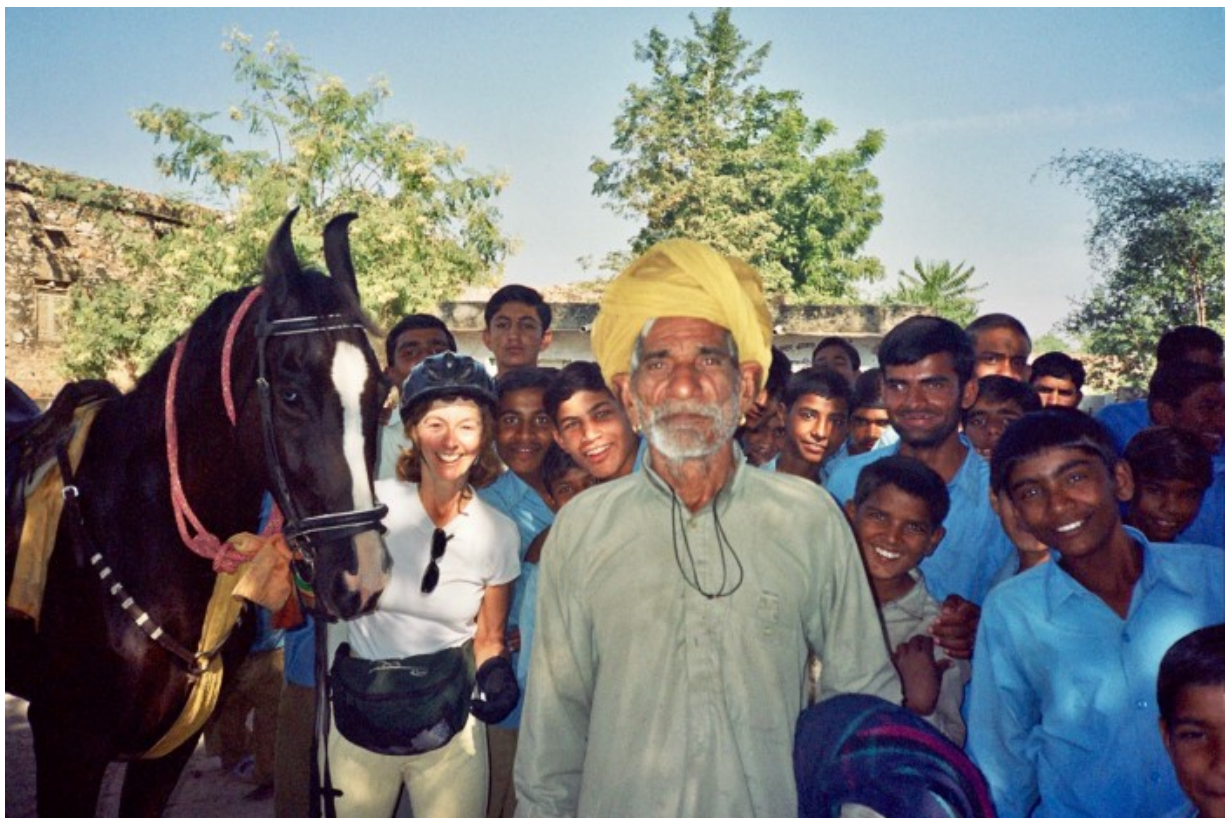


Globe trotting — and cantering and galloping — in Mongolia, India, Africa



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by C.Flisi

The cobras in India were less of a threat than the water buffalo, the elephants commanded as much respect as the lions in Botswana, and mad dogs were the biggest danger in Mongolia.

In other words, trekking on horseback in developing countries means you are not riding in Kansas anymore . . . or the Cotswolds, Canada, or the Camargue. The horses and gear are different, the way the animals are treated is different, and the landscapes, language, and customs are unlike anything you may have encountered before. You will be treated differently too, because you are closer to nature and to local populations than you could ever be looking out from the protective shell of a tour bus.

My first true adventure travel on horseback was to Mongolia, where tour buses would have a hard time anyway. Here there is almost no train or bus service, no taxis or rental cars, and almost no roads in the countryside, so the horse is the key mode of transportation. Besides, it makes sense to visit this country on horseback: the history of Mongolia and its horses are closely intertwined. Mongolia conquered more of the world than any other nation in history through its equestrian prowess.





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My prowess is nowhere near that of the average four-year-old Mongolian, who learns to ride before he or she walks. My consolation was that Mongolian horses are the size of double ponies, so you don't have that far to fall. They are tough, tireless, and low-maintenance, eating only the grasses they find on the ground and water from local streams. They never accept food from a person's hand, not even sugar. They don't have names. (Mongolians are dependent on their steeds but not sentimental about them).

Our small group of five rode on Russian saddles (Mongolian wooden saddles were out of the question) for eight days in the Arkhangai in the center of the country. It is a landscape of Colorado-like spectacle with smaller mountains, fewer trees . . . and four times the sense of space. Pure nature, punctuated by an occasional cluster of white gers (Mongolian tents) with goats, sheep, horses, cattle or yaks nearby, and the boundless hospitality of their inhabitants.

We would visit at least one ger each day and share the airag offered by our hosts. Airag is the national drink made of mare's milk, as ecologically pure as you can get: milk the mare, shake the output (a task usually assigned to the youngest child in the ger), and voila — frothy and ready to quaff.

When approaching a ger, we were told to say “Nokhoi khar,” which means, “Hold the dog”. Ger guard dogs were generally approachable, but we were cautioned not to befriend the wild dogs in the countryside; they can be carriers of rabies or bubonic plague.

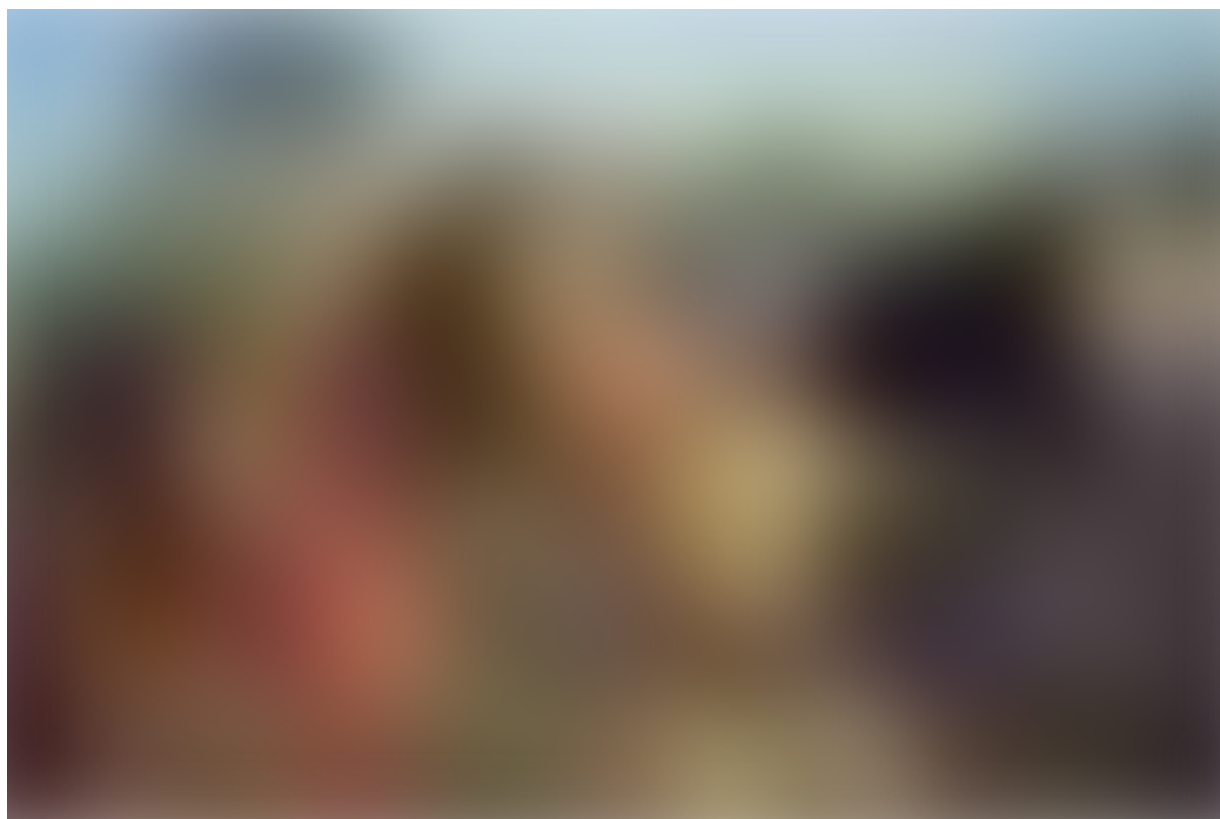


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We slept in Western-style tents, ate campfire-style meals designed to assuage hunger, not win Michelin stars, and bathed in the Tamir River. What we lacked in luxury, we made up for with adrenalin riding. Our horses loved to gallop across the steppes, and we tired long before they did.

In contrast, riding in rural Rajasthan was pure indulgence as we trekked for 12 days from Nawalgarh in the Shekhawati region

to Pushkar, site of the world famous Camel Fair. We camped out in spacious stand-up tents that looked like jeweled pillows, with comfortable cot beds and hot water bottles. A musician and singer accompanied us, as did a masseuse who was in constant demand. Our meals were multi-course Indian banquets with accommodation for special diets. We had hot water every night for Western showers or Indian-style bucket baths. Durga Singh, a Rajput noble who co-organized the trip, regaled us nightly with tales of Indian culture and history.



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Best of all, our horses were pure Marwari, those smart, strong, spirited horses with the striking circular ears. They came from the stable of Deependra Singh, Durga's cousin, who is trying to preserve this magnificent breed. He selected an appropriate horse for each rider and kept careful tabs on us throughout our

journey. It was he who spotted the cobra in attack mode, hood fully extended and body raised out of the brush beside the trail we were following. He motioned us to cut a wide berth, and we obeyed eagerly.

My beautiful bay, Chandrika, wasn't too bothered. She was more excited the second morning of our ride, when we ran flat out on a dry river bed. She was one of the fastest horses in the region, and proved it that day.

Nor was she skittish when we came across water buffalo. We had been warned that the buffalo sometimes attack horses without provocation. Two of our Indian riders always rode ahead with long poles to dissuade them of such notions, and we never had any problems.



We had no problems in Botswana either, despite the presence of three of the Big Five — elephants, lions, and leopards. Our outriders were well-equipped to handle emergencies, armed with elephant whips, knives, guns, rifles, hand grenades, and phones. Just seeing their arsenal underscored the inherent dangers of riding into the African bush. We were drilled on hand signals the first day of riding: “Stay where you are. Follow me slowly and quietly. Back up slowly and quietly. Follow me FAST.”

Our mounts were all geldings, either Boerperds (the local breed) or Boerperd mixes, fitted with McClellan saddles and severe bits (perhaps too severe, fretted our team manager Cor Carelson). We rode mornings and afternoons; our compound — a main lodge and six two-bed cabins — was our base for meals and accommodations.



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The compound was surrounded by a 9,000-volt electric fence that could cause a lion to rethink, or stop thinking altogether. Plus it prevented the baboons from pursuing any curiosity they might have about us, and baboons can also be pretty dangerous. It wasn't enough to stop an elephant, but it would slow one down.

Our trail guides had a healthy respect for elephants. Since we were in a region called "Land of the Giants", we saw a lot of pachyderms. We always approached cautiously and never got too close. With lions, the respect verged on deference: when we spotted lion tracks going one way, we headed in the opposite direction. We did come near a lion one morning but our sharp-eyed guide Tabo spotted it before we entered the danger zone, and we changed direction quickly.





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Other game abounded: baboons, warthogs, gazelles, elands, zebras, giraffes, kudus, jackals, and bat-eared foxes, to name a few. Rhinos didn't abound but they made their presence known; we were charged more than once.

Our wake-up call was at 5:30 am (in the summer, wake-up is 4:30 am) and we were in the saddle an hour later. We would ride till 11 am or so, return to the lodge, shower the horses, pause for tea and juices, then have lunch, rest, and another two-hour ride, with different horses, at 4 pm.

Comparing these three riding experiences is as difficult as comparing the three countries. Mongolia is the least densely populated country in the world, so riding there is floating through empty space on little horses that never quit. Rajasthan is rich in centuries-old culture, and this heritage is reflected in the ceremony of its rides, with Rajput flourishes and fiery elegant mounts. Botswana's Tuli Block is quintessential Africa: on horseback you have a marvelous close-up view of the game, but predators also have a close-up view of their would-be dinner (your horse). So heed your guide and humor your mount, and you should find your way back to Kansas intact.

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