



FEATURE



FEATURE

Crossing Kyrgyzstan

Have you ever dreamed of getting away for an extended adventure 'en selle'? It means 'in the saddle' and **JESSICA MORTON** recently spoke to a couple who are travelling the world in exactly that way.

Ashley Parsons and Quentin Boehm were just your typical Parisian couple living life in the city, working at a startup, and enjoying urban life. One loved horses, the other loved cycling. With a combined passion for saddles of different kinds, they quit their jobs and embarked on an epic journey around the world using just two modes of transport - horses and bicycles - and documenting their adventures on Instagram and through their En Selle blog.

So far they have cycled from France to Uzbekistan, and crossed Albania on horseback. Just this month, they finished an extraordinary 1,800 kilometre ride through the steppes and mountains of Kyrgyzstan (a landlocked country in Central Asia bordered by Kazakhstan

to the north, Uzbekistan to the west, Tajikistan to the south, and China to the east) with three stallions.

I sat down with Ashley to find out how they managed the trip through Kyrgyzstan with horses that they'd only had a month to prepare.

JM: Tell us about your stallions

AP: From the start, we knew we would probably end up with stallions. In Kyrgyzstan, mares are not ridden, and only tourism outfits have geldings. The locals don't see the point of owning a horse that can't reproduce.

We wanted to buy all our horses from locals rather than at a horse market, a bazaar. Quentin's horse Fidel was bought from a shepherd, and he was by and

large the best horse on the journey. We took an interpreter with us to make sure we could ask all the questions we wanted to ask, and to negotiate the price.

Chai, the packhorse, and my horse Tian were purchased from the bazaar. We had to wake up at 3am, drive three hours, and then we had five minutes per horse to decide whether to buy.

JM: What sort of horses are there in Kyrgyzstan?

AP: There is a national Kyrgyz breed, and its distinguishing feature is the 'jorgho', a special ambling gait that is really comfortable to ride. The locals know this gait makes them unique, so they cost a little more. My horse Tian had this gait, which is why he was a little more expensive. (In Australian dollars,

ABOVE: Ashley, Tian and Chai against a glorious mountain backdrop. LEFT: The 'en selle' adventure of a lifetime. (All images courtesy Ashley Parsons and Quentin Boehm).

Tian cost around \$1,370, Fidel \$1,290 and Chai \$1,050).

There is a myth out there that Kyrgyzstan is full of wild horses, but that is just not true. Every horse has an owner, and every horse is going to be used for something at some point.

In the bazaar you only get a few minutes to look at the horses, so we had a list of things we wanted. We looked for horses under 15hh as in the past we found smaller horses work better in the mountains. We paid less for Chai because he was skinny, but we wouldn't have gone any skinnier than that. But



Meeting the neighbours: ethnic Kyrgyz make up the majority of Kyrgyzstan's six million people.

you don't want anything too fat, because you can't see what's underneath, and you don't know what you're buying.

We eliminated any horses under five years of age or horses with open wounds straight away. We would pull on each horse's tail to check its balance, push and palpitate it all over, and check legs, hooves and teeth.

Every horse has ownership papers, so it's a good idea to take a photo with the owner shaking hands and holding the papers. That way, if it turns out the horse has been stolen you have proof to show the purchase was legitimate. Horses have clipped ears and sometimes they are branded, but it's always good to have as much documentation as possible.

It's hard not to get emotionally invested at a bazaar. Horsemen in Kyrgyzstan, just like anywhere else, do what they are taught is right. I couldn't get annoyed at people in Kyrgyzstan riding three-year-olds in the mountains, when in my country we train horses to race at two.

JM: How have you found traveling with three stallions?

AP: There were occasional power games between Fidel and Tian, who were the two stronger horses. Nothing serious, just general bickering. Chai, the packhorse, immediately accepted his fate as an intermediary - a role he kept the whole trip. When we first put all three in the truck together, Tian and

Fidel fought with Chai in the middle, and Chai ended up falling over. We got him up luckily, but that was definitively the moment that we both thought 'What have we done? We have just brought home three stallions!'

There are a lot of traditional ideas in our horse culture that you have to abandon when you do this sort of trip. Stallions get a bad rep for being difficult to handle, but once you understand their needs, they are actually the most giving and loyal of horses. Chai was so affectionate he would come when we whistled. If you scratched Tian or Fidel's bellies while they were resting, they would lie back. They really were our babies.



Party of five: Tian, Ashley, Chai, Fidel and Quentin with the flag of the Kyrgyz republic.

JM: How far did you travel each day?

AP: We usually travelled 15 to 25 kilometres a day, occasionally we did 30 kilometres and one day we even did 35, but that was when the bags had been sent ahead in a taxi so we could ride faster.

We started the ride in the second week of May and finished it in the last week of August. Every ten days we would stop at a stable for a few days, give the horses a proper break, restock our supplies for the next leg, and catch up on any work.

JM: What was the toughest moment on the expedition?

AP: The day Chai fell off a cliff. The river had flooded, and we mistook a goat trail above for the correct route. Luckily, I had the foresight to untie the horses before

I started climbing up the mountain. Tian, my horse, tried to follow me as I zigzagged up the hill. He tried to jump up twice and couldn't, so he backed into Chai behind him, who started sliding down the hill. Quentin was behind them both, and he tried to urge him forward. I could hear the fear in his voice. That's when I knew it was really happening. Chai was falling off the cliff.

Chai had the bags, so if he flipped and fell into the river 100 meters below we didn't know how we could get him up and out alive. Nobody wants to think of these sorts of things happening. It was one of the scariest moments in my life.

Incredibly, luck saved him. As Chai fell, he stayed mostly upright and didn't

flip or lose his balance. He ended up crashing down 15 meters before stopping on a ledge. Quentin tried to get down to remove the bags, but all on his own, Chai shimmied up most of the cliff and escaped unscathed.

JM: What tips do you have for riders thinking of embarking on a similar expedition?

AP: Remember, the trip is not about you, it's about doing it with your horse. Their needs always come first.

When you do a horse trek overseas, you really need as much help as you can get. This means you need to utilise any contacts you have, especially those that speak the same language as you. We had Helene, a French woman living



in Kyrgyzstan, who taught us how to shoe, and understand the local nomadic culture. She even brought our horses from us at the end of the trip.

Before you go to a country, try to read the most popular novels that have come out of that country. This will give you an insight into the culture before you arrive. It also gives you something to dream about.

JM: Your favourite gear and why.

AP: A Garmin InReach Explorer, just in case one of us broke a leg and needed rescuing. And a Canadian pack saddle, the same pack saddle that Australian Long Rider Tim Cope used on his 10,000 kilometre solo journey from Mongolia to Hungary. Next year we will rent it out to other riders. Also, Goal Zero solar panels. You can attach them to your backpack or strap them on the saddle bags.

Follow Ashley and Quentin's adventures at www.enselle.voyage, or on Instagram.

ABOVE: The couple developed a strong bond with their three stallions.

LEFT: Quentin and Fidel, who was bought from a shepherd.