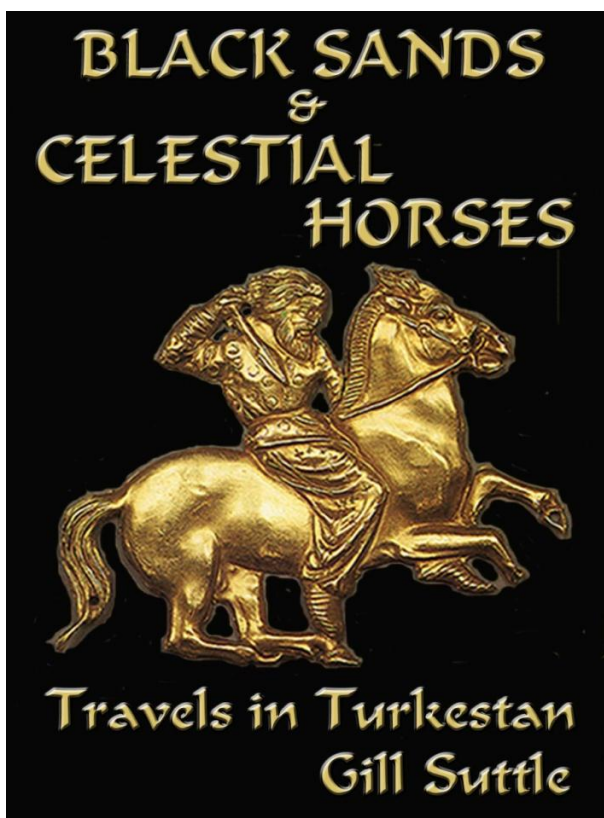
In the competitive environment of the race, navigation was crucial. Saying that, I don't think there was a single rider who can claim to have ridden the whole race without having got lost or taken a wrong turn at least once. For my part I ended up riding up and over rocky mountains when the flat valley would have taken me to my destination with half the time and effort; through a verdant valley littered with boulders and into a birch forest so thick I had to dismount to help my horse climb through the undergrowth; and several kilometres out of my way in the

scorching heat of the desert to find a well which, when we arrived, had no water left in it.

The challenges of the Derby were immense. Having lost half of one day to the aforementioned birch forest, and as a result covering an extra forty kilometres, we were still twenty kilometres from the uurtu when the heavens opened with a freezing storm and the sky lit up with immense bolts of lightning. On another occasion I found myself stranded in a range of rocky mountains with a lame horse and no option but to get off and lead him the remaining thirteen kilometres to the vet. The pain of the first few days was unbelievable; nothing can prepare you for the incredible strain on your legs and knees of so many hours, at speed, in the saddle. However, the experience is one I will cherish forever. For a few short days, I felt the true freedom that can only be had on the back of a horse, with wide open plains surrounding you. One memorable night was spent out on the Steppe, sleeping under the vast starlit sky in the shelter of small crag with horses tied to a nearby rock. At every turn we saw amazing sights, from lush meadows, sweet with the scent of wild thyme, to giant red sandstone crags, a huge flock of wild black vultures (wings nine feet across!) and when I crossed the finish line on day nine I felt I could have gone on forever. Unfortunately, not everyone completed the race, some succumbing to injuries or navigational issues along the way, but we were all reunited at the finish camp for a much needed shower (with soap!), cold beer, and change of clothes. Oh, and of course, some more vodka.

This has been truly a life-changing opportunity for me, a chance to turn a bad experience into an unforgettably good one and to change the lives of forty children and their families as well. And if anyone is brave (or daft) enough to fancy having a go at the Mongol Derby themselves, well, entries are open for 2011, folks!

*[mongolderby.theadventurists.com](http://mongolderby.theadventurists.com)*



This is a story of the Silk Routes of Western Turkestan, of the deserts through which they march, and of the cities which define them; of journeys through space and time, through deserts, mountains and millennia; and of a journey along the fringes of the Kara Kum, or Black Sands, of Turkmenistan.

It is also a story of the Turcoman Horse, whose ancestors were Sacred to their early breeders, the Persians, while the Chinese Emperors who coveted them called them Celestial. These two themes cannot be separated; for the second inspired the first, and you may not search out one without stumbling across the other.

One such horse enters the story and makes it his own: a horse who prints his personality indelibly upon the journey, a horse ultimately destined to travel further than most of his illustrious ancestors.

This story is peopled by heroes and villains, from Alexander the Great via Genghis Khan and Tamerlane to players in the Great Game; but its greatest heroes are the ordinary people of

Central Asia today. They enable a uniquely unrestricted view of old and proud lands, seen through a brief window between the collapse of the USSR and the inexorable rise and consolidation of new, totalitarian regimes.

*Available from November 2011 through high street booksellers or from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)*



# ESMA EGYPT APPEAL

*Beth Sartain, a riding instructor/former veterinary nurse in Cairo, describes the horrific effects on Egypt's tourist horses of the political upheavals and collapse of the tourist industry*

I have lived in Cairo for 5 years, and in this time have always owned horses here, so know many people in local stables. I stayed in Cairo during the Revolution, and as soon as it was safe for me to get to my stables I did so. What I found horrified me. The tourists had all left Egypt leaving the local stable owners with no income and therefore no feed for their animals. Many were in desperate need of feed and, sadly, many animals had already died. Many of the horses used for tourists here are not in good condition anyway. Many are malnourished, have overgrown hooves, sores and infections etc. The owners need help and education.

When I rode around the local area and realised the scale of the situation I then asked ESMA (Egyptian Society for Mercy to Animals) for help, and they said yes straight away.

We started to raise funds, with donations being collected by ESMA. We collected enough money to order a truck load of bran, chaff and maize which we had delivered to the stables. We all met there and distributed the food to approx 450 horses that day. The owners brought the horses; we checked their condition, checked the owners' ID and they signed for 2 days' food per animal. The owners were so grateful.



On the 15th February we received our second load of feed. This time we had ordered 2 loads of feed, so decided to distribute from 2 points, to reach as many starving horses as we possibly could. Our first feed of the day was given to 12 horses, which had actually been abandoned by their owners at our feed donation point, as they simply had nothing left to feed them. These horses were in very bad condition and we were told they had not been fed for several days.

We then loaded up an open backed truck with 40 sacks of already mixed feed. We drove into the village of Nazlet El Saman, the truck in front of several cars of volunteers from ESMA. I was in the car directly behind the truck with Susie Nassar, one of the founding members of ESMA, and my two daughters who had come along to help. People from the village on horseback had recognised us and had already started to follow the truck. When the truck slowed down to negotiate a speed bump the local people were so desperate to get feed for their animals they mobbed the truck. I shouted at the men to stop taking the food as we were trying to help them. Some did stop but many didn't. I noticed one man had loaded 3 sacks of food into his carriage. I was so angry I jumped into the carriage and sat on the food and told him if he wanted the food he would have to take me too. He set off at a gallop down the road, with me pleading with him to stop, and trying to explain to him that we wanted to offer long term help, but couldn't if this was how we were treated. He listened and stopped his horse, and shouted to many of his friends who were riding past with the stolen food to stop, and they did. They crowded around and listened to me as I explained that we were doing our best to help but we needed them to co-operate. The man I was with turned the carriage around and drove back to the place where the truck had been mobbed.

Word started to go around the village about what had happened. I and all the ESMA volunteers spent hours talking to people and visiting stables to explain our situation. The owners were desperate for help, and saw that if they wanted long term help the food had to be returned to us. While we were waiting for the food to be returned, we all kept busy by treating wounds as best we could with limited medical supplies. We also arranged for a local farrier to attend one stable whose horses' hooves were desperately in need of attention. The owner simply had no cash to pay the farrier. He trimmed 10 horses' feet while we were there. One of the ESMA volunteers is a homeopathic practitioner who administered as many remedies as she could to horses in need.

All the volunteers then returned to a central point in the village where people had been returning the feed to. 40 sacks were stolen from the truck in the morning. We received 28 sacks back by the afternoon and the stable owners, who did actually have enough food for their horses, then donated to us a further 26 sacks of food. They were also confident we will get more sacks returned as they now know we aim to help long term.

We set up a collection point, and once again owners brought their horses, we checked owners ID, checked the horses and gave as much feed as we considered appropriate considering the condition of the horse. Out of all the ESMA volunteers present yesterday I am the only one with any equine experience, so I treated any wounds I saw as best I could. Many of the ESMA volunteers stayed until late at night at our donation point. We now have a very good relationship with many owners there and we plan to continue our work after this crisis. We plan to help with education and it would be wonderful if we could introduce ESMA approved riding stables where all horses are well cared for, fed and are ridden in well fitting tack, etc. This obviously is in the long term but we have set great foundations for ESMA and the horses of Egypt.



*Alaa Sharshar, of ESMA, says:* We are in dire need of funding for food! If it weren't for the locals' donations and tremendous effort with preparing and distributing the food, today would have not been possible. It was truly inspirational to see their appreciation, organization, hard work, and their willingness to have an improved and sustainable system.

To achieve this system, I believe we need to continue to provide treatments and feeds until the economy and the tourism industry start to recover. Once life starts to return to normal in terms of income for the locals, we should start to **gradually** withdraw the emergency aid, as they become capable of providing for their families and animals on their own.

In the mean time it is important to start an educational campaign teaching the locals the proper care for their animals, and to emphasize the relation between a healthy animal and more income.

IFAW has also come up with an emergency grant, for which we thank them very very much.

*For more information, see [www.esmaegypt.org](http://www.esmaegypt.org). This situation will continue indefinitely. Please help if you can!*



## RIDING HIGH

*Caroline Baldock discusses the art of long distance riding.*

In a world where most people in Great Britain put their horses into a horse box and take them to wherever the event is and then put them back into the box and drive them home, the concept of walking a horse to an event is fast fading. I like to point out to people that when I was a child we hacked to every gymkhana and back again. We hacked to the hunt and we hacked out to events of all kinds. I recall those hours of being on horseback. I loved every second. We rode in our white Macintoshes with wide skirts and leg straps. We put up with all weathers. We were tough! No, we just didn't have a choice.

Today roads are hazardous. Traffic is heavy even on a country lane. Cars go at such speed that any wrong move between horse and vehicle could be fatal. I have travelled on my racehorse along main roads and been appalled at the lack of sympathy or understanding for the horse that exists today. So riding on roads today is really not much fun.

Today most people are lucky if they get their horses out for an hour a day. I know a lot of people who think it is appropriate to take a horse into a school, canter it around until the sweat is dripping off it, and then bring it back to the yard and put it back in its stable. UGH! I see people doing this all the time. A horse is an animal that we have stolen from its natural wild state and imposed ourselves upon its back. In the wild a horse moves all the time. They reckon the mustangs in America travel between ten and thirty miles a day in search of water and grass.

In medieval days people used horses to travel. In those days the roads were mud, chalk, sand and gravel. Not tarmac. In 2002 I was lucky enough to travel on horseback across the Eastern side of Iran with Louise Firouz. Her stud was near Alexander's wall, south of the Caspian Sea, and we travelled to a place called Jargalan on the border of Turkmenistan. I count myself among the blessed to have done this ride of about three hundred miles with the now late Louise Firouz and a group of friends. The horses only had front shoes and we literally sat on them and let them do the hard work for up to eight hours a day. I felt sorry for my horse one day while walking up a mountain. I got off. What a fool. My horse was walking fast; it was about 120°F in the shade. I could not keep up with my horse. I was out of breath, struggling, my horse was in full swing. There was suddenly no way I was going to keep up. I was at the back of the string. I did not have the breath to call out. What a fool I was. You see horses are very efficient travellers. People are not nearly as effective walkers. I was suddenly spotted; the ride stopped and I got back up. Louise told me off. That was a real lesson.

In 2001 Gill Suttle asked me if I would ride her Akhal Teke Stallion Atamekan through the Welsh hills. She had organized a long distance ride from the south coast to the border with Scotland. I was very excited about this proposal and was up for it. I was to ride from Hay on Wye to Heyup. Kaan was