

Commentary...

Rumble of hoofbeats, rattle of bones

By Lynn Woodward
Correspondent

I don't think I've ever been on a horse more nimble than that little bay.

He cantered through knee-high grass on a slope, striding over hundreds of ground-squirrel and marmot holes before I even spotted them. Smart, too. Unshod, he slowed to a trot to pick his way through tricky ground. When the hills were steep or rocky footing unavoidable, he walked to switchback down or pick his way. And hardy. That day we were on the move for about seven hours, maybe 50 km, most of that trotting and cantering, and climbed two monstrously steep, muddy hills, with only a few short rests.

These traits are typical of Mongolian horses. But this one was atypical in three respects: he was not skinny (I

didn't say he was fat). He was sporting a Western saddle. And he was named... Jerry.

He's one of about 25 head that belong to Keith Swenson and Sabine Schmidt, owners and guides of Stone Horse Expeditions & Travel, who provide riding adventures in Mongolia. For the last few years, Sabine has spent a few winter months in Bend building Western saddles and preparing for horse-packing season. One of Keith's best friends lives in Bend, and his sister in Eugene. Oregon is another home for the couple.

I went along for three days of a 12-day packtrip they and their Mongolian crew (who also choose to ride in Western saddles over saddles traditionally used in Mongolia) guided for six guests through the Gorkhi-Terelj National Park and Khan Khentii Strictly Protected Area, in the mountains northeast of Mongolia's

capital city, Ulaanbaatar. Only three because beyond that point, no roads intersect their planned wilderness route, and I was to fly back to the U.S. before their trip ended.

We started from their base in the Darkhid Valley, trotting upstream along braids of the Terelj River. The grass was thick, and the horses grabbed bites eagerly. In my years of guiding, I never let horses eat while a rider was mounted, as it often led to a misstep and fall. Keith told us that we are to let our horses eat and drink as they choose to; we would be riding fast and hard; the horses need all the food they can get. Turns out, none lag and I didn't see any of them stumble for grabbing a bite. And the packhorses were free; they had no intention of leaving or lagging; all trotted and cantered together for long distances.

The terrain alternated between waterways lined with willows, alder and birch, to dense forests of larch, to expansive green meadows — the steppe. The meadows of



PHOTO BY SABINE SCHMIDT

On the steppe for a packtrip. In a Western saddle, riding Jerry.

grasses and forbs with flowers under every step, rolled on and on — sweeping curves that turned out to be further and steeper than they looked. And yet the distance slipped easily into the past under the stride of the horses.

Every so often, Jerry decided to change his position in the group. At first I apologized to the other riders as Jerry veered out to run ahead and cut in front of someone. The other horses did it, too, and we had to laugh. Soon I just let Jerry navigate on his own; he knew the terrain and his buddies much better than I did. Turns out, he usually placed himself just behind

or ahead of another little bay who is Jerry's spittin' image. That's Ben. They're bosom buddies.

Instead of names, horses in Mongolia tend to be identified by color. A horse-centric culture, many Mongolian words exist for the various colors. Some in this herd: Blackie, Brownie, New Brownie. Ulaanbaatar (Red Hero) is a bright sorrel. Blue Roan. Little Dirty Face. Big Dirty Face. Occasionally, one is called Nergui, which means "No Name." And sometimes children are named Nergui.

One river crossing a few

See **HOOFBEATS** on page 22



PHOTO BY LYNN WOODWARD

At night, the horses were tied to a ground picket line, otherwise they grazed hobbled. Here, Big Dirty Face stands ready while the horsemen Byambaa and Bayaraa saddle the remaining 15 head.

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