

THE GALSHAR (FIRE HORSE) NAADAM

By Richard Manning - August 1997

Watching the Herders lead their horses back to the Gers for the night, with the warmth of the light softening the bare green landscape and the horses unkempt manes flowing in rhythm with their steps. The thunder of their hooves on a dry summers evening beckoning the dusk.

From my vantage point reclining on the slope of a hill I watched and enjoyed life amongst the Nomads. On the steppe one feels small, life is hard and winters are cold, but this was the summer and both horses and humans were enjoying it to the full. Mongolia sits precariously between China and Russia and is 12 times the size of the U.K. with only 2.5 million people. The Soviet Union provided a Governmental structure until 1991, but since then Mongolia has been very much on its own. Only letting in international advisory bodies and aid organizations. Political freedom is recent and keenly guarded.

As in much of the communist world devastating purges decimated Mongolia in the 1930's. The country's recent independence is giving the people an opportunity to rediscover their remarkable culture and history. Mongolia's landscape is barren and dramatic, with rolling Steppe and mountains in the north and west, ideal grazing grounds for horses and domestic herds. In the south is the Great Gobi desert, feared by explorers and travellers alike before the advent of mechanised transport.

It is home to some of the rarer breeds of wild animals in the world. Ibex, Blue sheep, and the elusive Snow Leopard are amongst the exotic animals still wandering the steppe. To it's credit the Government has been very careful, since Independence, to maintain and protect the country's natural assets, a difficult task where cash reserves are low and hunting licences keenly sought by people in the west.

In the 13th Century, under Genghis Khan, the Mongolians established the largest land empire that the world has ever known. Chingis as he is known locally, united the tribes of the area to avenge the murder of his father and spurred on by the momentum of his success built an Empire stretching from Japan to Eastern Europe. Encompassing most of present day Russia and China, the fabled Pleasure Dome at Xanadu and starting a lineage that can be traced down to the Moghul Dynasty in North India.

Although remembered with temerity by people outside Mongolia, inside the country Chinggis Khan is revered as the father of the nation and his life is still a source of inspiration for the Nomads who herd on the Steppe.

Flying over the vast expanse of Siberia you get your first glimpse of the isolated enormity of this region, the silver birch trees clothing the otherwise featureless landscape. As the plane moves into Mongolia the tree covering dissolves into the green undulating pastureland geographically described as Steppe. Nestled in the folds of the landscape one can make out white dots grouped in clusters. You don't see buildings until you approach the capital, Ulaan Baatar, the country people have no need for them, preferring the white circular tents which they call Gers.

During my last visit to the country I went to a place called Galshar two days journey south east of the capital, Ulaan Baatar. I wanted to see a Mongolian horse race and was told that the Galshar Naadam would be a good opportunity to experience such an event.

Naadam's are the summer festivals held amongst the Nomads in Mongolia, who collect from far and wide to race their horses, watch the wrestling and archery and meet up with otherwise distant friends. It is a wonderful opportunity to be with the herders and experience a glimpse of their lifestyle.

On the way to the Naadam I met an old man called Gongur, who has been training race horses for over 60 years. We met in his Ger and spent an evening together on the way to the Naadam. He was with his wife, a leathery skinned, determined looking lady, and their family. The youngest of whom, riding in the Naadam, must have been just 4 or 5 years old.

Over a bowl of Airak, fermented horses milk drunk like beer by the herders, Gongur told me the background to the event. It had been arranged to commemorate Prince Purevjev who was a well known and respected military leader in the region during the latter part of the 19th century. The Prince was a painter of horses who was renowned for his ability to select good racing horses, a skill which he learnt from a wandering monk. It is said that he could tell a good horse by the sound of its walk.

The Prince would sketch his horses and the monk would advise him which part of the animals form to concentrate on during the training. These sketches are still considered as important indicators of horses' physiques in Mongolia to this day.

Gongur told me that the horses from Galshar were particularly fast and had a reputation amongst the breeders for being very successful Racehorses. Could this be a Mongolian counterpart to the mythological Central Asian and Chinese Fire Horse? I have long since been fascinated by the myth of the Fire Horse. A fabled creature that crops up in folklore, literature, legend and fact in a number of places in the world.

In the Ferghana valley in what is now Uzbekistan there was a breed of horse known locally as the Fire Horse and there are a number of stories about this valuable creature. Prized in old China for their superiority over their own breeds at the time. The need for better horses inspired one of the very few military excursions by the Chinese, under Wu Ti who invaded the Ferghana Valley twice in 104 and 102 BC in order to retrieve some of these valuable horses. They were also known as Celestial or Blood Sweating horses and figurines of them were subsequently buried in the tombs of wealthy and official families in China.

The Fire horse also crops up in Chinese Astrology as one of the most robust and powerful of the signs, appearing only once in the sixty year cycle. The year of the fire Horse is considered to be exciting and progressive for all. Children born in this year are said to be born with the gifts of intelligence and magnetism, the last one falling during 1966 and the early part of 1967.

The Fire horse, or Chinta Mani as he called it, was graphically depicted in a painting by the Russian Artist Nicholas Roerich, who was an Explorer and Spiritualist born in the 19th Century during the latter years of Imperial Russia. Roerich travelled extensively in Mongolia, India, Tibet and Central Asia painting while he went. In the Chinta Mani painting a horse is depicted coming down from the Altai Mountains with a lantern on its back, symbolically bringing light to the people in the plains.

Until my last journey to Mongolia I was not aware of a Mongolian counterpart to this myth but with Gongur's description of the horses and the fact that Gal means Fire and Shar yellow the Galshar Naadam started to arouse in me a more personal interest. The kids sat and listened intently to the old man's words, he had a very kind face and the gentle assured manner of somebody who had spent his whole life amongst horses. The evening was drawing in and the ger was warm with Vodka and the quiet peacefulness of night time on the Steppe.

The afternoon had seen trial races for the Naadam ponies and riders preparing for their ordeal ahead. It was wonderful to be back with the Nomads, like true country people the world over, the herders have a calming nature and a practical uncomplicated sense of completeness.

Just as I was relaxing into the conversation and atmosphere of the evening I felt a tug on my sleeve, suddenly there was a sense of excitement and I was being led outside. I immediately noticed a change in the atmosphere, the day had been cloudy and wet but Tingri the sky God had blown the clouds away to reveal a clear sky for the sunset. One of the children was pointing up into the sky and my mind was dragged from the sleepy conversation into the freshness of early evening. The rain had let up and was falling as drizzle.

I followed the direction of the child's finger to the sky behind the Ger, the warm light of evening soothing the grass green carpet of the steppe, he was pointing to a Rainbow arcing above the undulating pastureland and falling beyond the horizon. In a country like Mongolia such natural phenomena are keenly appreciated and the beauty of the moment was quite breathtaking. A herder appeared on his horse, perfectly framed by the Rainbow, and stopped inside its bow as if in a dream. I eagerly took a photograph, knowing that this was a very special moment. I now call the picture Rainbow Nomad.

In the morning we got up early, the herders were moving on, taking down their Gers and forming caravans to leave for the Naadam. The early morning was fresh and clear to the sounds of animals grunting and groaning as they were yoked to their loads. Mongolian Nomads use Bactrian camels, the hairy two humped variety, to pull their carts, no doubt familiar to Marco Polo during his times in this region.

To see a Mongolian Nomad caravan on the move is a heart-warming experience in this modern age of technology and mechanisation, with the slow sure step of the animals and the calls of their keepers. We travelled with the trail of horses and people on their way to the competition. It was not far from the camp to the Naadam and I was very happy to be fulfilling a dream of many years.

I had been advised that this was to be a special event for the locals, who are avoiding the tourists and commercialism of the state Naadam in Ulaan Baatar, and had travelled from far and wide to compete and meet at Galshar. We were not the first to arrive at the

site. A number of Gers and the bright blue travelling tents that the Nomads use were already there.

The open pasture where the racing, wrestling and archery were to take place was being steadily filled with new arrivals, who pitched their tents, tethered their animals and rested in the sun after their journeys, for some of a week or more.

The Summer Naadams are an important part of Mongolia's social calendar, they are an opportunity for herders to meet with friends and acquaintances from distant parts of this enormous country. The site has a cattle fair atmosphere with thousands of animals; Horses, Camels and sheep, outnumbering the human participants. I found out afterwards that there had been 4,000 horses racing during the three days. Not a great surprise to me, but an indication in statistical terms of the grandeur of the event.

The opening ceremony was held the next day beneath the nine banners of Chinggis Khan. The spectators gathered as dancers and performers opened the games. Colour, sound and atmosphere, a celebration of summer youthfulness and competition.

The first race was for Stallions only, of any age, and as the performers warmed up the crowds, the children circled the ring on their mounts. The horses were decorated with medals from previous successes and their riders were dressed in colourful silky attire. They sang and whooped as they rode, goading the horses with prayers and calls of encouragement. Then a gap appeared in the ring of people and the horses and riders thundered through the centre, led by a chaperone carrying a pink flag. This was the warm up and a show of the runners to the assembled crowds.

After a few laps around and through the ring, and when the excitement was reaching fever pitch, the kids turned on their heels and raced off towards the start. Jeeps were fired up and people jumped on their horses. I was carried along on the wave of excitement and followed in the melee. I have seldom been in such a throng, none of the composed sophistication of Horseracing in the UK, with the sound of hooves on the hard earth and the shrill calls of their riders. Pageant and atmosphere and a sense of wildness accompanied us as we raced off, to where I did not know.

The start, or I think it was the start, was an alley of onlookers calling to the riders and shouting encouragement for the race ahead. The children, goaded on by the atmosphere looked proud and not a little unsure. They were carrying the hopes and expectations of their families along with them for the ride.

The Stallion race, for un-gelded colts, is the most prized race in the Naadam, success in it being remembered for years to come. It is run on a roughly marked course covering a distance of about thirty Kilometres. Quite an achievement for a child, all of the riders being children between the ages of 5 and 15.

The race winds through the countryside and finishes back near the start, the spectators pressing against the restraining ropes, keen to see who's coming home first. The first sign of the horses' return was a dust cloud on the horizon. As the vehicles guided them in the crowds began to murmur with anticipation. The leading horses appeared and we all waited for the race to the post.

As they approached the atmosphere reached a crescendo and the line of spectators surged forward in a wave of excitement. The riders were whooping and calling to their horses, swinging their whips in the air as they rode.

About 800 horses ran in the Stallion race although over 1000 horses were entered. A few of them did not actually make it back home and after the final stragglers had ridden in jeeps were started up by worried parents, who traced back along the course, looking for their children and horses.

Although tours help you get the most out of a country like Mongolia. For more adventurous Travellers it is now possible to travel independently, with the help of a guide. With the ease of 20th Century transport and this years introduction of a one month visa, it is now a much easier place to reach than it was previously. For the independent minded traveller Mongolia is a recent addition to the ever expanding globe and a genuine opportunity to experience a Nomadic culture, steeped in ancient tradition, alive and well in our modern times.

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