

● 32| Travelling By Horse James Greenwood

WHY ARE YOU THINKING OF USING HORSES?

You probably fall into one of two camps or a combination of both; you either specifically want to make a horse journey or the horse seems to be a good means of transport for entering or crossing the country that you wish to investigate. There is value in both. The horse offers a natural freedom to travel that can open doors that you did not know existed. Like taking a dog or child into the park, you are already more approachable. The very process of travelling with a horse opens up an extraordinary world – at an average speed of 5 km/h (kph) you get to see a lot of things and meet a lot of people.

You don't even have to ride to benefit – it is a treat to be able to cover a lot of ground without having to wear a rucksack, and horses, packed correctly, can carry heavy loads made up of rations and equipment. Their versatility and ability to cross most terrains is matched by a level of maintenance costs that can only be admired by expeditioners using more costly means of transport such as aircraft.

Do not count on using horses to speed up your journey. Horses are very slow and require constant attention. The process of riding, using unfamiliar muscles, mixed with exercising the whole range of walking muscles when on the ground, can be very tiring. The minimum time required to prepare for a horse journey of any great length is a month. There is terrain – jungle, coastal, wetlands, rock faces – where feet outrun a horse. Looking at the accounts of the long distance rides, the average speed has been a constant 19 km/day – 11 miles a day. Of course, average daily distances are longer and horses can perform incredible feats of short-term endurance – in Argentina there are 15-day horse races of 750 km

LOOKING AFTER YOUR HORSE

The most important thing to remember is that the horse is a naturally nomadic animal. They work on a cycle of movement, rest and replenishment. This natural cycle is the key to using horses to the best of their ability, while ensuring that they remain healthy and spirited. Your thoughts should be on sourcing the best food and water, and maintaining a natural rhythm that will get you to your destination with the minimum hassle and in maximum comfort. Emile Brager's book, *Techniques du voyage à cheval*, has everything you need to know.

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Once in charge of a horse, you are in charge of another living thing, and that may be a responsibility that you don't need. Such is the lack of everyday understanding of the basic components of equestrian travel that many trips by horse fail – usually within the first 2 weeks. Considering that the last complete manual on horse transport was written in the UK by the army at the beginning of the twentieth century, this is not surprising.

For any use less than a month, hire rather than buy horses. Work with local horsemen at all times. Horsemen the world over make good company and know their environment intimately.

If you have brought horses with you, seek out and speak to those who know best the local conditions ahead and who are attuned to the search for food and water. Horses need feeding and watering daily.

Horses in work are bred to travel backwards and forwards from their field, corral or stable to the fields, streets, passes or competition area – if they get ill or lame, they can have a couple of days off. You will not have that luxury to give your horses on a long journey, and you should make every effort, depending on finances, to find the best horses to buy or hire.

They should be sound, free from saddle sores, and between 5 and 15 years old. Cost and quality of horse will vary markedly depending on where you find yourself in the world.

It is absolutely essential that at least one of the members of the expedition has an extensive deep knowledge of working with horses. Detecting the earliest signs of illness or exhaustion is crucial to a smooth-running trip. A basic knowledge of horse management among all those present is a bonus. However, total novices should not have a problem riding from day one, although the person in charge of the horses should look out for the extra work that a novice rider will give a horse.

Groups should be no larger than what is sustainable – horses and people consume considerable resources, and the combination of grazing and shod hooves can denude a campsite overnight.

It is perfectly possible for a full set of modern lightweight camping equipment to be packed around the seat of a saddle with a ruthless attitude to weight. Carry only the essentials. Two horses taking it in turns to carry both kit and rider is the fastest method of travel. The second horse will adopt a herd mentality, allowing the lead horse to assess the everyday threats of the environment. Despite travelling the same distance, the follower will use a fraction of the energy of its friend.

SADDLERY

Above all, a saddle should not cause a saddle sore. Once damaged along the back, a horse will rapidly lose condition and weaken as a result of the pain, unless remedial action is taken, which is a laborious, time-consuming and difficult process. The English cavalry saddle remains in use all over the world because of its sympathetic design.

PACKING

Pack horses can be both a blessing and a curse. The ability to carry equipment and stores can make life more comfortable and fruitful, but the extra time required for saddling, packing and horse care can be frustrating. Dead weight takes much more energy out of a horse than a good rider, and is more likely to give a saddle sore. The right equipment is essential in keeping the pack steady, balanced and upright.

SHOEING

Learn the basics by spending time with a friendly farrier. It is illegal to shoe a horse in the UK without having done a 3-year apprenticeship, giving the UK the best artisan farriers in the world. As you are unlikely to have a spare 3 years, concentrate on “balance”, the basis of all good shoe work. In the field, work with local farriers. The most essential tool is a pair of “nippers”, and always carry spare nails.

FEEDING

Fodder is the basic ingredient that no horse can do without. Unless they have a regular intake of roughage, their digestive systems will seize up and you will have a case of colic on your hands – rice and maize straw give virtually no nutritional value but are better than nothing. The king of fodder is alfalfa, followed by hay and barley straw. Natural grazing may often be available and full use should be made of it. On the whole, horses will be tethered out to graze and the process of tethering is fraught with danger to the horse. Picking the spot to maximise the night's

feeding, while ensuring that the horse will not come to any harm, can take an hour of indecision. No horse should be tethered until its knowledge of the tether is confirmed.

Barley, wheat, maize and pulses can all be given as “hard” feed. The quantities to give will depend on what the horses have been used to and what you are expecting in the way of work. If travelling for a number of days where “hard” feed will not be available, it is worth taking feed with you and gradually reducing it to “half-rations” to avoid sudden changes of diet. Grain that is in some way crushed or ground gives a greater nutritional lift than whole grain, which can simply pass through the horse’s system undigested.

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WATER

There is much debate about how much and how often horses should be watered. However, all agree that horses must be watered every day. It is impossible to carry sufficient water, so the availability of daily water is the main driver behind route selection. Without water, your horses will die.

CONCLUSION

Successful horse travellers of recent times have relied on a mixture of common sense, good horsemanship and an initial basic understanding of both the environment and the societies through which they were travelling. Specialist manuals and equipment are beginning to appear, particularly in France, as the commercial world catches up with an increasingly popular method of travel.

For getting close to the land and for getting close to the people of that land, I know no better way to travel.

And remember – when the going gets tough and you feel like crying, you’re only pony trekking!

FURTHER INFORMATION

Further reading

Brager, E. (1995) *Techniques du voyage à cheval*. Paris: Editions Nathan.

Green, T. (1999) *Saddled with Darwin: A journey through South America*. London: Weidenfeld and

Nicolson.

Greenwood, J. (1992) *No Guns, Big Smile*. London: Michael Joseph.

Hanbury-Tenison, R. (1985) *White Horses over France: The Carmargue to Cornwall*. London: Granada. Hanbury-Tenison, R. (1987) *A Ride along the Great Wall*. London: Century.

Hanbury-Tenison, R. (1989) *Fragile Eden: A ride through New Zealand*. London: Century. Hanbury-Tenison, R. (1991) *A Spanish Pilgrimage: A canter to St James*. London: Arrow. Severin, T. (1989) *Crusader: By horse to Jerusalem*. London: Hutchinson.

Severin, T. (1991) *In Search of Genghis Khan*. London: Century Hutchinson. Tolstoy, A. (2003) *Last Secrets of the Silk Road*. London: Profile Books. Tschiffely, A.F. (2002) *Tschiffely's Ride*. Reprint. London: Pallas Athene.

Useful addresses and websites

Association des Cavaliers au Long Cours (CALC), La Carcarie, 30700 Montaren, France

The Long Riders Guild. Website: www.thelongridersguild.com

An international association of equestrian explorers, formed in 1994, to represent men and women who have ridden more than 1000 continuous miles on a single equestrian journey.

Horse Travel Books. Website: www.horsetravelbooks.com

This chapter originally appeared in the *RGS-IBG Expedition Handbook* published by Profile Books, 2004 and is now out of print