

COLLECTIVE

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*From the bright city
We tell the stories
well-known brands
chart their journeys
all we cheer as
They are the
spirited, the bold,
the leaders,*

*skyline to the barren desert lands
of unknown faces, to the most
We celebrate their talent and
most brave. But more than
they walk the path they pave.
creators, the dreamers, the
the travellers, the makers,
young and old.*



A LIFE WITHOUT BOUNDS

On September 22, 2007, Australian adventurer TIM COPE completed the unthinkable: riding 10,000 kilometres across the former MONGOL EMPIRE on HORSEBACK. Tim shares on his epic life, the intoxicating lure of FREEDOM and finding the best of both worlds.

WORDS SERENA RENNER



It's been more than 10 years since Tim Cope set off on his journey from Mongolia, across the Eurasian steppe, to Hungary. Not only did he traverse the former Mongol Empire, following the path of Genghis Khan, he did so as the Mongols would have done – on horseback – despite having only eight days of saddle experience. Over the next three and a half years, Tim faced wolves and horse thieves; endured extreme temperatures that ranged from -30°C to 45°C; and tapped into a nomadic way of life that dates back thousands of years.

Speaking from his home in the Australian mountain town of Tawonga, Victoria, Tim is trying to translate an adventure that few can fathom. But through books and films as well as exhibitions such as the Australian Museum's "Trailblazers: Australia's 50 Greatest Explorers", sharing his story has been such a huge part of the coming-to-grips process.

"Once you've been immersed in a nomadic lifestyle, you're forever changed," says Tim. "Whether it's a dull kind of ache or something brighter than that, it changes you, and there's no way back after that. The only way forward is trying to figure out how you're going to make sense of your experience."

The first time Tim felt an ache like that was following a gap year in Europe, during which he quit his studies in the UK and travelled as far as Bulgaria, stopping in Sarajevo, Bosnia, to celebrate his 19th birthday.

"The further east I went from Europe, the more alive I felt," says Tim. "I came back after that trip really infused with the feeling that there are an infinite number of ways to live life, not just the two or three paths I had been taught at school."

But this new realisation made it hard to commit to his double degree in arts and law. During the very first lecture of Tim's studies, the head of the law faculty said, "Congratulations on choosing law. The foundation of law in history coincides with the beginning of civilisation."

"At that point in time," recalls Tim, "I thought, 'My god, I want to be as far away from civilisation as possible, and I had just come back to the roots of it.'"

He eventually quit uni. With it, he ditched any semblance of a 'normal' life, beginning a 14-month adventure in 1999 with his friend Chris Hatherly, riding from Karelia, in northwest Russia, to Beijing on recumbent (reclining) bicycles. The bikes were packed so heavily the pair often slogged through the soft sand at one painful kilometre an hour. That is, when they weren't slicing their toes free from frostbite. One day, as the two pushed their bikes through the Gobi Desert, a few horsemen galloped over, took one look at the sorry strangers and rode off with a sense of boundlessness that Tim didn't know was possible. >



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“Bicycles had been freedom machines for Chris and me, allowing us to break away from the pull of a conventional path in life,” Tim writes in his latest book, *On the Trail of Genghis Khan*. “But it began to dawn on me that because we were confined to roads and wheel tracks, the realm of nomads was off-limits to us. I was merely a tourist passing through.”

The image of the wild horsemen – unrestrained by roads, fences or cities – burned in his mind until Tim returned to Mongolia in the summer of 2004, this time mounted atop a steed named Bor. His aim was to better connect with the people and the land. In the years leading up to the odyssey (he intended for the trip to last 18 months but it ultimately spanned three and a half years), Tim studied the history of the Mongol Empire, learnt Russian and attempted to save enough money to live on less than \$10 a day. He didn’t, however, get around to really learning how to ride a horse – let alone take care of one.

“I was more completely seduced by this dream of getting on a horse, compass in one hand, and setting off to the big, wide, open horizon,” admits Tim, “breaking free of the shackles of Monday to Friday, mechanical civilisation and our money-based society.”

Tim’s naivety came into sharp focus towards the beginning of the trip when two of his horses were stolen in the middle of the night; only their bells and hobbles remained the next morning. When he



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tracked down the perpetrator, Tim was shocked that the man welcomed him into his yurt for some mare’s milk and offered some of the most valuable advice of the entire journey: “A man without friends is as small as a palm. A man with friends is as big as the steppe.”

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Tim put the trip on hold for four months after his father passed away back in Australia in November of 2006, reinforcing the wisdom of the horse thief, who was right about life being easier with friends. And not just friends but families: from the 150-plus families that took him in at crucial moments to his new family of four: three horses and his Tazi dog, Tigon, gifted to him by a Kazakh companion named Aset.

One of his favourite memories was made about one year into the quest. Tim and his animals had survived winter and the once-bare landscape was sprouting patches of green. The horses and Tigon were so happy to be moving after being stuck in the same place for three months, and Tim was finally living out his fantasy of galloping off into the big wide open, with nowhere – or anywhere – to go.

“There were no fences,” recalls Tim. “There were no people in sight. There were not even any big mountains that would have been obstacles. There was literally nothing stopping me from going any direction I pleased. In that environment, not even your thoughts are hemmed in. Everything is boundless.”

The concept of ‘home’ remains a tricky one for this modern-day nomad, who spends a few months a year leading treks through Mongolia and Russia. The rest of the year, he lives where he’s talking to me from: a cabin at the base of the Victorian Alps that he shares with Tigon and his partner Khorloo, a Mongolian woman he met in 2010. He says his current life

encompasses the “best of both worlds,” straddling the conveniences of urban living and the peace of the outdoors. He spends most of his time writing, lately for a children’s book about Tigon who, despite moving across the world from her vast homeland, still gets to roam in the wilderness of the nearby national parks.

“Right now, I’m looking at snow over the mountains,” Tim says towards the end of our phone conversation. “Once you get out there, it’s just like being on the steppe.”

