



Cambridge Lower Secondary Checkpoint

ENGLISH

0861/01

Paper 1 Non-fiction

April 2025

INSERT

1 hour 10 minutes

INFORMATION

- This insert contains the reading text.
- You may annotate this insert and use the blank spaces for planning. **Do not write your answers** on the insert.



This document has **4** pages. Any blank pages are indicated.

Text for **Section A**

In the following extract, travel writer Colin Thubron waits with his guide and the horsemen carrying his supplies on the edge of a remote mountainous wilderness in Mongolia. They will travel on horseback to the source of one of Earth's least-known rivers, the Amur. But first they need permission from rangers to enter the reserve: a strictly protected area.

5

I open my tent-flap on the cold dark, and catch my breath. My shadow falls black over the grass. The night above me blazes with stars of the Milky Way, and across that immense Mongolian sky, the stars sweep like an icy torrent.

Dawn spreads like the thin radiance of another planet. The world looks still unstained. In the distances around us the sun is lifting a glistening mist above grasslands heavy with dew. It is as if a great fire were burning over the plains. For a while it obscures the hills on the skyline, then its haze dissolves as though we had imagined it.

10

The air grows warmer. Tiny moths are rising from the grasses, where invisible birds sing, and the air fills with the click and whirr of grasshoppers. To walk here is to wade through a tide of wildflowers: multicoloured asters, butter-coloured potentilla, peacock-blue columbines. Then some local men on horses emerge, heavy in their native *deel* overcoats, their daggers at their belts, to check our own tethered mounts.

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It is well into morning before the rangers appear. They come to our tents on motorbikes, in their outsize boots and piratical headbands. They carry little briefcases. They remain with us a long time, eating our biscuits and scrutinising our papers. The country ahead of us is dangerous, they say, and the remote marshlands almost impassable. The monsoon rains had been heavy that summer. Now, in late August, the ground is flooded and treacherous. And there are bears. Once inside the reserve, we will be beyond help.

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Batmonkh, my guide and native of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's capital, listens to them without interest. He says they resent outside intruders in their land. Eventually the rangers present us with a document to sign, releasing them from any responsibility, and at last they leave, bouncing over the steppelands¹ on their motorbikes after washing their hands of us. We should have listened to them, of course.

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For a moment we halt at the edge of the reserve; the next we are in underbush, following the river where it descends from the east. Already the slopes are steepening and darkening into forest. A late cuckoo calls. We are crossing the divide from grassland to woodlands, the scent of crushed wildflowers fading under our hooves, and all of us elated by our release.

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But soon the terrain becomes wetter. Sometimes the horses struggle in bog water that is still flowing. Once, ominously, the ground beneath the leading horseman gives way, and his stallion² collapses into a mud hole, and has to force itself up onto its feet again.

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By early afternoon we are riding along hills above the river. Birds of prey are dropping low over its swamp. For miles we brush through dense undergrowth, while conifer trees look down on us from the mountainside valleys. The only sounds are our own. As the air sharpens, I sense the deepening remoteness of our path, and feel an old excitement at entering another country.

My horse is a 12-year-old stallion who has no name. To the horsemen he is simply ‘the White Horse’; any other label would be sentimental. He is tough and scarred. We ride in a straggling procession of nine, our tents and food loaded onto five packhorses. These beasts are strong and glossy after summer grazing – not the sickly creatures of late winter. Short-legged and large-headed, they descend from the tireless horses of Mongol history, able to gallop 10 km without pause, and we ride them in the Mongol way, with our legs bent back from the knees on short stirrups³. 40 45

Towards evening comes the first hint of trouble. One of our packhorses is still untamed, and its wild energy unsettles the others. Ahead of us, in low woodland, they are suddenly thrusting and pushing against each other. Suddenly, the horses tear loose from their ropes, three of them bolting back the way they came, their eyes large with fear, with the horsemen following. 50

Batmonkh and I tether the remaining pair of horses to trees and wait. We wait seemingly for hours. When the horsemen return with the escaped horses, we find that the untamed packhorse has thrown off its baggage, which now lies somewhere – anywhere – in the forest around us.

They return to search for it, while Batmonkh and I worry about which of the giant saddlebags is missing. If it holds my rucksack, I realise, my passport and visas will be gone, and our journey ended. I tramp back along the way the horses disappeared, but the forest spreads around me in a glaze of concealing birch scrub⁴. 55

After an hour we hear a far-off shout. And soon afterwards, the two men calmly return with the lost saddlebags as if their recovery were expected. And when we unpack that evening, we find that the recovered baggage contained our food. 60

Glossary

¹steppelands: grasslands

²stallion: male horse

³stirrups: light metal rings that hold the feet of a rider

⁴birch scrub: an area of land covered with short trees and bushes

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