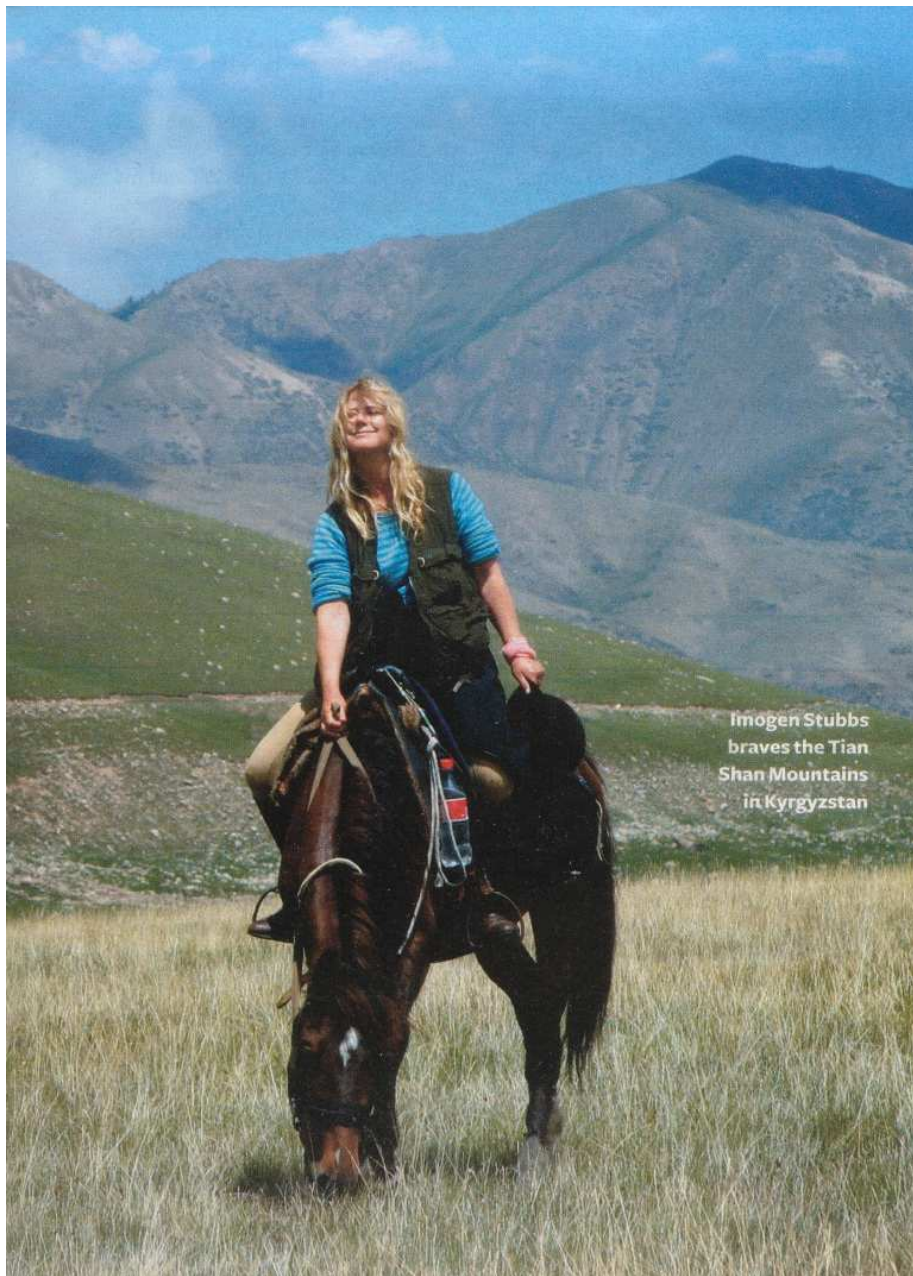


A bad back,  
a dramatic  
holiday booked  
and a doctor  
telling her  
not to go. It  
all adds up to...

# Sciatica in Kyrgyzstan

BY IMOGEN STUBBS



Imogen Stubbs  
braves the Tian  
Shan Mountains  
in Kyrgyzstan

## My riding trip to Kyrgyzstan had an

unpromising beginning. Just before the departure date I had been acting in a play with a very violent fight scene. One night, the table had collapsed underneath me while I was being beaten up and my fellow actor came crashing down on top of me. The result was a crippling back pain and a constant fragility interspersed with yelping agony. Undeterred, I resolutely ploughed on with my travel plans, deciding I could write an article entitled: "Sciatica in Kyrgyzstan—thank God I'm not dyslexic" (having checked this with my dyslexic son first, of course).

But when it became clear that I could only walk like a Lowry figure and sit down like someone being lowered on to a hedgehog, my osteopath sent me for an MRI scan. This confirmed his fears that I had a herniated disc at the bottom of my spine. Four days before my departure. Bummer.

He devised many exercises for my back, none of which centred on riding. I pleaded desperation, claiming my disappointment might cripple me even further. He rolled his eyes and gave me sheets of exercises and a back corset, recommended drugs for pain relief and asked whether there would be facilities for emergency airlifts.

At this point I realised I knew nothing about where I was going. I had been so busy with my back I had not actually researched Kyrgyzstan.

It turned out to be a landlocked Central Asian republic, formerly part of the Soviet Union, bordered by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China. Thanks to Borat and his jokes about Kazakhstan, I assumed there was something ridiculous about this area.

Instead, it seemed to be a kind of Shangri-La, unchanged for 2,000 years since it was part of the Silk Route. When I actually read the proposed itinerary, it looked fantastic: camping and riding for ten days across 13,000-foot-high snowy mountains and rock-strewn valleys with no signs of civilisation—just herds of horses, yaks and the odd yurt. Untouched wilderness in all its mobile-phoneless, A&E-less glory.

I had to go.

## And so I went into training with a

plan of action that involved taking a taxi up and down a street with speed bumps, sitting with my legs apart as if on a horse and seeing if I could bear the jolting.

Ride World Wide—a wonderful company for anyone seeking equestrian adventure—sent me a questionnaire. "What standard do you consider yourself? Would you prefer a stallion or a stable hunter? What is your ambition for yourself as a rider?"

I had replied honestly and from the heart, even though the angle of writing was setting off my sciatica. "I



**'I WAS FORCED TO ACCEPT THAT A HORSE CAN NEVER BE A VOLVO'**

would prefer a speed-impaired horse called Snoozy, not Thunderbolt. I like to walk either on or off the horse. I really need a Western saddle or an Endurance saddle (with back rest and possibly a drinks cabinet and stereo). I am a terrible, repeat terrible, rider..."

I think it was at this moment that I was forced to accept the fact that a horse can never be a Volvo.

My husband devised an elaborate contraption with two pairs of oversized bicycling shorts stuffed with the down feathers from a cushion. Another friend gave me some huge sanitary towels that she had been given for post-baby haemorrhoids to stuff down my jodhpurs.

At the airport I couldn't lift my rucksack on to the weighing scales. This did not bode well. The plane journey was only made bearable by doing my back-loosening exercises in the aisle. Unfortunately, this looked like an alcohol-induced disco-dance and I was politely asked to go back to my seat where I was plied with water.

We were met by Domenico Mocchi,

a gorgeous Italian who turned out to be our guide. Having received my questionnaire, he had been searching in vain for a Western saddle and was worried that without one I might keel over and injure myself. Sadly, I could not calm his fears.

The rest of the group included two health-and-safety experts and a doctor. On the downside they were all alarmingly body-toned, experienced riders. I felt my back cowering before their riding anecdotes. Half of them had special jackets to stop them breaking their spines.

## The journey to the mountains was four

hours over rutted roads and potholes, eventually arriving at Lake Issyk Kul, a vast stretch of turquoise water surrounded by mountains. We stayed with the family of a famous eagle hunter, Sogan Bai, who fed us and put us up with immense hospitality.

The next day we got kitted up for the beginning of the ride. The horses were a beautiful, eclectic bunch, some

## DAILY TIPS FOR BAD BACKS

- 1** Never sit up straight before getting out of bed. Move carefully on to your side and then lever yourself into a standing position.
- 2** If you dry your hair with a towel, don't throw your head from side to side. Keep your chin towards your chest.
- 3** When getting dressed, put socks and clothes on while sitting or lean against a wall.
- 4** If you can, cycle or walk to work. If you drive, sit with your back firmly against the seat. Your arms should be at 90 degrees.
- 5** Bend knees and hips when lifting children and do not twist.
- 6** When playing with children, kneel to adjust to their height.

friskier than others. I suggested the smallest one for myself, but Domenico gave me the horse he considered the most placid and reliable. The saddle was plush with a royal-blue velvet cushion, but there was nothing remotely regal about sitting on some sanitary towels crammed between two pairs of cycling shorts. Fortunately, I found a little graspable ledge at the front of the saddle.

We ended the day camping by the lake and swimming with the horses. I lay in shimmering water looking at snow-capped mountains, a beer in my hand, resting my spinal discs and soothing my sore legs.

Oddly, when I tentatively removed my back brace I didn't collapse like

a demolished chimney stack. I lay in my tent breathing in the smell of wild sage and listening to the munching of the horses. My urban carapace was disintegrating but my spine felt intact.

Over the next week we rode across range after range of the Tian Shan Mountains, negotiating our way along desiccated valleys strewn with boulders and then up into emerald prairies of cobwebby thistles, forget-me-nots, edelweiss and egg-yolky buttercups. In every direction we saw butterflies, yaks, goats and herds of frisky horses like swarms of midges. We galloped past children on donkeys and yapping dogs. We stopped for fermented mare's milk at isolated yurts.

After long morning rides we picnicked in meadows, in snowfields, in sheep pens. Lunch was always processed cheese, bread, cucumber, tinned fish and sweetcorn. Everything past its sell-by date but organic, since the country is too poor for pesticides.

As each ten-hour riding day passed I felt my back improve until I weaned myself off all the pills and back braces and felt like a human being again. I even started to enjoy cantering.

The main terror was approaching thunderstorms. We would gallop in the other direction, usually with herds of rather frisky stallions trying to join us. But repeatedly the storm would catch up with us and we became riders in the storm.

Our highlights included a night when we all slept in a row in a yurt like the Lost Boys. And then there

was the eagle. He accompanied us on horseback with Sogan Bai's son one day. He was sent off to swoop down on prey and was beautiful in flight, although not in killer mode.

## **Before I went to Kyrgyzstan I was**

bent double and actually starting to care about what Brad and Angelina were going to call their twins. I returned upright and slightly more profound. My husband asked me if I ended up thinking deep philosophical thoughts after riding 215 miles of mountains and valleys uninterrupted by fences or people. Well, yes. I pondered on the fact that human

beings are here to wonder, invent, create, procreate, tell stories, to assimilate huge unfathomable Nature while being aware of our little place in the universe. Not to download and assimilate every horror, perversion, apocalyptic prediction...all the trivia, ambition, impatience, frustration and frazzle we fill ourselves with every day, until we kill our instinct for joy and live like Chicken Little, always waiting for the sky to fall on our heads.

But mainly I stopped thinking, stopped the chatter in my head and stopped analysing. I just allowed simple remembered things to resurface. And I enjoyed having my back back.