

Tanbwa Karoo - Hiding from the sun while pack horse Pat carries our dinner

By Barry Armitage

## TWELVE MONTHS WITH THE RIDE

**T**welve months ago I crossed the finish of the 1000km Mongol Derby in a dead heat for first place with Irish jump jockey Doni Fahy, after a gallop for the line. But my elation turned to devastation a few minutes later as my horse showed signs of lameness in the warm down before the final vet check. I was handed a two hour time penalty and with it my dream of winning the world's longest horse race was over.





**A**s I write this article the 5th edition of the Mongol Derby is being run; it is day three, the day that I have learnt through two outings in this spectacular race, that separates the real contenders from the rest, and I am feeling very left out! I am in fact green with envy! I would love to be out there on the steppe, the only point of reference to the next horse station a pink line on the LCD screen of a GPS, trying to stay on board a dilly pony in a fizzing bolt, needing to navigate with hands in short supply to whip the GPS from its pouch, a fatigue addled brain and pounded body battling to come to terms with the scale of the undertaking, all the while attempting to squeeze in as many 160km days as possible and delivering a horse that will get through the vet check in the minimum time possible. For me this is heaven, even if I get a little grumpy and break a bone or two along the way!

The 2012 Mongol Derby was our last major expedition and unfortunately there are no filmed expeditions on the horizon, with the SABC, our production partners and international distributors not much interested in another horsey frolic with Baz and Joe. Since our second Mongolian outing last year we have been perfecting our skills at travelling long distances on horseback, developing new equipment, and getting our two South African horseback adventure trails off the ground.

The first of these is a ten-day scamper down the Wild Coast from Umngazi River Bungalows near Port St Johns, 207km South-West to the hamlet of Morgan Bay just beyond the mighty Kei River. Joe and I rode the final recce of this trail in November 2012 with Irishman and serial trail rider Victor Keys, along with local horsewoman Niki Hoseck, from Wild Coast Horseback Adventures our partners in this caper, who was keen to extend her experience of this stretch of coast. We squeezed the planned nine day trail into just six, and had a blast riding hard every day, facing the challenges of this wonderfully varied and exquisite landscape as a tight knit team in order to reach our destination each day on our contracted schedule. Victor's experience prompted him to exclaim on reaching the Kei River "That is simply the best ride I have ever been on!"

The second adventure trail is a 235km ride through the Winelands of the Western Cape about which I wrote in a previous article. It was when I set out to ride a recce of this trail, in the four days I had available, that I decided to try leading a second horse. This proved to be an inspired decision, and on subsequent rides I have worked on perfecting this method of horseback travel, and tested equipment I have developed for this purpose.

In May I went fully solo and unsupported, undertaking a 170 km ride to the Afrika Burn festival in the Tankwa Karoo. This challenging ride, I told myself, was essential for product development purposes. I needed to test the bridle/halter that I had designed, which is integral to being able to travel light, alone, and unsupported with two horses, and I was trying out the latest samples of our new riding jeans that we are developing with Hong Kong based KTC Lab, that will form part of their new range of endurance riding gear. Necessary endeavours both but to be truthful, having ridden over 8000km in expeditions in the last two and a half years, a whip around the paddock just doesn't do it for me anymore, and I just wanted to get out into the world with the horses!



*Wild-Coast - endless glorious vistas await*



*Wild-Coast - Another river crossed*



*Tankwa-Karoo - Our first sight of AfrikaBurn after 80km*





IT IS A DAUNTING THING TO HEAD OUT ONTO THE SEARING FLATS OF THE TANKWA ON HORSEBACK; MOST VEGETATION DISAPPEARS AND THE GOING UNDERFOOT BECOMES HARSH WITH THE HEAT OF THE SUN RADIATING OFF THE EARTH, ROASTING YOU LIKE A ROTISSERIE CHICKEN.

I loaded Pat, an experienced Nooitgedagter, and Kandahar, an Arab cross, the newest member of The Ride team, who recently arrived as an Easter present from Perseverance Endurance Horses in Graaff Reinet. It was a case of "be careful of what you wish for" as I had ridden him while filming Series 3 of The Ride, and at the time asked Laura Seegers from Perseverance "What do I have to do to take him home with me?" Some things happened in the interim and now he is part of our team! Thank you so much to Bob and Laura; it's like being given a Ferrari by Enzo Ferrari himself! I left my vehicle and horse box at a friendly bed and breakfast, along with my car keys and my wife's phone number (in case I didn't return at all) on the Wednesday afternoon, asking them to come and look for me if I wasn't back by midday on Sunday, before heading into the foothills of the Cedarberg.

I had a stripped down version of our saddles from Franco-C Saddlery on the spare horse that I rigged as a pack saddle to carry my tent and meagre rations for four nights on the road, as well as a little Equi-Feeds Enduro to give the horses extra fuel for the potentially difficult second day of riding into the desert. My route along remote farm tracks, picked out with the help of my old friend Google Earth, took me up a steep pass to a rooibos tea farm with a sweeping view of the Tankwa Karoo. It was dark when I arrived at the homestead and asked to camp for the night, happy yet again to experience the generous hospitality of Cape farmers.

The temperature plummeted overnight and it was tough to drag myself out of my sleeping bag before first light. I had 57km to ride out of the hills, across two rivers, where I hoped there would be water, and into the bleaching heat and stones of the Tankwa Karoo. I needed to get it done before the real heat of the day set in. This ride was not the longest I have undertaken alone but it is

one that I am probably most pleased with. I had planned well, the equipment performed, and the horses worked well together, with me alternating them approximately every 25km. The rivers duly provided water and the horses drank.

It is a daunting thing to head out onto the searing flats of the Tankwa on horseback; most vegetation disappears and the going underfoot becomes harsh with the heat of the sun radiating off the earth, roasting you like a rotisserie chicken. I arrived at the Tankwa Tented Camp, 4km from Afrika Burn, where proprietor Henk van Zyl had organised a bleak paddock for the horses, remedied somewhat by a substantial tree for shade and a pile of lucerne bales, enough to feed the horses for weeks! I rode the 4km to Afrika Burn and around the Binnekning with a friend the next day before setting out on my return journey the following morning.

Again I left early, wanting to get to the sanctuary of the rivers before the heat of the day and once reaching the second river I tethered the horses to graze on the grass along the river's edge while I slept for a few hours, as sleep had been lacking the previous two nights. In the late afternoon we hauled ourselves out of the river valley into the hills and my overnight stop at the rooibos tea farm. My hosts had warmed to me in my absence and offered me a shower and bed for the night. The shower was critical as I had not washed for four days nor changed my clothes: in fact I was travelling so light that I hadn't even packed a change of clothes! I made it back to my vehicle at the B&B mid morning the following day after a slow last leg as Pat was a little footsore. This brought home how careful you have to be going into this kind of environment unsupported. You have to be sure that you can get yourself and your horses out or to safety at least as it is an extremely harsh environment should something go seriously wrong. Hoof boots are next on the kit list!





*Wild-Coast - Spaza Shop - there's nothing better than a cold beer at the end of a long ride*

November 2013 will see us ride our first proper Wild Coast Adventure trail with clients from Germany and the United Kingdom joining us for what will, as always, be an incredible ride. I have ridden long sections of the Wild Coast on three occasions and will never tire of it; something that will always remain a real privilege to be able to do.

The trail starts with the luxury of the Umngazi River Bungalows before we head off to resorts from a bygone era like the Haven and Kobb Inn, and the more recent invention of backpackers like Bulungula, The Kraal and Mbumbi. These overnight venues bring a real charm to the journey and my favourite pastime is the afternoon walks to the local shabeen, after a long days riding to buy ice-cold quarts of beer, to be drunk sitting on a grassy hill overlooking the sea; the way you've come stretching off to your left and tomorrow's challenge disappearing into the haze of sea spray to your right. Memories of the landscape unrolling before you streaming through your mind, one stunning setting after the other: picturesque cove, tranquil forest fringed bay, endless beach gallops, aloe pocked hillsides, a striking rock formation smashed by perfectly formed waves, sublime beachscapes punctuated with serene sleek long horned cattle and the pleasurable promise of more to come tomorrow!

The rivers are the biggest challenge of this ride and there are many of them. Some are a deep wade, some a short swim and a few formidable swims indeed. Joe and I have perfected our technique for swimming rivers and in fact the itinerary and dates of each trail are dictated by the tides, and each riding day by the available window to cross the major rivers as safely as possible. The largest

rivers of the day are crossed an hour after low water when the water is slack or the tide is just beginning to push gently upstream. We have added one vital piece of equipment for the peace of mind of our guests for the longer swims: a personal flotation device. These vests, inflated by a small gas canister before each major swim, offer riders the security of a languid paddle across an idyllic lagoon in the high tech equivalent of an inner tube, should they become separated from their horse.

I can't wait for November! These rides are always such an escape for Joe and I even though we have the burden of responsibility for the safety on the group, horse and human. Friends are made and bonds formed through mutual experience; the tough moments, the moments when things went a little wrong, like when your lunch sandwiches get soaked with seawater after a river crossing, and of course the funny moments, provided by the inevitable joker in the group, like Victor on our last outing, who had us in stitches a lot of the time with his dry Irish humour. But like all good things it doesn't last and is over all too quickly. I always get the blues on the last day before that inevitable return to reality.

We have ridden tons and learnt a huge amount about riding horses long distances over the last twelve months. We have extended our horsey family and have been lucky to learn from many wise and experienced people. We have been humbled by the support that we have received from so many, and also by our failures. More grand adventures beckon too; a Karoo trail, a trans-Lesotho ride and of course another crack at that most complex of horse races, the Mongol Derby!

#### **Umngazi River Bungalows and Spa**

To find out more about this truly memorable family holiday destination or a romantic honeymoon contact Umngazi River Bungalows & Spa on (047) 564 1115/6/8/9 or 082 3125841/2 or visit our website and see our promos on [www.umngazi.co.za](http://www.umngazi.co.za).

GPS Co-ordinates: S 31 36.680 - E 29 25.938

How to get there: Umngazi is located in the heart of Pondoland, twenty kilometers south of Port St Johns, SA. Airlink offers direct daily flights from OR Tambo into Mthatha, which is 90 kilometers from Umngazi. Transfers can be arranged. Alternatively drive past Kokstad & turn into the R61 (Port St Johns route). If you driving from the Cape, get yourselves onto the N2 North & follow Port St Johns direction from Mthatha. From Durban, follow the R61 route past the Wild Coast Sun/Bizana/Flagstaff/Lisikosi.

#### **Franco C Saddlery**

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