

30th August 2012

Well... I made it back from Mongolia.

Firstly thank you all for being so unbelievably generous and supportive towards this cause - racing across Mongolia to raise money for the fabulous charity War Child, and I am thrilled to say I have so far raised in excess of £11,000 – and donations are still coming in.

I have had an amazing and unforgettable time over the last few weeks - the Derby was without a doubt the hardest, most painful, agonising, stressful and exhausting ten days I have ever encountered! It is very hard to put into words the experience to be honest- I must admit there were times I felt well out of my comfort zone, I'm sure a reality that most of the riders would admit to, particularly when faced with unpredictable variables all the time. There's such an arbitrary nature to the outcome of choices having to be made all the time, like the horse you choose or the route you take, or whether to move on or stop for the night. There were parts that were incredible, and parts that were utterly miserable - real highs and lows, but all in all a huge success and I'm so pleased I seized the opportunity to do it. Nothing could have prepared me for how tough it was - but I am so relieved I managed to finish the race and that nothing serious went wrong. There were some pretty ghastly accidents along the way - broken neck, broken pelvis, broken collarbone, collapsed lung... the lot. So I was very very lucky to have got away with no more than some minor war wounds - although Day 3 of the race hands down wins as the most painful day of my life - twisted knees, exhausted muscles and chaffing blisters like never before!

The race was extremely demanding in terms of hours in the saddle and the amount of distance we needed to cover during the hours of 7am-9pm each day. Any major setbacks such as falling off and losing your horse, to bad navigation, could cost you 3-4 hours, and just a couple of these could prevent you from finishing the race in the allocated 10 days. Essentially we needed to be covering 120km a day which would consist of mainly trotting, cantering and galloping - with no time for any more leisurely pursuits such as swims in the rivers or similar, just riding hard day in day out - so pretty grueling to say the least!

Some of the horses we rode were incredible - absolute speed machines with very light mouths - there are 5-6 that I will never forget - their stamina over 40km of varying terrain and dodging marmot holes was quite amazing. There were others that I'd rather forget about! On Day 5 I rode what can only be described as the laziest, most idle, unfit sack of potatoes I've ever sat on, and took 6 hours to ride 30km before physically refusing to walk forward another stride! My team mate Jess and I had a meltdown during that leg of the race - we tried everything to get our horses to go forward but they had thrown the towel in

and we were forced to camp out in a nearby ger with some locals. This was gutting as we were making great progress at the front of the second group on the field, and had aimed to catch up with the front runners by the end of that day.

That night poor Jess became ill and once we'd made it into the next horse station at 8am the following morning, we spent the rest of the day lying low whilst she recovered. This prevented us from doing roughly 100 – 120km that day which set us back hugely - and the outcome of this was that the organizers gave us two options: either we ride on from where we were the next day, but with the warning that we wouldn't finish the race in time and would be pulled up, or be driven forward to make up the distance we'd lost that day, but in doing that they would disqualify us and we wouldn't receive an "official place" in the results, but at least we would complete the race for ourselves and ride across the finish line as we'd planned to. This was very depressing at the time and seemed like a 'no win' situation, but a lot of people who were at the back of the field didn't even have this option - they were simply moved up to catch up with the front runners and disqualified in the process. We decided that to finish the race properly was essential, so asked to be moved up the distance we missed whilst Jess was ill, and we finally rode through the finish line in freezing cold and wet conditions on Day 9, just as it was getting dark at 8.45pm. I was fairly emotional, to say the very least! Despite our setbacks – Jess and I still rode over 1000 kms in 9 days, which we were thrilled with.

Would I do it again? NO! The risk and luck element to the Derby is quite rattling. The amount of serious injuries there that arose from such silly circumstances such as a horse being spooked when it heard a zip being undone on its rider's jacket, make it a pretty high stress/high risk environment. Couple that with the uncertainty of whether your horse was completely mad, or nimble enough to dodge and avoid the many millions of marmot holes that litter the ground, and you get an idea of how lucky I was to return completely unscathed having not fallen off once - basically a miracle!

Whilst the Derby was extremely tough, our experience of the country more than made up for some of the grim realities we experienced during the race. The Mongolian people are amazing and their hospitality is mind blowing. Whilst the food and drink they offer you is fairly / completely (!) inedible - consisting of mutton fat or grizzle mixed with noodles, or fermented mare's milk - the simple fact that they would welcome you into their home having never even heard of the Mongol Derby, letting you sleep on their floor, eat their food and help you with your horses, was very humbling indeed. Given there was absolutely no way of conversing with them properly either made the whole experience even more astonishing. The Steppe is also breathtaking to behold - the sheer volume of the land is mesmerizing - everywhere you look you see rolling hills, mountains, valleys with winding rivers, sand dunes, grassy plains, with not a fence or road in sight! The cloud formations are dazzling, and the weather alternates from blistering heat to moody black storms hour by hour - dressing accordingly was a challenge even for the British amongst us!

Our fellow riders were an eclectic mix of wonderful people from 15 different countries - there were many professional riders - Irish jump jockeys (who won the race), cowboys, cowgirls, racehorse trainers, showjumpers, polo players, endurance riding champions... and me! Most of them were extremely charismatic, great fun, and hopefully will continue to be friends of mine for years to come. It was brilliant to meet people from all across the world who shared a common interest with you that brought you all to Mongolia, yet our upbringings and life experiences until that point could not have been more different. It was fascinating hearing about their lives back home, and everyone complemented each other very well, helping one another along through the good and bad times.

Anyhow, it is very good to be home! I am pleased to say that after 4 hot washes my clothes are beginning to smell more civilized, and I have spent a great deal of time catching up on two occupations that I hold most dearly and lacked out on the Steppe - eating well and sleeping!

Thank you very much again and I look forward to seeing you all at some stage during the hunting season!







