



CHAPTER SEVEN



Mongolia: Blue Wolf

‘I would love to go to Venice at the end of September, to celebrate our 30th wedding anniversary,’ Sue says.

I say nothing. After several years of not being able to get away, I am free to travel, but my itinerary does not include Venice.

‘What?’ she demands, giving me “the look”.

‘That’s when I’ll be in the Altai mountains in Mongolia looking at the horse games at the Hunting with Eagles Festival.’

I never tell Sue my plans until I’m sure of my leaving date. The Festival is at the beginning of October, but it will take several days to get there.

There is a long pause.

‘I’ll come with you,’ she says. ‘But I don’t want to be away for too long, the dogs will get upset.’

For a moment panic seizes me. It will have to be an organised trip,

no dashing off at a tangent when I hear of some different horsemen in a distant place. But it's the first time she's wanted to come with me.

'Great,' I say, wondering if it will be.

The setting sun is pinking the snow-capped mountains when we spot the Eagle Hunters' camp. It is amongst some scrub on the far side of a small river. Our minibus bumps down the bank, crawls in low ratio across the river and drives up the far side, stopping near their tent. Their golden eagles are tethered to some rocks close by, and their chunky ponies to some bushes.

Our camping stove, a metal box on legs with a short detachable chimney, is lit by our female cook, Kinjay. Bits of tyre and kindling get it going, then dried dung is added, and a stew-pot set on top. While the food is cooking, our guide, Bulbul, a girl in her twenties who speaks good English, helps us pitch our tent as night closes in. We eat the local



Me riding with an eagle.

dish of stewed mutton with dumplings, cabbage, onions and potatoes by the light of a lantern hanging from a stake.

After supper we are offered tea or coffee. Sue chooses hot water, but quietly tips it away when she sees the colour of it. Thousands of stars shine in the black sky as we walk a little way from camp to do our teeth and have a pee.

‘If you need a pee in the middle of the night,’ I say to Sue, ‘stay in sight of the camp, or you’ll get lost.’

To prove my point I shine the torch round. All we can see is four-foot high scrub. A short distance away a torch beam slashes through the dark, showing where the camp is. When we get back, the hunters, to whom we have not yet been introduced, are playing cards by candlelight. We retire to our tiny tent.

The early morning sun throws long shadows as it rises over the scrub in a cloudless sky. The breath of the eagle hunters comes in white puffs as they saddle the horses. The grass is stiff with frost and when we try to do our teeth, the water is frozen in the bottle. Kinjay comes to the rescue with some warm water left over from making tea. Breakfast is a cold omelette followed by piping hot wheat porridge with honey.

Aralbai the leader of the hunters allots us our ponies. My 13.2 hands coloured mare is slightly smaller than Sue’s one-eyed bay, and my stirrup-leathers stop several holes shorter than I normally ride. This means either sitting on the large metal ring on the back of the saddle or bouncing on an equally large ring at the front. Luckily for Sue, her saddle is a good fit. We move off as soon as an extra pad has been found for my saddle.

The three hunters: Aralbai the leader; his son Arman; and Bakht, go at a steady trot, their golden eagles carried on their forearms. We follow with Bulbul. The hunters place their thickly gloved carrying-hands in the V of a Y shaped stick, the bottom of which rests on a pad on the front of the saddle. The hooded birds sit quietly, and turn their heads into the wind.

The low rolling hills are covered in what looks like a sea of brown grass, but once in it, the ground is stony with only intermittent grass stalks. The horses’ hooves click metallically on the stones as we jog mile after mile. Despite the extra pad, the only way for me to get comfortable is to stand in the stirrups, holding on to the mane to keep my balance.

We are relieved to see the olive-green minibus waiting for us in the



Long trumpet announcing the arrival of the Lamido at the start of the Fantasia .

There is no sign of Yse and Idsert as Moussa shows me to a seat at the back of the officials' area under an archway. One of the first horsemen to arrive is a tall, slim noble on a chunky, roan Adamowa horse – again the likeness to the figurine is amazing.

He carries a spear with an eighteen inch point and has a sword on his hip, but what stands out are his bright pink, long soft leather boots. Not only do they disappear under his yellow jalaba, but they are specially cut, with the big toe separated from the other toes, so that he can ride with just his big toe in the stirrup. I saw paintings of toe-stirrups in Ethiopia, but never expected to find horsemen using that style of riding on the west coast.

Colourfully dressed horsemen continue to arrive on Barb-like mounts. I leave my seat to get a closer look. Most of the horses are tightly constrained by their bridles. All have severely curbed bits with long shanks and broad metal nose-bands attached to the bit and held up by a strap going to the head-piece. They ride on a loose rein, except when they want to show off their skills. Then, as soon as they take

A groom takes the horse as the horse-master leads us off round the farm. He points out a field where there are two hundred mares with foals, but it is so big that they look quite scattered. I ask about the breeding policy, but he strides on, and instead tells Joseph how the Fulani cavalry led several jihads in the Sahel region, and what wonderful horsemen they were. He says they train through kindness and the use of ropes rather than using sticks.

We get in the taxi to go to a couple of outlying fields where there are more horses, but the ruts are too deep. I ask about other traditions.

He says he doesn't know of any, then says he must leave us.

On the way back to Bamenda I spot some hobbled horses in a village and get out to look at them. They are in good condition and have obviously been well handled. A group of male villagers keep a wary eye on us, but move away when we approach. Joseph tries to talk to them, but they continue to edge away. A shout makes us turn round. Several soldiers with rifles, led by an officer, run towards us. Behind them, Jacob is sitting very still, with a soldier pointing a rifle at him through the open driver's window.

'Just stand still,' says Joseph quietly.

'What are you doing here? Why are you talking to these men?' asks the officer in English.

Joseph answers for me, and there follows a swift interrogation.

'You're writing a book?' the officer asks me.

'Yes, that is why I stopped here, to look at them,' I point to the horses grazing close by.

'A book about horses?'

'Yes. I was going to ask the men who they belonged to, and what traditions they have.'

'Those men are not allowed to talk to foreigners. You must leave, right now!'

Joseph and I walk through the line of soldiers back to the Toyota. Jacob guns the engine and we speed off.

'I'm sorry, Mister Bob, I should not have let you stop there. The people there elected their Fon, but the government in Yaound appointed a different person. There has been a lot of trouble, and the army have been sent to keep order. There have been a lot of arrests and some shooting.'

The evening before I leave I telephone Mister Thales (my driver in Douala) to arrange for him to meet me at the Armour Mezzam bus station. I have heard too many tales of whites taking taxis and getting robbed, or having to pay extra once the taxi is in a bad area. Joseph insists on seeing me off. In the end he has to go to work, because the 07.00 bus eventually leaves at 10.30. I am glad I booked two seats – the large lady next to me takes up hers and half the spare seat. She fidgets. At every stop she opens the window and takes her cardigan off then, as soon as we move on, the reverse.

We are well entertained. First there is an ex-priest selling ginseng. With a bible in one hand and a packet of powder in the other, he extols the virtues of the plant saying it will cure bad stomachs, impotence, even malaria.

His final exhortation is, 'Without it, your bones will turn to butter, but with it, you can break rocks with your bones.' He sells all his stock. After him comes someone selling Chinese medicine, then Mister Super Soap. He has a cleaner that will scour your loo, get rid of stains on any piece of clothing, is good for washing floors and dishes, and will even clean any jewellery dipped in it. He sells a good number of bottles filled with his yellow liquid.

After the lunch-stop a pregnant lady gets on, carrying a large bag. First she liberally dabs everyone with a foul-smelling perfume that will clear headaches, sinuses and breathing problems, while keeping mosquitoes away.

I can well believe it.

Then she produces 'Wormit 100', something to get rid of everyone's worms. She holds up placards of all the different types of infestation to emphasise her point, and most of the passengers buy at least one packet. Now she comes to 'man and woman talk'. Antibiotics for after sex. They will cure anything a man might catch, and keep a woman healthy after menstruation. The male passengers buy the lot.

The bus is six hours late getting to Douala, partly because of setting off late, but also having to wait while the road is cleared after a crash. An overloaded taxi tried to overtake a tanker and ran straight into an oncoming lorry. When we pass what is left of the taxi I can see why no one survived. Luckily I manage to borrow a mobile phone so that I can ask Mister Thales to wait for me.