Buying Horses in Africa

It was cold enough for sweaters when we drove out of the town at 5 a.m. But as the sun climbed in our faces, the Land Rover became hot and we were soon back to shirt sleeves.

The Niger glistened in the sunshine, still vast and swollen from the ruins; but rocky shelves and sand spits showed that the level of the water had already fallen.

After fifty miles of dusty and rutted red laterite, we turned north on an undulating but gradually uphill gradient. The rains make this road impassable for five months of the year. Now it was potholed but firm.

We passed one or two villages. Women, naked from the waist, waved and smiled. A few others, enveloped in black, glanced at us from beneath their hoods. Their sharper features showed the mixture of a nomad strain with the negro races of savannah and river valley. The undergrowth was burned off in places as is the local custom, but for the most part the bush remained monotonously scrubby and impenetrable.

After three hours' hard drive, we approached the small town where we would find the horses. We began to pass people on their way to Monday's market day. The men rode the rumps of donkeys, the women swung along in single file with loaded calabashes on their heads. The occasional horseman seemed haughtier than the rest. One such was followed by his wife on foot.

At the far end of the mud-walled town, packed with people and animals for market, we found an open space where same forty stallions were being walked around by their owners. We saluted the local officials and selection began.

One of our party was a vet. His wife, a doctor, took notes. The other two were expert horsemen, former cavalry officers, and very tough. Each horse was measured and examined. None were much above

cob-size, but all were well muscled with shining coats. The vet said that the millet they had for feed had a curious effect on their teeth which made it difficult to be precise about their ages; but they were all between four and seven years old. Some had open saddle sores or were scarred by spurs. The owners crowded round for their turns, causing the stallions to leap and rear, lashing out at each other. The horses neighed and everyone shouted. The crowd scattered and some fell down. Everyone laughed. Meanwhile the professionals got on with the job, pinching the horse under examination by the nose and trying to keep him quiet while examining his mouth.

We had been commissioned to buy for a riding club on the coast, seven hundred miles away. A local businessman had driven up to do the job, but as he had turned his car over in a river bed *en route* he was in no shape for his task. He said he would give us a horse for our local club if we would do the buying.

After three hours we had eliminated all but a dozen. Our European saddles and bridles were produced and the rodeo began. Our two experts got up first and went bucking down the track, scattering the crowd. We each took our turn, with considerable trepidation. But only one came off, and we were impressed that the horse concerned stood stock still till its rider recovered, although it had just done its best to get rid of him. We chose ten and went to picnic lunch in the local rest house. Some of the owners whose horses had been eliminated were seen to vault up bareback, without touching the horse, and to canter away with loose rein. The rest waited for us. No one had yet mentioned money.

Our experts decided at lunch that the price of the best horse must be settled first and that its owner should be encouraged privily, by promises of a subsequent sweetener, to accept publicly a moderate price. The bargaining began.

By 2.30 I had to start home with half the party. We were well out of it, as we subsequently learned. Prices were eventually settled, and the lorry which had preceded us was found. The intention was to put ten stallions into one three tonner, broadside on, head to tail with wooden slats between. By nine in the evening they had them all in, having driven the lorry into a dry river bed and backed it up to a wooden bridge, there being no ramp and no material available to make one. How it was done it is hard to imagine, but worse was to happen.

After half an hour over the laterite ruts, the lorry stopped. The horse nearest the cab, aiming to kick his neighbours, had stuck his leg through the slat, had fallen down, and could not get up. The rest had converged upon him and were trampling him while, with his leg impaled, he could not right himself. The vet gallantly lowered himself into the melee from the roof of the lorry and fought with elbow and leg for an hour, with help from the two others, to get the fallen horse on its feet. But they had to give up and go back to the same river bed, untie all the horses and lead them out. By this time it was midnight and bitterly cold. So they left the horses there with orders to reduce the load to five the next day; the rest, destined for our club, were to be led down, a three day journey, after which they would need two weeks for their hooves, worn by the stone, to grow again. The boys who lead the horses cannot be persuaded to go by bush paths; they prefer the road way where they can wave at the lorries.

The lorry load will now have got to its destination by the sea. The horse who fell down in the truck miraculously suffered no permanent damage. But the riding pupils in his new home would be surprised to learn the full story of the day he changed hands.

Written in HM Emb'y Bamako in 1964/65 for the Times in response to a long standing invitation from A.P.Ryan, Deputy Editor, extended in Chile, to write a descriptive piece for their Times column of such pieces. But in this case Ryan replied that while it was charmingly written, especially the first paragraph, he could not publish it as no-one w'd believe the part about the horses in the three tonner. This was my first and last effort for the Times or any other descriptive writing. The French vet described later died of rabies.

JPW

Somerton

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