

# Journey

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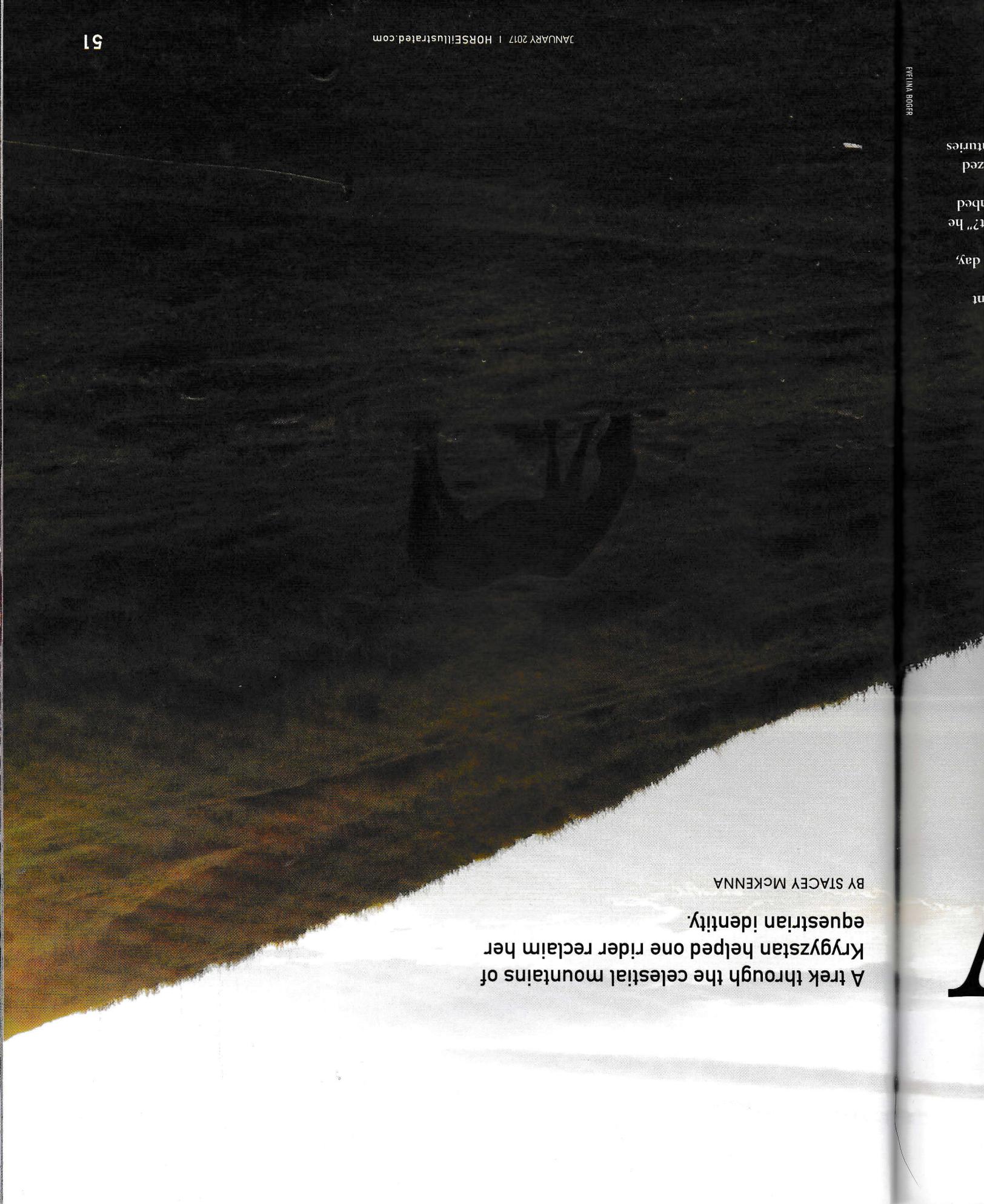
BY STA

**T**he moment we rode onto the rain-splashed alpine pasture, the prancing began. After hours spent traversing spruce-lined switchbacks and skidding down muddy hillsides, the eight sure-footed, solid-minded mountain horses were eager to open up. As the sun appeared for the first time all day, our little group—five guests, two guides and a translator—was raring to go.

My flea-bitten gelding Jettagüs jiggled sideways, his ears swiveling back to me. “Can we go yet?” he pleaded. He’d wanted to lead since leaving Shepherd’s Way Trekking the day before, as we climbed southeast from the Kyrgyz town of Barskoon.

I waited while Misha, our crinkly eyed, camo-clad guide, diligently checked girths and stabilized saddle bags. Including their riders, each horse carried about 20 percent of its mass. Yet not one faltered, belying centuries of selection among the Tian Shan Mountains and more recent cross-breeding with tough Russian stock.

EVELINA BOGGER

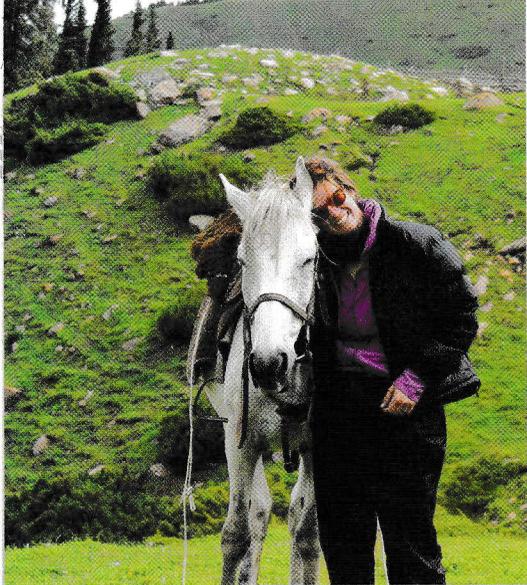


A trek through the celestial mountains of Krygzstan helped one rider reclaim her equestrian identity.

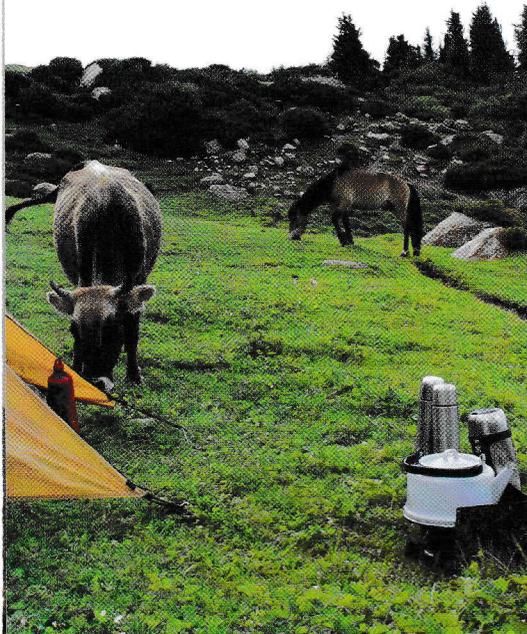
BY STACEY MCKENNA

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COURTESY SHEPHERD'S WAY TREKKING

**Top left: Jettagüs and Stacey. Right and below: Shepherd's Way Trekking uses tent accommodations.**

land of the horse nomads on an eight-day trek. In Kyrgyzstan, even the city people say they were born on a horse.

The sentiment runs so deep that the Soviets had limited equine breeding and ownership for a long time, trying to settle the shepherds who occupied the high country. Twenty-five years into independence, the Kyrgyz celebrate their equestrian past with nomad games and community-based horse tourism; these things may help save an at-risk way of life. But they also revive an identity. It was the perfect place for me to retool my own.

I was one of those girls who pretty much grew up in a stable. My earliest memories are of mucking stalls and warming cold hands in an equine mane. I don't remember the names of my childhood friends, but I recall Brick and Foxy Lady, Pandora and Plum Pudding and Troy's Prize. After my parents' divorce, I took refuge in hoof beats, snuffling muzzles, and the sweet scent of shavings and timothy hay.

As my skills advanced, I found freedom plunging across rolling hills and soaring over brightly painted rails. For most of my life, I rode with the kind of abandon bred in youth, popping up relatively unscathed after a tumble. Until I didn't.

**/ Fear Settles In /**

In my late 20s, a series of bad rides and worse falls left me truly scared for the first time. My own savvy and athletic horse had my number and goaded me with daily bucks and rears.

Eventually, putting my foot in a stirrup crippled me with trepidation rather than inspiring excitement. Even after I found the mare a better home, the fear stuck with me. Three years and countless uneventful rides later, I was still the terrified amateur I never wanted to be. I didn't trust horses anymore.

On June 20, I waited with helmet in hand, ogling the peaks as they rose toward the clouds. Rash, Shepherd's Way Trekking's head wrangler, approached with a whiskered, freckled horse.

"You've been riding all your life, right?" he asked.

Certain his charges were secure and balanced, Misha gave a curt nod and a sharp whistle, spun his grey gelding on his haunches, and charged ahead.

I gave Jettagüs his head and he launched into a gallop with the ease of one trained in the steppes. I sank into my heels and rose out of the saddle, suddenly 10 years old again.

I whispered the equivalent of a cowboy's *yah!* into his ear: "Chu!" Racing across the grasslands at 10,000 feet, following millennia of nomadic hoofprints, I found a renewed me.

**/ Journey to the Nomadic People /**

Last June, hoping to regain my care-free love of riding, I headed to the



**Shepherd's Way Trekking celebrates Kyrgystan's equestrian heritage with community-based horse tourism.**

"Um, yeah, but I don't ride now," I said. "I haven't ridden regularly in a couple of years."

"It's OK. Jettagüs is very good. But he likes to be in front. He will always try to be in front. And sometimes he tries to kick the other horses. Maybe you could train him a little?"

I bit my tongue to swallow my nerves and swung into the saddle, a leather-wrapped wooden tree padded with sheepskin blankets. Jettagüs immediately began fighting for the lead, wrinkling his nose and threatening the other horses as we crested the first hill.

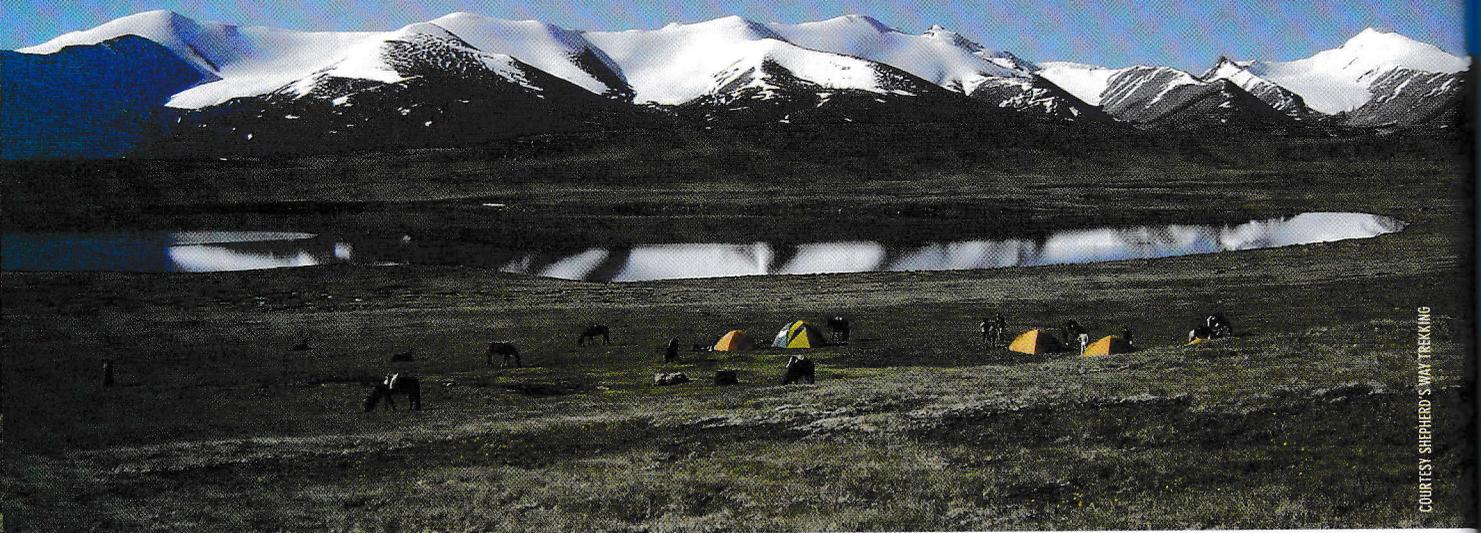
Lake Issyk-Kyl stretched below, 2,408 square miles of salty glacial runoff edged by snowy summits. My fingers, free of calluses, were already raw from the reins.

Middy, we came to an open field and my overzealous partner began cantering in place. My camera bounced against my chest and I cursed as I tried to keep it from hitting the saddle's horn. Kuwan, our second guide, rode up beside me, ignoring my mount's pinned ears and twitching tail.

"He wants to run!" he said, grinning as his bay romped beneath him. Born on a horse.

EVELINA BOGER PHOTOS





COURTESY, SHEPHERD'S WAY TREKKING

## IF YOU GO

### → WHO:

Shepherd's Way Trekking is a family business. Ishen, Gulmira, and Rash run an operation that takes good care of the horses and promotes socially and ecologically responsible tourism in Kyrgyzstan's high country. They will happily chat with you about the evolution of the modern Kyrgyz horse, the preservation of shepherding, and their country's efforts to get back on its feet after years of Soviet rule.

### → WHAT TO BRING:

Water purifier; sleeping bag & liner; down jacket; waterproof boots, gloves, pants and jacket; big plastic bags to stuff inside the saddle bag; swimsuit for the hot springs or to take a dip in Lake Issyk-Kul on your way to or from Barskoon. Check the website for more details: [www.kyrgyztrek.com](http://www.kyrgyztrek.com)

### → WHAT TO KNOW:

Kyrgyzstan now issues visas for travelers from most countries on arrival, making it a relatively easy gateway to the region. Ishen, Gulmira, and Rash all speak English and Shepherd's Way provides translators for the journey. If you want to visit other parts of the country independently, knowing Russian is helpful.

"Yes, I know he does," I forced a smile and wondered how I was going to survive the week.

### / The Impossible Becomes Possible /

And then something happened. Or rather, nothing happened. As we walked deeper into that field, Jettagüs didn't do anything; nothing naughty anyway. He danced and snorted in anticipation, but denied his desire to gallop, he never escalated. It was the equine equivalent of a shrug.

"OK," he seemed to say, "Maybe we'll run in the next field." I exhaled and smiled. Maybe I could do this after all.

When we paused in that first pasture to picnic, Kuwan and Misha tethered the horses to graze while our translator laid out thermoses, sacks of food, and a plastic table cloth. We gathered in a circle around tea and a smorgasbord of jams, tinned fish, dried apricots, local almonds, and fresh-baked bread (sacred in Kyrgyzstan, and rightfully so).

After lunch, I stood with Jettagüs, scratching his speckled ears while he ate, exchanging glances with a beige cow and her curious calf. Land in the Kyrgyz high country is communal, and shepherds let their animals roam at will for days or weeks at a time. Throughout the week, we passed many herds of horses, cattle, sheep, goats and even yak.

### / Adventure of a Lifetime /

For the next eight days, Jettagüs' feisty humor and gentle spirit reminded me how to trust his kind. When the sky opened up for hours at a time, I tucked my hands into his mane for warmth. When the clouds broke, we basked, drying our respective coats in the solar blaze.

We galloped and marched up funicular-worthy trails and forded rushing rivers that came up to his belly. Completely out of my element and in his, I left most of the decision-making to those wise, sure feet.

At night, I'd shower him with praise and sugar cubes, just like I did my favorite horses at 6 and 16 and 26. Kuwan and Misha laughed at my extravagance. Horses are far more utilitarian in Kyrgyzstan than the U.S. But, horses are their lifeline—companions who make survival enjoyable, not just possible. If pressed, they'd confess their affection through a blush and a shy smile.

On our last night in the mountains, we pitched our tents at almost 12,000 feet beside a stream at the base of a granite cliff. We woke above the clouds but were soon inside them.

Shortly after setting out, hail came suddenly and we turned our backs. Jettagüs pinned his ears and tucked his tail in disdain. I hunched my shoulders and leaned forward to cover his compact neck. I owed him that. ■