



On the Trail of Genghis Khan: An Epic Journey Through the Land of the Nomads

Tim Cope

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Grand Prize Winner, Banff Mountain Festival Book Competition

The relationship between man and horse on the Eurasian steppe gave rise to a succession of rich nomadic cultures. Among them were the Mongols of the thirteenth century – a small tribe, which, under the charismatic leadership of Genghis Khan, created the largest contiguous land empire in history. Inspired by the extraordinary life nomads lead, Tim Cope embarked on a journey that hadn't been successfully completed since those times: to travel on horseback across the entire length of the Eurasian steppe, from Karakorum, the ancient capital of Mongolia, through Kazakhstan, Russia, Crimea and the Ukraine to the Danube River in Hungary.

From horse-riding novice to spending months in the saddle, he learnt to fend off wolves and would-be horse-thieves, and grapple with the haunting extremes of the steppe as he crossed sub-zero plateaux, the scorching deserts of Kazakhstan and the high-mountain passes of the Carpathians. As he travelled he formed a close bond with his horses and especially his dog Tigon, and encountered essential hospitality – the linchpin of human survival on the steppe – from those he met along the way.

Cope bears witness to how the traditional ways hang in the balance in the post-Soviet world – an era that has brought new-found freedom, but also the perils of corruption and alcoholism, and left a world bereft of both the Communist system upon which it once relied, and the traditional knowledge of the nomadic forefathers.

A journey of adventure, endurance and eventual triumph, *On the Trail of Genghis Khan* is at once a celebration of and an elegy for an ancient way of life.

On the Trail of Genghis Khan: An Epic Journey Through the Land of the Nomads **Details**

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Tasmin says

Zwar habe ich aufgrund des Formats des Buches (eng beschrieben, sehr schwer, etc) ziemlich lange gebraucht, um es zu beenden, aber es war SO! GUT! Tim Cope schreibt so bezaubernd und mit so viel Fingerspitzengefühl, er lässt keine Tiefen aus, beschreibt auch was diese enorme Reise mit seiner Persönlichkeit gemacht hat und was passiert, wenn im Leben "daheim" plötzlich etwas schief geht und man irgendwo in der Steppe sitzt.

Sein Schreibstil hat mich unglaublich begeistert, genau wie seine Recherche über die historischen Hintergründe des Nomadentums in Zentralasien und Osteuropa und der verschiedenen ethnischen Gruppen. Es ist definitiv eines meiner neuen Lieblingsbücher.

(Ausführliche Rezension folgt auf tasmetu.de)

Richard McGeough says

Man with way too much time on his hands rides horse from Mongolia steppe to Hungarian steppe and writes utterly compelling book. He's even taught himself fluent Russian to chat to the locals, and a tolerance for the local vodka that inevitably flows with every human encounter. Thus emerges part travelogue ('How I Learned To Ride a Horse', 'Kazakhstan Is, Like, Really, Really Big'); part historical context ('Why the Heck Did the Mongols Do This 700 Years Ago Anyway?'), and - like all truly great travel writing - part rumination on lives in a landscape. The quiet desperation of a once proud nomadic people eeking out a marginal existence across the desolate Kazakh steppe is especially memorable. Truly, one of the most rewarding pieces of travel/adventure writing I've ever read. And I've barely ever been near a horse.

Dawn says

The best sort of travel writing. As a disclaimer, I have met Tim several times at writers festivals, and his dog Tigon which is why I bought this book to start with.

This travel memoir is interesting on several fronts: as a history of the region, of Ghengis Khan and the nomads of the steppe; as beautiful landscape writing; and as a personal drama where like all good adventure stories, Tim gets into some dangerous and challenging situations that threaten both his journey and his survival. It's a compelling and beautifully written story, and one where Tim hauls the reader along with him with his caravan of horses and Tigon.

Bryn Hammond says

Weighed up, I have to say I've found this a bit of a scarifying read. We know that Genghis Khan was the last, if the most spectacular, assertion of steppe nomads over settled, and that ever since his age the nomads have

been on the losing side. But this book brings it home to you. We know the 20th century was more horrific than the 13th... and then there are the centuries in between. The best of this book, I feel, was the sense of tragic absurdity we reached at about the centre of the steppe – like a Camus novel, even though I've forgotten them. He does meet with random acts of kindness from strangers and with great characters or eccentrics, that cheer you up on the journey. The adventure sounds romantic, and at times it is. But it's a bleak prospect he travels through.

My spirits were flagging in the Ukraine when we came upon the Hutsuls, who had kept safe an island of sanity in the Carpathian Mountains. We end on a high note in Hungary with much interest in the past, but then the afterword warns of the effect of massive new mines in the last real bastion itself, Mongolia. I think any review has to mention the drunkenness, which is a scourge right the way from Mongolia to Hungary.

On the sunny side. He achieves his goal, to learn to look through the eyes of a nomad. Late in his trip he starts to talk about the settled's attitude to roads and fences, and he can start to take down our own settled assumptions. One evening spent on the old circuit with a nomad family in Kazakhstan sticks in the head – along with other pockets of traditional life he is happy to stumble on. Then there is the awful travesty of a hunt by rifle out a car window... google 'Kazakh eagle hunters' for pictures of the old-style version he describes. It's an upsetting book, though Tim, with his decision to “trust in people's good side”, can see that good side even in testing circumstances, and that counts for a lot. An old man who sells him a horse acts very rudely, but then you learn what the horse means to him.

For Genghis in the 13th century, it's hard to sort history from legend. One thing that gets slurred over, frequently, and does here – although mostly in his notes – is the evolution of the Mongol idea of world-conquest. It seems to have set in with success; its first (non-legendary) expression dates from after Genghis Khan's lifetime. Genghis may have seen its early growth; certainly he didn't leave Mongolia with world-conquest already in his sights. There's enough madness and madmen in here without that...

I wouldn't have missed this book, of course, but it ain't a joyride.

Katia N says

Poignant, sincere, personal and very informative book about one man's journey on the horse back following the trail of Genghis Khan's warriors. It is very well written and I learned a lot about the places in Central Asia and other regions from Mongolia to Danube and its people through the eyes of this man. The book touches both the history of the regions and the contemporary state of affairs. In his travels, Tim has met a lot of local people, and these encounters are colourfully described as well.

Though he imitated the Nomad way of life, he traveled with the satellite phone and computer and had a few longish breaks in his project (not all of them is his desire). So it is kind of different from the 13th century... But still, very courageous journey and interesting insightful read into the human nature, the disappearing Nomad culture and the region.

Megargee says

Bicycling across Asia from western Russia to Beijing in 2000, Australian adventurer Tim Cope felt confined

by the need to follow existing roads instead of roaming freely across the steppes through which he passed. Reading about how Genghis Khan and his Golden horde of 100,000 Mongol warriors, with their 300,000 Mongolian horses, had subjugated the world from China to the Danube in 1240 AD, Cope conceived the plan to recreate Khan's epic journey.

Although he had not sat on a horse since he was seven (when he promptly fell off), Cope traveled to Mongolia in 2004 where he purchased the first three of the 13 horses (and one camel) he would employ on the trip. He then set out to retrace Khan's route all the way to the Danube, first with his then girlfriend and later on his own with the company of Tigon, a dog that followed him out of a village and stayed with him the next 6000 miles. This journey, with interruptions, would take three years to complete. On the way Cope kept a detailed journal of the places he visited, the extraordinary people he encountered, ranging from thieves to priests, and the adversities he and his animals faced along with his thoughts about the how Central Asia has evolved from nomadism to more urban sedentary cultures. Stalin's collectivism as he stamped out the free ranging tribes of the steppes in the 1930s and 1940s was a major influence. Cope's observations of the ethnic and cultural divides between Russians and local ethnic groups in Crimea and Ukraine are highly relevant to contemporary political conflicts in that area.

While I have read a number of books on epic journeys, including solo trips by sea (Joshua Slocum, *Sailing Alone Around the World*), automobile (John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley* and William Least Heat Moon's *Blue Highways*) and even by foot (Peter Jenkins' *The Walk West: A Walk Across America*), the animals make this narrative unique. Unlike Tim and Tigon, the horses and camel had to live off the land so there is a constant search for grass, grain, and water across the arid deserts and steppes. Humans and animals alike are subject to illness and injury, and subject to the depredations of thieves as well as the hospitality of strangers along the way. The bonds that grow among the equine, canine and human fellow travelers are an important part of the narrative.

Cope faced one adversity that never troubled Genghis Kahn, namely officious border crossing guards with their demands for papers, visas, and permits to import or export live animals, annoyances that Khan's warriors would have skewered with their swords but which delayed Cope for weeks.

This lengthy is illustrated with numerous color photographs of the people and places encountered, and there are ample maps, a good index, a bibliography, interesting end notes and even a glossary of Mongolian, Russian, Kazackian and other terms encountered.

Gary Patton says

Mr. Cope writes an intriguing introduction and first Chapter that drew me into the book.

He made me hungry to learn more about, his fascinating journey as a nomadic horse rider across 6000 miles of the Eurasian steppe, desert, and mountains. Plus he baited me with the fascinating history of its incredibly intriguing people groups which are little known by Westerners like me.

The author has a fluid ability to picture the vast sweep of the Mongolian steppe in poetic language that helps me to feel like I am there seeing it.

He also describes an 800 year old history about Genghis Khan ("the ruler of all people who live in felt tents everywhere") with a passion and knowledge that makes it easy to take in and enjoy.

I was amazed to learn that Genghis, his sons, and grandsons ruled an empire which stretched further east and west from central Mongolia than any other that has ever existed ...anywhere on earth!

Blessings in Jesus all!

GaryFPatton

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Susan Oleksiw says

I would have given this book ten stars if that were possible.

Tim Cope, an Australian, took on an adventure that many have wanted but few have dared. He crossed the Eurasian Steppes, from Mongolia to Hungary, 6,000 miles, alone on horseback to gain a true understanding of the life of the nomads who once dominated this land. The book is the story of his journey, the people he met and the obstacles he encountered as well as the history of Genghis Khan and his descendants and their amazing feats riding across the steppes, conquering all they met and ruling in unexpected ways. When Cope began he was a young man who had been on a horse once and was generally afraid of them. At the end, he describes a glorious ride bareback. His journey took over three years.

This trip required detailed planning, from working with a vet to prepare for the kinds of problems he would face with three horses traveling long distances, establishing contacts in each country to help him with issues as they arose, getting visas to cross borders with and without animals, mapping the route, and choosing gear to support the journey. He met nomadic peoples all across the land, some who still lived the life of their ancestors and others who, when touched deeply by Tim's journey, brought out an old saddle or some other remnant of an ancestor's now forgotten way of life.

Along the route through open grassy steppes, over mountains, through deserts and along rivers and inland seas, the reader meets nomads in one area packing up a yurt or herding sheep, and a few miles on he meets others who have been forcibly removed from their way of life to manage collective farms and industries. He meets some who survived the Stalin deportations and exile to Siberia to return later to nothing, their homes and land having been taken by those who remained. The remnants of the Soviet Union's remaking of the culture and landscape are dismally depressing, and it is little wonder that alcohol plays a major role in getting through the day. The damage done to the landscape in some parts is stunning and disturbing. The incredible stupidity behind massive collectivization of farm and industry is so obvious as to wonder why anyone ever thought it would work.

Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Southern Russia, and Ukraine are undergoing tremendous change right now, and in even a few years this journey would be quite different if even possible. The author passed through Crimea and the area in Ukraine that is now caught in a military conflict, and when he passed through parts of Mongolia and Kazakhstan he noted the regions that have recently been identified to hold valuable ore deposits. Development can't be far away.

The nomads carry with them a way of life that is gentle with the land and animals, and relies on a web of community reinforced by strict rules of hospitality, among others. The wonder is the number of strangers who took the author in, helped him correct mistakes and false notions, and guided him on his way. People took care of his horses, fed him and housed him, and some traveled miles with him to ensure he got onto the right track, literally. Without the help of these men and women (and almost all were men in some parts) guiding him across the steppes, he would not have made it.

The author takes a break from his journey when his father dies unexpectedly, and his mourning over his death is part of the narrative. Cope is the oldest in his family, and very close to his father, who taught him to love the outdoors. Cope's grief adds a poignancy to the loss of the nomadic way of life he sees all around him as he travels farther west.

Through it all, the author is blessed with hardy animals able to tolerate temperatures of 40 degrees below zero, and 100-degree heat. The three horses, two especially, and a dog given by a young disabled boy, become the author's family. He is also blessed with enormous good luck.

CD says

A better than most personal adventure story of a 'professional' writer, traveler, adventurer, filmmaker, lecturer, etc. who traveled the paths of the Mongol horde. It could have easily been called 'My Years on Horseback: Learning all the thing I should have thought of before I left on this adventure'. Or not.

The reader of books of this type needs to be prepared for and in the mood for the self centered style that is inherent in these works. Author Cope does a good job of mixing history, legend, personal experience and modern problems in his story.

Far better than most books of this genre.

Louise says

Over the last 5 days, I've just spent much of my free time tagging along with Tim Cope as he traveled by horse from Ulaanbaatar to Hungary. We rode in freezing and sweltering temperatures, slept yurts, mining camps, under the moon, hiding from the sun, on farms, offices and in the homes of kindly people. We learned horsemanship by doing, avoided bandits, nearly died of thirst (our horses too) and stared down bureaucrats. We met nomads, miners, poachers, oilmen, café owners, black market suppliers and people of little known of tribes and cultures. We drank a lot of vodka and had a romance. Like the author, I hated to see this trip end.

Tim Cope, began as no stranger to wilderness travel. He had bicycled across Russia and rowed a boat 2500 miles from Lake Baikal to the Arctic Circle. This trip was designed to cross the terrain covered by Genghis Khan's army from its Mongolian home to its farthest destination.

Cope is informative on how history has shaped the life the people met along the way, sometimes going back hundreds of years. For instance, the Klamak people, now working to preserve their culture as well as the over-hunted saiga, may have descended from members of Khan's army stranded in Russia. In Kazakhstan more recent history has resulted in a formerly migratory people living on the shells of the collective farms with broken and rusted machinery scattered all about. Kazakhs are still coping with Stalin's collectivization which was accompanied by an influx of Russians making the Kazakhs a minority in their own country. The nomadic way of life was shattered; the Kazakh language was banned. The Tatars, expelled from the Crimea by Stalin, have only been allowed to return since the 1980's and are attempting to rebuild their lives and culture.

Despite the oil boom and recent gold discoveries, there are economic struggles everywhere. Along with the forbidding landscape, and the danger of bandits, there is incredible hospitality in the country. While hospitality is harder to come by in cities Cope was housed for over a month and given help with his horses and visa application in Atyrau, an oil-boom town on the Kazakh-Russian border. At the trip's end in Hungary, Cope was greeted with great fanfare by horse loving people, many seeking connection with their nomadic heritage.

Each chapter covers a county and is introduced by a map, showing all the places on written about. The publisher is generous with color photographs (I wish they were larger). There is a good table of Steppe people and a glossary at the end.

Prior to this, I considered *Travels in Siberia* by Ian Frazier to be my top travel-adventure read. Tim Cope's lovingly written "On the Trail of Genghis Khan" is my new gold-standard for travel-adventure literature.

Chris Stevenson says

This is a really fascinating story. It's very exciting and Cope does a good job of transporting you to the steppe so at times you feel like you're riding next to him. It's quite long, longer than I anticipated, and sometimes the story sags when it's purely descriptive and not as plot-driven. That's one problem I had with the style of writing. Many times it seems like some sections weren't even closely edited -- egregious amounts of adjectives, feelings, repetitive use of language. It's not a huge issue; the reader will get used to it over time, and it's actually a good way to get used to the authors's personality. If you remind yourself it's travel literature then the style of writing is negotiable. If you choose to read it like a novel, then be prepared to be very frustrated with the style of writing. However, on a positive note, you receive a good amount of history, geography of a place that unfortunately few people know about, and a solid, genuine, determined person's telling of possibly the coolest story I've ever read. Having been to Mongolia, it stirred up the adventurous side of me again, and will make others do the same.

Shane Vontelin Van Breda says

Such an epic adventure book. After reading it, it left me craving for more. Time Cope is an amazing modern day adventurer. I can also recommend his other book; *Off the Rails*. When I read his books, I actually feel like I was with him.

Camille says

Tim Cope's book about his epic journey is magnificent as an adventure/cultural/historical tale. I knew basically nothing about Genghis Khan or nomadic peoples before reading this book. I picked it up for a bit of armchair travel and got so much more than the narrative of his 3 and a half year horseback journey that I expected.

On the Trail of Genghis Khan is a well researched book covering off on Genghis Khan, the enormity of the Mongolian empire, nomadic life, Soviet Union communism, ethnic tensions and the geopolitics of the region (for which *Prisoners of Geography* was useful background reading).

I cannot imagine what stamina it takes to endure such a demanding journey for more than three years - most of the time solo and at the mercy of the elements, the people and the horse thieves. Tim presents a deeply personal, interesting and well written story of his experience and I think achieved a nice balance of history alongside his memoir.

I feel like the ending was a bit rushed and almost anticlimactic as all of a sudden the horses are shipped off, however there is a nice long epilogue, which is good, considering the book was published several years after Tim arrived at the Danube River.

One of the criticisms is that there are few female characters and stories in this book. It's not intentional, because of course a lone male on this type of journey and, perhaps, in this part of the world is not going to have the opportunity to get close to many married women. However the inclusion of multiple tales of drunken men keen to offer and be surrounded by prostitutes rankles.

I listened to the audiobook and although I missed parts due to daydreaming, I learned how to actually pronounce steppe and I loved the narrator's accent for the Mongolians and his depiction of other dialogue. It was certainly easier to listen to in large chunks of time - like while doing all my Christmas baking - to really get into it.

I really hope Tim Cope continues exploring and sharing his stories, because he has a talent for it and I want to read more in the future from him.

Diane says

This is a long book covering the three years that the author rode and led horses across Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Russia and Hungary. Tim Cope is from Australia and I think that gave him an edge in meeting and relating to the people he met – a “Westerner” who was not an American or European. He was not a horseman before beginning his journey but felt that he needed to use horses to better understand and appreciate the role of the horse in nomadic culture and in Genghis Khan’s travels. He spoke fairly fluent Russian and learned some Mongolian.

My favorite area of Cope’s travels was Mongolia; I believe Cope liked this area best, too. The nomadic life is still pretty healthy in Mongolia and the people he met still reflected the nomadic culture that he was looking for. Once he gets to Kazakhstan and Russia, the nomadic life is pretty much gone. His comments on the effect of Soviet and post-Soviet eras on nomadic culture are very interesting. I was surprised and touched that several times Cope’s trip and even his life were saved by the acts of unexpected people.

One of the things I enjoyed was watching Cope grow and learn as he traveled. I liked him much better by the end of the trip. I appreciate that he admitted but did not make light of his mistakes and inexperience. I also appreciate that he notes but does not overly belabor the terrible bureaucratic hassles that he had to endure – at times having to wait weeks for permits and visas. This experience seems to be consistent with those in other books I have read about travel in former Soviet areas.

A long book, but worth reading.

Pamela says

Well, that was better than I expected! A well-written combination of personal journey and historical detail. Took me to places I knew (Mongolia), places I didn't know well at all (Crimea) and places I had never heard of (Kalmykia). I loved the characters he met on the way. A very good read and armchair journey!

One caveat: I didn't realize all the pics were at the end of the book (reading on a kindle). I wish I had, because he has photos of most of the people he meets and it would have been nice to be able to see them as I read. They are full-color, so worked better on my app for iPad than my paperwhite kindle.
