

700 KM ON FOOT WITH CASPIAN HORSES AN ENDURANCE TEST WITH NO CONCESSIONS

By **Bernard Peccoud** (Translated by Peta Jones) Reproduced by permission of CHS

It took Namaki and Khalif nearly two best part of a thousand kilometres of road between the Pyrenees and the Alps. Caspians, descendants of the legendary Seal of Darius the Great, King of Persia, breeders in Gommer – Francoise and for this long and complicated journey who had come to select them two months

of June these fabulous little horses Bernard (7 km from Annecy in Haute addition to enjoying their well-deserved acquainted with their new owners and way of life.



Trial of baggage with
Frances Smith Boyes

months to cover the and track which lie These two little horse displayed on the left the stables of their Brian Smith Boyes – with their new owner, previously. At the end

arrived at Menthon St. Savoie) where, in rest, they are getting adapting to their new

This journey had a three-fold objective: to become fully acquainted with a breed of which the new owner knew absolutely nothing, to train the two mares, Khalif (three year old mare, 1.1m at the withers) and Namaki (five year old mare, 1.2 a.t.w.) who, prior to their departure, had experienced the minimum of handling and to treat ourselves to an amicable trip of a lifetime across France, following the route of the great circuit, in particular the road to Compostella. The watchword for the trip, devised by the new owner of the horses before departure was “Let’s have a good time”. Full conformity with this maxim entailed strict daily attention to all the parameters of the ‘Expedition’ and these became progressively varied as the horses and their escorts gained both in endurance and in mutual understanding. Four basic rules required particular respect:

THE EQUIPMENT MUST BE PERFECT: It is absolutely essential to avoid any harm or discomfort so that the horses are not deterred from training and can cope with the distance. The essentially distinctive morphology and size of these horses necessitated the creation of a special tack (*i*), which proved perfect down to the last detail (not a single sore or swelling, nor any excessive sensitivity during the whole three months) after the two trial days spent at our departure point in long excursions on the magnificent roads around Gommer (Atlantic Pyrenees). The precise balancing of the load each morning and a close check of the harness soon became a reflex action.

THE STAGES MUST BE ADAPTED both to conditions and to the state of the horses. It was essential to avoid stages beyond the range both of the horses, who were completely untrained, and their fellow-travellers who, for the most part, were novices (*ii*), so they varied between 18 and 30 kms (*iii*), according to the map and state of fatigue. To avoid exceeding the capabilities and patience of one and all at the end of each stage, it was essential to be able to stop as one or other of the joint members of our party really needed to do so. Our basic baggage thus included camping equipment which allowed us to spend a reasonably comfortable, restful night more or less anywhere (*iv*). Furthermore, the stages must not be too tedious or stressful, so that the horses and their escort derive from them both the variety and the motivation indispensable to the enjoyment of every nomad pedestrian on a long journey. So, out of the 1,100 kms estimated before departure, approximately 700 kms were covered on foot and 400 kms were covered by lorry. It involved the stages from Gomme to Eauze, in order to rejoin the GR65 at the Gommer run-off and from Puy en Velay to Saillans in Drome in order to avoid the Ardeche section, which is very stony and badly laid-out. It also included the tedious long wind through the Rhone Valley and the section from Grenoble to Annecy, where most of the roads are asphalt and run through built-up areas or suburbs.

IT IS ESSENTIAL TO REACH A COMPROMISE BETWEEN DISTANCE TO BE COVERED AND FATIGUE: The former must be reasonable vis-à-vis the particular features of the region and the

possibilities of overnight stay. Sufficient equipment must be carried to ensure a minimum standard of comfort while imposing the maximum limit on the load involved. This load should never exceed the capabilities of the horses or their escort. It is equally important to adjust the load according to the state of fatigue and the particular problems of the stage (heat, height). Thus the loads varied all the way along this long, hard journey in accordance with its various parameters. Namaki carried up to 35 kg (including the baggage saddle), Khalif up to 25 kg and each of the escort up to 7 kg, bearing in mind that the objective was neither a sporting achievement nor a training exercise for the horses. Taking into account that the latter were not in sufficient condition to guarantee success in a long and arduous effort at the end of a winter spent in stables, they were relieved of their burden every time there was a chance of alternative transport or a support car (v).

THE HORSES' FEET MUST BE SPARED TO THE MAXIMUM - 'No foot, no horse' as the old saying goes. So the decision taken at departure point was to avoid shoeing and take a gamble on the legendary toughness of Caspians' hooves. This gamble was a risky one, bearing in mind the distance ahead of us across regions that would prove really hard on the horses' feet – Aveyron is very flinty and Aubrac and Margeride are both granitic. In certain of these areas it is almost as though one is walking on a farrier's rasp. The initial was therefore to walk on the shoulder of embankment, in order to avoid the often preferable to make a long detour on rather than taking dicey short cuts, even shorter (vii). Equally essential was to see allowed to set their own pace on any appeared unhappy (viii). The fact that we on every detail and took a fortnight's rest



Improvised water-hole

training of the horses the road, even on the asphalt (vi). It was also less attractive roads if they were very much that the horses were surface where they kept a very close eye in Aveyron made it

possible to take up the challenge. 23The trip unshod, although they did begin to increasing sensitivity in the last very pebbly stages through Vercors. On our arrival, the farrier announced that they were 'in perfect condition' since they did not need any paring and even the slightest tenderness had disappeared a fortnight after arrival.

horses did the whole show signs of

Thus, by following these simple rules kilometre after kilometre, highway after footpath, a night in a hostel or camping out, valleys followed by plateaux and mountains, we steadily built up a trust and a mutual understanding with these amazing little horses. Of course we had to talk them through every step of the way and play down the dramas – crossing bridges and footbridges, meeting or being passed by terrifying farm tractors of every kind and colour, monumental trailers covered with every variety of logo, motor bikes roaring by, each noisier and more disquieting than the last, interminable trains travelling at fiendish speed, not to mention all the other monsters lying in wait for Caspians such as motor mowers, traffic signals and school crossings... They were also required to make the acquaintance of every breed of dog, horse, cow, hen and duck, every ford and every marsh into which you fear you are about to disappear, every type of terrain and every gradient; in short, everything that makes up the world and life spent in the company of man. The speed with which these Caspians caught on, their courage and the bond of confidence which grew with every step of the way were never at fault.

What is so captivating is the sustained attention paid by these horses to their accompanier (or trainer) when they are learning to cope with a new situation and the particular gratitude which they demonstrate towards him as an individual. The younger of the mares very rapidly learned obedience and grew in confidence. On the other hand Namaki stubbornly resisted for nearly a month before yielding. Her defensiveness (refusing to stand still when being saddled, a tendency to bite herself free) all disappeared suddenly one fine morning. It is obvious that, more than any other breed, this

particular one requires patience and a great deal of gentle handling. Any display of ill-temper or impatience obviously stays in their memory for a long time.

The hardness of the Caspians was further verified not only by the way their feet stood up to the task but also from the point of view of their nutrition. Throughout the journey they were only fed on grain 15 times at the most, when it was absolutely impossible to find grass of edible quality. The grass at the side of the road and in the pasture at the hostels proved sufficient for their need despite the long, sustained effort demanded due to their minimum training, so that they arrived at their final destination fitter than when they had set out.

Thus it was that the horses who finally reached the end of their long journey were attentive, confident and perfect to handle. However, it must be admitted that whereas Namaki never showed any signs of fatigue, there were possibly times when Khalif, the younger of the two, needed a rest. She would begin to show signs of acute weariness, even of depression, for which the major reason was undoubtedly the tenderness in her feet. But without a shadow of a doubt these small horses had finally acquired the technique, the rhythm and the mental attitude required to ensure their capability to continue for a long time on this journey. However, it seemed pretty clear that a rest of fixed duration (8 to 15 days) is necessary after each stretch of about 300 kms so that they can 'get their feet back into shape' since they are unshod and need to have a break. These particular horses evidently love variety and diversity appears essential to maintain their morale (*i*).

As for the accompanying team, they also achieved their objective of 'Let's have a good time', the joy of renewing old friendships, the rediscovery of an almost forgotten rhythm of life and the thousand and one simple pleasures of the wanderer on a long progress, who doesn't have to consult his watch. A patch of shade where it is cooler, a murmuring stream, a deeper pink in the sky at sunset, the odd siesta filled with the ceaseless buzzing of insects, the song of the birds when the first rays of dawn strike our camping ground...the companionship of these affectionate little horses added a touching and very precious extra dimension to the journey. Indeed, caring for them and their comfort served as a wonderful antidote to the personal blisters, aches and pains which are unavoidable on such a long journey. Moreover, it is impossible to exaggerate the aesthetic pleasure afforded by the road to Compostella (even if you are travelling it in reverse) or the infinite variety of experience afforded by this magical highway. In short, travelling across France (and that journey in particular) affords an infinite variety of landscapes which the traveller on foot can enjoy with every step of the way.

So it is that, a week after their arrival in the Alps, these two little mares had started their saddle training without showing any particular signs of fatigue or tenderness in their feet. At present, the two small Caspians are boarded out in a pony club where they have already won many admirers. They are there to learn all about the role of a horse, but will shortly return to the meadows of their new owner. Up to the present time they have fully lived up to their promise: two and a half weeks after their arrival, they had reached the 3rd stage in training. Certain it is that, thanks to the important groundwork carried out during the journey and, above all, to the skill of an outstanding trainer (Claude Chariglione of the Pony-Club du Ramponnet at Annecy-le-Vieux, these little horses were broken-in very rapidly by a young horsewoman called Agathe (11 years old, gallop level 3). Agathe made up for her lack of experience by her courage and willingness and, after only 10 half-hour sessions, Khalif could already be ridden by a four and a half year old child. It is surprising to see these lively little horses, with all the sparkle of an Arab steed, remain perfectly calm in the midst of a bunch of laughing, gesticulating children, all squabbling for a chance to use the brush or curry-comb or to check their feet.

As far as the accompaniers were concerned, this journey into the blue had certainly proved a 'really good time'. Judging by the welcome the two small mares reserve for them and the trust they still reveal on every visit, it is obvious that the mares shared our good time with us. Inevitably, the project had involved a great deal of hard work and fatigue but...what a memory to look back on!!!

- (i) Leather saddle-bags, especially modified and fitted from Cab'âne, mounted on Western saddles (10" and 13") from the Baude saddlers, padded Western saddle-cloth, front and rear girths backed with natural sheepskin and halter in American-type cord.
- (ii) Apart from the new owner of the horses, who covered the whole journey, a team of five of his friends split into relays.
- (iii) An average of 25 kms, one rest day per week.
- (iv) This equipment consisted of plastic tarpaulins in case of rain, a complete cooking unit, a mobile electrified pen (50 m of wire, 6 stakes and a picket post), 2 complete meals for the horses and their accompanying team.
- (v) We thus fully avoided portorage for approximately 250 kms and partially for around 100 kms.
- (vi) By the end of the journey, they only needed a quick finger sign from their leader to move up or down the embankment.
- (vii) It is worth noting at this point that the shoulders of the asphalt roads are often less hard going than the roads.
The speed of a Caspian at walking pace is about 4 kms/hr. It is constrained to trot short at 5 kms/hr. and settles into a steady, gentle trot from 7 kms/hr. Medium speed was actually from 4 kms/hr. This was reduced to 2 kms/hr. on ground that was really hard-going (e.g. gritty, granite surfaces, hard-stone blocks to descend or a very granular surface).
- (i) This need for variety is definitely the outcome of their rapidity of assimilation.



.Luggage loaded and ready to go: Bernard ® and friends



Narrow Bridge en-route



First time in a Town



A midi au cours



Two days of rest



Two days of Rest, Valhourles



L'Abbaye de Mouissac



L'Eglise do St Alban



After the journey: Agathe & Virginie on Khalif (l) and Namaki (r) at the riding school