

THE LAND OF THE TURKOMANS

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The eastern shore of the Caspian sea is a vast plain of green steppe which stretches to the Kopet Dag mountains on the border with Iran, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. In the spring the grass is waist high and a blaze of iridescent wild red poppies, tulips, iris and gladioli. Cultivated wheat fields shimmer with the breeze off the Caspian sea. It is a wild land, populated mainly by semi-nomadic Turkomans and Kurds grazing their sheep and cattle. Wolves follow the herds, cheetahs stalk the unwary, wild boar forage along the brackish creeks and golden eagles soar over the undulating plains. Herds of mares used to graze this land but they are mainly gone. Those that remain are wild, fleeing into the erosion gullies that slash perpendicularly across the steppe.

This is the land of the Turkomans. A land that saw primitive Neanderthal man who lived in caves and hunted seals in the Caspian. This land supported the Scythians who had tamed the horse and roamed from the frozen north as far as the Persian Gulf. Alexander married his Roxanna here and founded another Alexandria. The Parthians swept out from their capitol Nisa to conquer as far as the Mediterranean.

It is also the land of the horse. The early ancestors of the Caspian and the Turkoman were wild here. They were hunted and eaten and were tamed and domesticated and were taken on raids and exported from their native steppes to China, India, Greece and Egypt. It is the cradle of the Oriental horse.

There are scattered Tepes and shards that remind the lone horseman of the glories of the past but only the wind blowing unobstructed across the steppes still sings.

The horse is almost gone, replaced by imported Thoroughbreds for the races and motorbikes for the travelers. What pure Turkoman horses remained were turned loose by decree after 1979 revolution. When the Russians subdued Turkmenistan in 1885 many Turkoman horses were slaughtered, turned loose to survive as they could in the desert of the Kizil Kum or fled with their owners over the borders to Persia, Afghanistan and Turkey. History turned a page and repeated itself in Iran exacting the same toil of destruction on a unique and rare horse one century later.

My husband, Narcy, and I bought 18 hectares of barren steppe land near the tiny Turkoman village of Ghara Tepe Sheikh in 1975. We had sold our farm near Teheran and needed a place to keep the few Caspians we had not sold to the Royal Horse Society and some of the children's riding horses. Four years later we had a revolution and were ordered to turn our horses loose or face total confiscation. When two years had passed we visited the spring where we left the horses and found three of our horses which we enticed to follow us with nose bags. They had done well for themselves and were sleek and fat. Slowly, slowly we acquired some fine mares which others had caught. They had all the marks of purebred Akhal-Teke/Turkomans (later blood tests with Gus Cothran confirmed this). So, out of this bonanza of beautiful mares which one could say had literally dropped out of the sky, we began the Ghara Tepe Turkoman Stud.

We have 25 now (having sold a few along the way to pay for the keep). That is not very many but I suspect that there never were very many of these pure horses. The Chinese sacrificed huge armies for only 30 and William Moorcroft, dedicating his life in the early 1800's to finding these horses for the East India Company only ever saw five altogether in Bokhara. In fact, I suspect 25 perfect specimens all in one place is not bad.

Narcy died in the spring of 1994 but I still live with the Turkomans. The horses have a rather splendid stable Narcy built for them. I live in a one room mud hut. We do have electricity but there is no water (we collect rain water) no telephone, no all weather road and no bridge over the Gorgan river near us. The Turkoman and I breed the horses, ride them over the endless steppe watching kestrels floating in the sky and we occasionally sell a horse in order to be able to live.

I do not really have an address but if you are ever in the vicinity of Kalaleh and ask for the horses of Ghara Tepe Sheikh any one of the tall, fur hatted Turkoman can tell you where we are.

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