

Three months into his three year journey from Mongolia to Hungary, Tim and his horse Rusty survey Khokh Nuur (Blue Lake) in the Altai Mountains of Western Mongolia



[Profile]

Tim Cope

Australian adventurer and author Tim Cope has created a life out of the things he loves: adventuring, slow explorations of countries and cultures, and sharing stories of his experiences

Words Megan Holbeck

Tim Cope's adventures sound more like biblical tests. He's ridden a recumbent bicycle from Russia to China, spending 14 months living on a budget of \$2 a day. Developed a taste for boiled goat's head for breakfast. Spent four months crammed in a tiny boat with three other stinky blokes, 24 hours a day. Ridden horses from Mongolia to Hungary, surviving 40 days above 40 degrees while crossing the steppes and then survived the winter that followed, the summer that came after that, the next winter, on and on for nearly three and a half years.

It's this last challenge for which he's best known. It earned him the 'Adventurer of the Year' award from the Australian Geographic Society, and 'Adventure Honoree' from *National Geographic*. But it wasn't just the crossing of the entire Asian continent (and then some) that made this 10,000km journey epic; it's that he's been working on it in one way or another ever since he set off in 2004. It was a play in three acts—the preparation, the journey and the digesting—with the longest of these, according to Tim, being the last.

His life can be divided similarly, with the hardest challenge being integrating his disparate worlds and adventures into one life that works. This journey doesn't end: it's a changing, shifting thing that alters with each year, each new interest and relationship. But the reward is that the life he's crafted out of exploring and adventure allows for domesticity, for connections, for relationships and growth, as well as for the appreciation of different cultures, priorities and lifestyles.

I spoke to Tim the day before he flew back to Mongolia for the third of four exploratory guiding trips. It was a mammoth interview, interrupted by phone calls, random blaring radios and lunchtime soup deliveries: a fitting analogy for the way he melds many roles—author, explorer, friend—into being resolutely himself. He talks slowly—his country roots show in his voice—with considered pauses and the odd stammer as he collects his thoughts and condenses them into words that evidence his life experiences and love of deep thinking. Our topics of conversation range from adventures to God to love, before he lets slip this nugget: "I do believe that you create

yourself, you don't find yourself." And with that he sums up his entire life's work in one line: Tim Cope is in the process of creating the best possible version of himself.

THE PREPARATION

Tim grew up in Gippsland, Victoria, the oldest of four kids who were always outside. His father, Andrew Cope, was an outdoors instructor at Monash University, and young Tim was fed a diet of skiing and sea kayaking, hiking and adventuring. "Some of my earliest memories are the experiences of going somewhere...that feeling of hitting the road. Suddenly it feels as if the slate is wiped clean and you've got these blank pages ahead and you can write the script of your own life without any of the constructs of living."

Through his dad he was introduced to a range of Australian adventurers, people like mountaineering legend Tim Macartney-Snape, polar explorer Eric Philips, and sea kayaker and documentary filmmaker Larry Gray. Another early inspiration was Wilfred Thesiger, who wrote about desert explorations and the nomadic Bedouin people in books such as *Arabian Sands*.

Thesiger's books didn't start his fascination with nomadic life, only extend it. "As long back as I can remember, I was completely intrigued by Indigenous Australia." He wished to travel back in time, and to live as an Aboriginal in pre-colonial Australia. "I used to climb up hills," says Tim, "...and tried to imagine what our country may have looked like before Europeans settled and colonised."

At age 16, Tim went overseas for the first time on a school trip trekking in Nepal. "It completely extended my horizons, and triggered my interest in travel. It opened the mental door for me to start thinking beyond the conventional path...of finishing school, going to uni, getting a job."

This door kept opening. Tim spent the year after school travelling, then in 1998 deferred his law degree after one semester and travelled to Finland to study as a wilderness guide. He never returned to university, and only returned to Australia in late 2000. After finishing his studies in Finland, in 1999 Tim took off on the first of his big adventures: cycling 10,000 kilometres from Moscow to Beijing.



“I was starting to understand that happiness was not a just feeling, or something that happened when the stars aligned.”



Tim, Tigon, and his three horses in Ukraine's Carpathian Mountains. After three years, he couldn't imagine life without his animals

THE JOURNEYS

Off the Rails (but on a Bike)

The ride to Beijing on a recumbent bicycle with fellow Australian Chris Hatherly was a momentous initiation into epic adventuring. Tim had never ridden a recumbent before setting off, and over the next 14 months, he and Chris pushed through temperatures from -40°C to 40°C , with challenges ranging from frostbite (a fortnight in!), to arrest, to millions of hungry mosquitoes. They spent 23 days pushing their bikes through the Gobi Desert's soft sands, navigating by compass and an atrocious map. They travelled 1000km along the world's most remote rail line. Tim's bike frame snapped on two occasions.

Despite their tiny budget, they had big ideas. "We had a dream of making a film and writing a book," says Tim. "But we were 20 years old and had no experience. But we did have a camera." The pair made a documentary of the journey, *Off the Rails*, which—strangely enough, says Tim—was picked up and broadcast by the ABC in 2002. The pair collaborated to write their book, too, Tim's first; of the same name as the (eventually award-winning) doco, it was published in 2003. "That established," says Tim, "a bit of a model for my life: a combination of adventure and writing and films that led to speaking."

As well as increasing Tim's adventure repertoire, this trip also introduced him to Mongolia and its nomadic culture. "I saw these proud, indigenous people still living by traditions that have gone by the wayside or been crushed elsewhere. It was almost like the opportunity of that childhood dream to return to a time when people were living outside the Monday to Friday and in tune with the rhythms of the land and the climate."

Four Men in a Leaky Boat

After Moscow to Beijing, Tim was now on the radar of other adventurers, just in time for a serendipitous connection. He'd cycled past massive rivers in Siberia and dreamt of canoeing down them to the Arctic. And when he got back to Australia, an email awaited him. It was from Australian Ben Kozel, who was preparing to travel from source to sea down one of those very rivers, the Yenisey, the fifth-longest river in the world.

In June 2001, seven months after returning to Australia, Tim joined Kozel and two others—Canadians Colin Angus and Remy Quinter—at Siberia's Lake Baikal. They found a boat, an abandoned five metre long wooden dory, and after spending three weeks making it seaworthy—sanding, patching, coating it in tar and building a simple plywood



Riding in winter, Kazakhstan. The snow, which let the horses hydrate, gave Tim the freedom to roam in this arid region



Tim filming on the banks of the Zhem River, western Kazakhstan

cabin—they set off, taking shifts on a 24-hour rowing schedule designed to get them to the Arctic before the river froze.

Rowing the Yenisey not only increased Tim's adventure skills and his fascination with the area and its people; it also gave him insight into how these journeys could become the basis of a life. Tim's fellow adventurers were all aspiring writers and film-makers, each inspirational for different reasons: Kozel for his ability to write anywhere (between rowing shifts, he wrote *Three Men in a Raft*, a book about his previous trip with Angus rafting the length of the Amazon); Angus for the way he backed himself when taking big risks but worked hard for every inch. Both Angus and Kozel later wrote books about the Yenisey trip.

On the Trail of Genghis Khan

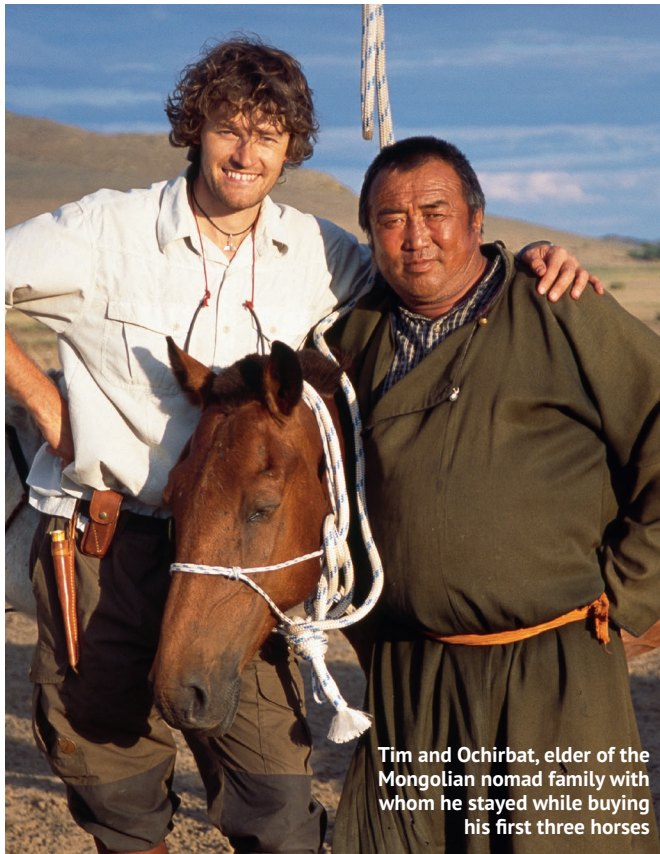
After spending 2002 writing his book *Off the Rails*, Tim spent most of the next year, and early the following year, preparing for his next challenge. It was to be one of the longest equine journeys ever made, a mostly solo trip of 10,000km from Mongolia to Hungary, through Kazakhstan, Russia, Crimea and Ukraine.

The initial plan was for an 18-month expedition, but it ended up taking more than double that—three years and five months. It's easy to skim over just how long this actually is. It's time enough for a newborn to progress to preschool, or

for someone to complete a university degree. Comments from Tim put it in perspective: the girlfriend who joined him for a couple of months at the start was married to someone else by the time he finished; he was only terrified by the ever-present potential for disaster for the trip's first 12-18 months—after that, he could take it in his stride.

While Tim had extensive adventuring skills, his horse-riding experience was minimal. As a kid he'd been thrown from a horse and broken his arm and, despite some recent training, he was still scared of horses. Managing the logistics of riding, looking after the animals, and carrying and organising equipment was hard enough, but he also had to adapt to the challenges of a foreign land and culture, along with dealing with the inevitable injuries along the way. And then there was the climate: in winter, temperatures plummeted to -52°C ; in summer, they pushed 50°C .

"It was just so hot that it smelt of death," says Tim. "There were 40 days in a row of above 40 degrees and no shade, so I travelled exclusively at night. The key was to find someone to take me in and give me shelter and shade and water before the sun was too high in the sky. When I couldn't, I just set the tent up, draped it in all the horse blankets and sat in a pool of sweat feeling myself being boiled alive."



Tim and Ochirbat, elder of the Mongolian nomad family with whom he stayed while buying his first three horses



Tim stayed with around 90 families during his horseback journey



Seryoga, a Russian from Staryi Krym, helping Tim in Crimea

The weather wasn't all he had to protect his horses from. There were wild stallions and packs of wolves, and there were horse thieves, too. In the first week, two of his three horses were stolen while he slept. "Lying in bed at night for months after that, acutely aware of any sounds outside, wondering whether someone might steal them. It was terrifying because they're not just horses; they're your means of survival. If someone steals them or a wolf attacks them or they run away, you're stuck with nowhere to go."

Other challenges weren't related to the trip itself, but to Tim's 'real' life back home. He was 30 months into the trip when his brother called him with tragic news: Their father had been killed in a car accident. Tim had recently flown home to accept the *Australian Geographic* award, and had spent a week with his dad. It's time he treasures for obvious reasons, as well as the chance to see his dad's pride in his achievements.

The rewards were equally numerous and unexpected, accompanied by insights into life as relevant in Melbourne as they are in Mongolia. "I was starting to understand," he writes in his recent book *Tim & Tigon*, "that happiness was not a just feeling, or something that happened when the stars aligned. It was a decision to weather the hard times, and focus on the positives, even when all hell might be breaking loose."

This ability to be in the moment and focus on the positives not only allowed him to complete the trip, but also to enjoy it. Much of this pleasure sprang from simple, everyday things: The chance to travel over the natural paths of the land and appreciate its continuity; the way people would take him in, no questions asked, no matter his state of dishevelment; how nomadic families dropped everything to share a meal in a spontaneous celebration.

"There would be incredible laughter. And we were all very present and just celebrating being together and celebrating the simplest things...I loved the way that nomads would recognise that this was an opportunity that wouldn't happen again. And it happened everywhere."

He recognised early that travelling alone made him reliant on the help of others. "I had to make friends, even with people who I might ordinarily try to avoid at all costs. And in that process...I found a great generosity of heart. And I found that everyone had an interesting story to tell." His books are littered with stories of non-ideal mates: drunks, self-promoters, people who steal everything from his saddles to his horses. But it was all part of the ride.

Six months into Tim's trip, a Kazakh nomad was so concerned that Tim was travelling alone, he gave him a dog: Tigon. Together, man, dog and horses became a family as they travelled, tuning into each other's routines and moods. Tim says, "Every now and then I had to double-check myself because I realised that I'd forgotten that they were a horse or a dog, I just saw them as a personality, irrespective."

The relationship with Tigon developed into one of the most important of Tim's life. They finished the trip together, and Tigon eventually moved to Australia, only dying at the start of 2019. The dedication at the start of *Tim & Tigon* captures how much he meant: "To Tigon, my dear companion who turned hostility into friendship, fear into love, danger into curiosity and faraway places into home."

DIGESTING IT

Tim returned to Australia in 2007 to awards, accolades and the joys of a stationary life. He was surrounded by family and friends. There were supermarkets, electricity and roads. Life was 'easy' once more. But he faced new, different challenges: loneliness, the feeling that the whole trip was a dream, and the separation from his animals and what had become his world.

"I felt a sense of isolation...over those first few months especially, as I realised that no one could quite relate to me. I had no idea where these things I'd learnt fitted in—a lot of the skills and knowledge I had now seemed obsolete. And in a world with so much, the small things didn't mean anything, whilst over there the small things always meant the world to me."

Six months after returning home, a bag containing half of Tim's trip diaries was stolen. This proved a turning point; he realised he needed to digest and share his experiences to make sense of them and create his new life. He began this process through storytelling—in film, in writing, and in person. First came the two-year process of producing *On the Trail of Genghis Khan* for ARTE in Europe and the ABC. Then he wrote his book of the same name, published in 2013. Most recently, he wrote *Tim & Tigon*. Aimed at a young adult audience, Tim penned it to inspire young people to explore the world beyond their doorstep. It was released just months ago, in September 2019.

Tim has also begun returning to Mongolia annually to guide trips through his second home. From three-week trekking and canoeing expeditions, to cultural journeys mixing festivals with adventure, he spends up to a quarter of every year sharing his love of the land, its culture and people. It's a rewarding and challenging process. "Most of the trips are pretty out there. And you're taking people who ordinarily wouldn't go into those remote environments and you're trying to make it a comfortable, enjoyable experience for them." But he sees this role as similar to documentary storytelling—his stories and insights can help others interpret what they're seeing.

Tim has further adventures planned. He'd like to spend a year living with nomads in Mongolia. He's long dreamt of following the route of the Roma from India to Europe. And he's driven to run trips in Mongolia, and potentially in Australia. Then there are the more 'normal' ambitions: a family, a home.

Whatever's to come for Tim, some things seem certain. The route he takes will not be conventional. Nor will it be quick and easy. His experiences will be consciously chosen, then lived and processed, mined for insight and clarity, before being turned into something meaningful for others. And his life—and the lives of all those he touches—will be the better for it. **W**

Tim & Tigon: A man. A dog. An epic adventure in the land of the nomads is a young reader's story about Tim Cope's horseback journey, published by Pan MacMillan. It's available on Audible, e-book, and, of course, in store. Visit www.timcopejourneys.com to learn more about Tim, and for information on getting Tim to visit your school.

CONTRIBUTOR: Megan Holbeck has pitched her tent in the family adventure camp, revelling in the slow pace and low demands for both fitness and navigational ability. She will emerge a fitter, wiser, more patient person in a decade or so. Until then, she explores with words.



Tigon, which means *goshawk* or *fast wind* in Kazakh, was given to Tim as a pup by a herder who told him he needed a friend



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