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SPRING TRAVEL

HAPPY TRAILS In Kyrgyzstan

By P.J. O'Rourke



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HORSE LATITUDES

One way to view the scenic
marvels of Kyrgyzstan
is aboard a half-crazed
palomino. In fact, it's pretty
much the only way.



I was standing in the stirrups,

stretched over the horse's neck. The reins were clenched in my teeth. I was gripping the mane with my left hand and swinging a quirt with my right, whipping the horse up a steep mountain-side. There were hundreds of feet to climb to the top and a thousand feet to fall to the bottom. It had been raining all night. The grass was slick. Hooves churned. Forelegs milled the air. Hind legs buckled. The horse was on the verge of flipping backwards.

And that was the least of my worries.

In the first place, I don't know how to ride. I can't ride a horse up a mountain. I can barely ride a horse at all. Until shortly before doing this impression of Sir Edmund Hillary as Roy Rogers, my equestrian experience was limited to going around in circles to calliope music on a pony with a pole through its middle.

In the second place, I was in Kyrgyzstan. Not only didn't I know what I was doing, I didn't know where I was doing it. And I wasn't in the Westernized, cosmopolitan part of Kyrgyzstan—such as it is—with hospitals and ambulances. I was in the part with no roads, electricity or cell towers. A satellite phone was in my saddlebag, but I couldn't get a satellite connection. Even by the standards of outer space, Kyrgyzstan is remote. If something happened to my horse it would be shot. For me, the medical treatment wouldn't be that sophisticated.

Furthermore, there were blond hairs all over my clothes and

luggage. How would I explain this to my redheaded wife? I had a love affair in Kyrgyzstan. Not only that, but with a male. His legs are so beautiful. And he has four of them.

All this began—as such things tend to—over a couple of drinks. I was having them with my friend from Yorkshire, Adrian Dangar, whose surname is only slightly misspelled. Adrian runs a small bespoke travel agency called Wild and Exotic. I was telling him that I planned to go to one of the former Soviet Republics in Central Asia to write about how, or if, democracy is developing in a place with no democratic traditions. This seemed a safer way to investigate the question than going to Fallujah. I was wrong.

"Funny you should mention Central Asia," Adrian said. He told me that he was organizing a horse trek in Kyrgyzstan with Alexandra Tolstoy and her husband, Shamil Galimzyanov. She is the Great-Great-Great- (give or take a Great-) niece of the author. Though English by birth, she speaks Russian and lives in Moscow. Shamil is a Tatar from Uzbekistan whose family has been training horses since horses were the diminutive things with toes that we see in the natural history museum. Shamil knows the region. So does Alexandra. A few years ago she and three girlfriends from college retraced the Silk Road on horses and camels for 5,000 miles from Turkmenistan, near the Iranian border, to Xi'an, China. "We'll have a great trip," said Adrian. "Come along.

You'll see parts of Kyrgyzstan the Kyrgyz haven't seen."

"But I can't ride," I said.

Adrian has been riding since he was in utero. He's been master of hounds for several particularly neck-breaking fox hunts. He's ridden across the Serengeti and over the Andes. "Nonsense," said Adrian, "a horse trek is just backpacking on someone else's back."

Thus, eight months later, I found myself in a tent camp in the heights of Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan (I looked it up when I got home) is a South Dakota-sized nation that's all but lost among the Tian Shan Mountains, the "Heavenly Mountains," that divide China from the trans-Ural steppes. It is north of Kashmir and Afghanistan, beyond the Hindu Kush and the Pamirs, past what even Alexander the Great considered worth conquering. The country is, or might as well be, the "Kafiristan" of Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King*.

A fellow named Djuman Kul, who looked like Genghis Khan and was wearing a felt hat as tall and amazing and elaborately embroidered as anything the Pope dons for Easter, was choosing my mount from a herd of wild Kyrgyz horses. They were wild enough, at least, that nobody had bothered to name them. I had been picturing something on the order of a shaggy little Mongolian pony that would let my feet drag reassuringly on the ground. But these horses were five feet tall at the shoulder. They were thin and boney-headed as fashion models but sinewy like a California governor left outdoors to eat grass all winter. And the horses were stallions, with

of the horse. Shamil helped me up.

I had an excellent, if precarious, view of Kyrgyzstan. It looks like the American West. Not the dry-gulch Western movie American West, but the whole West—purpled mountain majesty, fruited plain, noble forest spires, canyons as grand as all get-out, packed into one place with about as much sign of human habitation as Lewis and Clark saw. (Sacagawea, please go to the satellite phone.) It would have taken my breath away if I hadn't been too scared to breathe.

Not that Trigger was giving me much to be scared of. I'd dutifully taken some riding lessons—in an indoor ring atop horses named Elmer's and Library Paste. I assumed a proper "seat," placing the balls of my feet on the stirrup treads with heels down and foot, hip and shoulder aligned. I held the reins low and felt for the correct gentle contact with Trigger's mouth. I applied a subtle pressure with my lower legs and gave the reins the requisite slight flick. Trigger stood there. I tried all of the above a little more forcefully. Trigger stood there. I tried more forcefully yet. Trigger stood even more there. Everyone else was riding away.

Djuman Kul handed me the quirt. He pantomimed a ferocious Patrick O'Brian novel shipboard lashing. It is one thing to beat a miscreant of about one's own size who has been firmly tied to a mast. Beating a 900-pound critter that could buck you to China and run over there before you landed and then kick and bite you is another. Trigger received the sort of spanking that a six-year-old gets on a birthday. He ambled off, thankfully in the right direction.

That direction was onto the middle of a bridge over a small but Napoleonic mountain stream. I'd noticed the bridge earlier. What I'd noticed was that I wouldn't care to cross it on foot. It was made of several logs arranged like the losing turn in a game of Pick-Up Sticks. I cared a lot less to cross it on six feet, two of which had come out of their stirrups.

"Let the horse do the thinking!" Shamil yelled. It is an experience to stake your life on a brain to which you wouldn't assign the simplest task such as keeping the lawn short without destroying the flower beds. I endured a mortal version of the fear my wife feels whenever she sends me to the grocery store.

On the other side of the bridge was a cliff, five or six hundred feet high. The horses went right up it. Trigger found each tiny notch in the rocks by feeling around with his horseshoe as though he were typing a blog. Then, when his posting seemed strongly enough put—**DEATH TO REPUBLICANS ON OUR BACKS!!!**—he pressed "send."

I didn't die because there was always one part of Trigger that held still enough for me to cling to, desperately. His withers were firmly planted as his backside fluttered in the breeze. His loins stayed solid while everything up front gyrated in scree.



Left to right: a rocky ascent in the Chatkal mountain range; one of the expedition's two six-wheeled Soviet army trucks, surplus from the Afghan war; Kyrgyzstan is roughly the size of South Dakota, and as hilly as Colorado.



Floyd Landis levels of testosterone. Like Floyd and Tour de France officials, they were kicking and biting each other.

Djuman Kul led the lone palomino forward. He told me in Kyrgyz, Shamil translating, "This horse is strong, but kind." I wish I had not overheard Djuman telling each of the other trekkers, "This horse is strong, but kind."

I dubbed the horse "Trigger" and hopped aboard. There is a trick to this. You turn the left stirrup backwards, place your left foot into it and, springing with your right leg, swing yourself up so that you...slam your whole body smack into the side

At the top of the cliff there was no top. There was more and steeper cliff. Traversing this was a path the width of a dollar bill. The landscape had been turned 180 degrees. The horizon was viewed by ignoring the climbing coaches' advice.

I don't own a hunt cap, and I wasn't about to show up in Kyrgyzstan wearing my daughter's pink Hello Kitty bicycle helmet. Now I saw that headgear was necessary only to preserve enough dentition to identify the corpse.

I rode with one stirrup banging against the cliff face like the knell of doom and the other a footrest on a bottomless pit. Beyond the cliff were forest glades of the kind that, at American ski resorts, put an end to Sonny Bono and Michael Kennedy. They had it easy. The wet clay of Kyrgyzstan is deeper and faster than Rocky Mountain powder, and Trigger is more self-willed than any pair of Rossignols. We went up, which was bad, then down, which was worse. Plummeting through a boulder-choked chute there were times when Trigger was beyond vertical, when my boot heels were out past his ears and I didn't need a haircut—that was Trigger's tail flopping over my face.

After nine hours we reached camp on the Arkit Sai River. Shamil and Alexandra have two seven-ton, six-wheel-drive ex-military trucks, surplus from the Soviet Union's Afghan war. One is rigged as a kitchen and the other carries the gear. A camp staff of half a dozen drove in these down logging skids and sheep tracks and across country to meet us each evening.

Tents were up. Latrines had been dug. A table was set with a line of vodka bottles down the middle. A local lamb was roasting. And I was splayed on the river bank reveling in my good fortune. I wasn't dead. And I wasn't dead in a magnificent place. And I magnificently wasn't dead among splendid people, whom I've neglected to mention because I've been too busy being scared.



There were 14 of us, including Adrian, Alexandra and Shamil:

Andrew Stott—senior executive for Nestlé, UK, master of camp-craft and avid fox hunter, who could lead a charge of the Light Brigade every bit as well as he charges (quite reasonably) for coffee and cocoa.

Ettie Boyd—superb athlete and corporate headhunter, the horsewoman who saved me from my own “Into the Valley of Death” experience by tactfully pointing out that whipping Trigger while yanking on his reins was making him as confused and stupid as...

“Me?” I suggested.

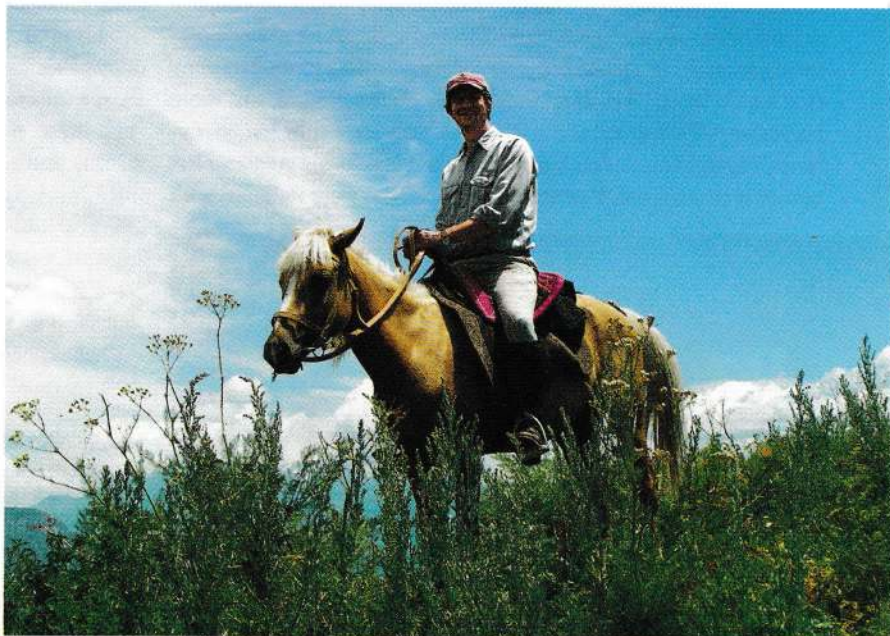
Claire Morrissey—North Dublin colleen possessed of the Irish way with dumb animals, sits on a horse with the same

aplomb and authority as Tip O'Neill sat in the House of Representatives (but cuts a much finer figure).

Jennie Crohill—Norfolk countrywoman and seemingly an unassuming farm inspector for the British government but actually the hero who shot the last feral coypu in England. (It would sound more thrillerish if I left that unexplained, but a coypu is a nutria, a giant South American aquatic rat with a body two feet long. They were raised for fur, escaped, bred in the wild and were playing merry hell with the Norfolk marshes.)

Bahar Ghaffari—exquisite Persian miniature, looks 19 but she's a Master of the Universe investment banker for Lehman Brothers in Hong Kong, juggling equity derivatives so complex they make Alan Greenspan's head throb.

Camilla Coventry—raised on a ranch in Australia, but she and Crocodile Dundee are from the outback the way Lauren Bacall and Mel Brooks are from New York. Studied theater and can produce and direct *Annie Get Your Gun* and do all the stunt work too.



Jean-Baptiste Oldenhove de Guertechin and Gaëtane Schaeken Willemaers—Belgians with resumé's as elaborate as their names. He a global management consultant with a degree in civil engineering and an MBA from the Wharton School of Business. She an international finance lawyer and the former counsel to Belgium's Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Harold van Lier—another Belgian, a movie producer turned hotelier because guest towels have more to say for themselves than entertainment executives. He is on his honeymoon.

Emily—Harold's beautiful English bride, a relief worker specializing in third world sanitation problems (of which I was one at the moment). She has given up international aid work to come to the aid of, well, people such as ourselves who read *ForbesLife*, at the Grand Hôtel des Bains in Brittany (www.grand-hotel-des-bains.com). As the name implies, it has plenty of sanitation.

“You had better have another vodka,” said Shamil, “because tomorrow the riding becomes difficult.”



Left to right: A Kyrgyz girl and baby; the author astride his sure-footed steed, Trigger, for whom "being beautiful was a career"; brave riders traverse a moonscape above the tree line.

We rode through the village of Kizel Kel', where Djuman Kul and our horses were from. A lone electrical wire and a notional road connected it to the world. And even this much civilization the Kyrgyz leave, spring through fall, to graze their herds in the mountain pastures. Stay-behind women and kids and

the 80-year-old blacksmith (who had "about 40" grandchildren) came out to say hello and feed us apricot jam.

We went up into a cartoon-beautiful forest, climbing with animation—feature-length animation—through Shrek-colored fern glades with sunlight pixilating in the tree leaves. Irish Claire herself had never seen anything so green. We emerged to a view that looked even less real and left me faint with a wish that it weren't.

We were on a scimitar of a ridge, thousands of feet in the air. Snowcapped mountains loomed, but they loomed below us. We could see rivers, in extremely small scale, threads of blue monofilament. Mile-wide turquoise lakes glinted minutely, beads lost in a shag rug. We were at the top of the Chatkal Range of the Tian Shan, above everything.

Above almost everything. Obese thunderheads materialized on top of us. A Jovian flatulence erupted. The sky would have been black if it hadn't been bright orange with lightning.

Gaëtane's curly hair stood on end, making a nimbus three times the size of her head.

"It is an interesting phenomenon, an effect of ionization," said

Jean-Baptiste.

"You look like Medusa," said Harold. "But much prettier, of course, and without the snakes."

"@#\$\$*&! GET DOWN!" screamed the nervous person from a country with frequently toasted golfers.

The best we could do was a thicket of stunted trees with a lush undergrowth of stinging nettles. It poured. It blew. The temperature dropped 30 degrees. The nettles were enjoyed by the horses. Ettie and Claire got under their mounts. This, if you've seen a horse relieve itself, was a calculated risk of a worse wetting. Camilla said, "I know what—*The Sound of Music*."

The hills are alive with the sound of...

KA-BOOM

"@#\$\$*&! GET DOWN!"

Doe, a deer, a female deer,

Ray, a drop of golden...

KA-BOOM

"@#\$\$*&! GET DOWN!"

The paths down from the ridge were washed out. Shamil found a crevice leading...somewhere. It was too muck-sunk and brush-filled to ride. We had to lead the horses.

An enormous creature is behind you, threatening at every moment to add the mud luge to the list of Olympic equestrian events. Taking a fall off a horse is just a matter of one's own slobby body-mass index hitting the ground. It is not to be compared to a horse taking a fall on you.

There were places where leading was impossible. We had to



jump and slide on our own, then call the horses like dogs, asking them to perform stunts that Lassie would have left Timmy down the well rather than attempt.

Trigger, who'd shown no previous inclination to obey, or even notice me, turned petlike and followed with puppyish devotion. The crevice opened into a gorge and the gorge opened into a canyon, and once, when he and I were stuck on a ledge, Trigger gave me a little nudge away from the abyss. (Though it's possible Trigger is dyslexic and was pushing in the wrong direction.)

The rain kept on and so did we, in a trail-breaking slog until our spirits had descended as far as we had. And there on the canyon floor were our trucks.

Using a frayed old Soviet topo map, drivers Valeri and Andrei had guessed where we might emerge. The cook, Tyota Vera, and her helpers, Nadia and Lyuda, had a hot meal ready. A tarp was stretched over the table.

"You had better have another vodka," said Shamil, "because tomorrow the riding becomes *very* difficult."

It did. We climbed 3,000 feet up a slope like a graph of crude oil prices to have lunch with the shepherds of Kizel Kel'. Their yurts are streamlined for the mountain winds—Airstream trailers made of felt but with more spacious and contemporary open-plan interiors. We ate yogurt and little balls of goat cheese fermented in burlap sacks and we drank the whey that dripped from the bags. The Kyrgyz bring little with them by way of provisions except their livestock.

We rode out through a canyon with walls that will dwarf the luxury resort that is going to be built there someday, through clouds of blue butterflies where the parking lot will be, and under a natural bridge, naming rights available. The striated sediment in the sandstone cliffs had been bent by mountain-building into a Brobdingnagian taffy-pull. Owners of leisure homes will be sure to frame this view in the great room's palladian window. Hundreds of feet up, ibex skittered across the openings of unexplored caves. Unexplored cave tours at ten, noon and two. Shamil, reconnoitering the canyon on foot a month before, had seen a Tian Shan brown bear and the spoor of a snow leopard. Call the concierge for safari bus reservations.

"This canyon is one vast herbaceous border," said Jennie, standing by a yard-wide clump of irises and naming a dozen other plants. "All these have to be so carefully tended in England, and here they just grow."

"Herbaceous Boarder" is a clever name for the upscale bed and breakfast that will cater to the more ecologically conscious visitors.

We vilified progress all the way to our cooked meal, distilled beverages and double-walled synthetic-fabric tents. The river at the canyon's mouth will survive—sweeping fly fishermen and kayakers straight to perdition. We tried to take a bath in it. Ettie had the guts to go first, lowering herself into water the temperature of decompressing freon and being beaten by the roil of pebbles in the current. "Yow," she said, "this is worse than a spa. You know, there are people who pay thousands for things like this."

"Us among them," said Andrew.

We rode for two days through the Chatkal Range's meadow fairways, not one of them less than a par 99.

Being careful on Trigger wasn't hard. The other horses were galloping around. But for Trigger, as for many of the world's great beauties, being beautiful was a career. Doing anything else that he didn't have to was a waste of his valuable talents. Trigger would go where the other horses went with a Kate Moss vacuity. But out on his own, on open ground, he'd prance, flare his nostrils, arch his neck nobly, gaze at the fields of wildflowers and eat them.

Trigger and I were married or—I'll have to check the laws of Kyrgyzstan on this point—joined in a civil union. Anyway, there I was on top going "Yes, Dear." Of course the other riders were skilled and accomplished. Although some of them said they weren't.

"I haven't ridden since I was a kid," said Bahar.

"Bahar," I said, "you *are* a kid."

"Jean-Baptiste has spent only two hours before on a horse," said Gaetane. Jean-Baptiste blushed with modest embarrassment at being a natural athlete and quick study.

I am neither. And I'm pushing 60 with a short stick. And I was

chafed and sore in surprising places. In unsurprising places, too. Do not wear jeans on a hundred-some-mile ride through a graduate course in geography. You'll have permanent seams right where Levi's do. But I was also rubbed raw in my belly but-

Left to right: a lighter moment along a steep ascent; a riderless horse treads gingerly past a recent landslide.



ton where the pommel of my saddle had dug into my gut going up hill and in the small of my back where the saddle's cantle had caught me going downhill, and the bottoms of my feet ached because I'd been pressing on the stirrups with an automobile driver's instinctive hope that one of these things was the brake.

Yet every night, after half a bottle of vodka or so, I became a brilliant rider. In fact we all became quite brilliant. Jean-Baptiste discovered that he could play the guitar. Camilla staged a production of *Grease*, complete with choreography.

A week into our trip we awoke below the mountain where Trigger would experience near-gymnastics. It stood at the end of a seemingly endless meadow. Blossoms of clouds drifted down from its peak on sunbeam stems arranged in an urn of celadon mist, or something like that. It was a scene to make me wax as

florid as the nature poets of the Romantic era, although, compared to Kyrgyzstan, the Lake District of England looks like a rest stop on I-95.

"I think," said Shamil, "when we die this is what we see."

I'm glad to say that's not the means by which I saw it. Trigger didn't tumble. We made it to the top. And I could ride Trigger after all. He didn't change direction with leg pressure. It was reins on his neck that made him turn. The quirt was no punishment, just a memo from middle management. I couldn't post: That is I couldn't rise rhythmically with Trigger's trot. His gait was too much like a hoppy toad's. But I could canter if I kept my mind—and my behind—on what I was doing.

And I had other epiphanies up there. I wasn't scared. I was still a coward, but I'd run out of fear. The grassy slope had depleted my proven reserves of trepidation, vast as they were.

I'd also run out of adjectives. My ability to describe was as exhausted as my ability to worry. We went through a bunch-of-superlatives countryside down to a highly-evocative-metaphor valley and on to our campsite that was, oh, darn nice.

Except there was no camp. The trucks and the crew weren't there. The rain had been causing landslides on their routes. Alexandra's horse had gone lame and she'd ridden in one of the trucks that day. It began to rain again. There was no food. Our canteens were empty. The sun set. It rained harder.

Miles down the valley was a government forestry station, intermittently occupied. The horses were worn out. We hobbled them and began to walk. The flashlights were with the camping gear.

Hours later, at that moment in a cold, wet, dark hike to an uncertain destination when the soul cries out for a cozy office cubicle and a job making dinnertime phone calls asking people to switch their cable service, Alexandra appeared. Indeed there had been a landslide. She and the camp staff carried the supplies and equipment to the other side of the debris. They commandeered a logging truck. And they brought, thank god, the vodka.

The weather cleared the next day and so, eventually, did our heads. We rode on through mountains, fields and forests. The Mongols and the Huns and Shamil's ancestors must have felt like this. They didn't really mean to overrun the known world and sack it, they just didn't want to stop riding.

And one afternoon on the banks of a lake called the Sary Chelek, the "Golden Bowl," I galloped Trigger. A real gallop with all hooves—and not me!—launched in the air. We ran for a mile and a half. We were a centaur. Trigger was Pegasus. I was Alexander on Bucephalus, conquering Kyrgyzstan after all.

Now I know what it is to be a chevalier, to be the Man on Horseback. I'm making the patio into a paddock. I'm building a stable in the carport. I'm getting Trigger a green card. I'm learning to jump so I can go fox hunting. There are plenty of foxes in our suburb. And a hell of a hunt it will be, because the neighbor's hedge has a swimming pool on the other side. I wear my new jodhpurs around the house, and all that I talk is horse sense.

"One small sore butt for man," says my wife, "one giant pain in the ass for mankind." •

Wild and Exotic's next Kyrgyzstan trip runs from June 22 to July 7. \$4,100 per person. 011-44-1439-748401, www.wildandexotic.com.