

# The Gobi Experience

## No wusses allowed

*By David Edwards (abridged)*

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*Note: David was on the very first, exploratory, tour to Mongolia, but we think it gives an authentic flavour of what touring in Mongolia is all about. It also demonstrates why you need to travel with our expert guide and a good local back-up crew, something we put great emphasis on.*

This isn't what I had in mind, not at all. Actually I had few preconceptions when I signed on for a tour of Mongolia, but I didn't expect to bed down for the night in a pup tent in the Middle Gobi, in the middle of freakin' nowhere, in the middle of a rainstorm. No showers, no latrine and nothing but a thin foam pad between my ample ass and the cold, hard ground. This after an all-day off-road ride, the last 50 miles in a stinging, sideways downpour.

It would get worse.

Next morning, breakfast served off the back of our ex-Russian army 6x6 chase truck, we saddled up for another 200-mile ride, with the carrot of another night's tent-camping at the end (ed. note, we no longer have the truck or do tents!). But 20 miles in, disaster struck, Ed, with little dirtbike experience, got it all wrong in a downhill rut, launching himself over the bars and onto his head. With a concussion and several broken ribs, he was done, his Mongolian adventure finished.

A couple of hours later, four more of us were on the ground. The previous day's rain had turned a low-lying section of trail into a snot-slick mud field. The clinging sludge jammed itself between tyres and front mudguard, effectively locking the wheel and putting us down. Nobody else was injured, but I augured in at about 15 mph, tweaking an ankle.

It would get worse.

Towards the end of the day, Roger, the best dirt rider of our group ('I don't even own a bike with mirrors') overcooked a corner and low-sided hard, knocking himself out and snapping a collarbone He'd join Ed in the lead jeep.

Good news out of all this was that with two people in need of a hospital, we detoured to a nearby tourist camp served by an airstrip – the tents stayed in the truck, and we had hot showers (okay, warm dribbles) and even a restaurant that night. Ed and Roger, pain eased with pills, would catch a flight back to the capital city of Ulaan Bataar the next morning. Or maybe not, as one fellow camper informed us to expect delays. MIAT, Mongolia's national airline, he joked, really stood for 'maybe I arrive today'.

Cleaned up and resting in my comfortable ger, a cement-floored version of the round canvas-and-felt abodes of the Mongolian herdsmen, I considered shipping out with our wounded. My sprained ankle was still swelling. Plus, we were having all kinds of trouble with the bikes, undoubtedly the hardest-working BMW Funduros anywhere. The victims of several previous tours, the rented 650 singles all had 10,000 or more tough off-road kilometres showing and all wore the scars of battle (more modern F650s are now used!). Already we'd broken two shock mounts, a couple of the bikes had horribly crunchy steering races, another dribbled oil from its cracked frame, and my bike was going through fuses like there was a Halfords on every street corner, which there wasn't – stores or street corners. With 8 days left at the rate we were going I wasn't sure if we'd run out of bikes or riders first.

Patrick, our guide, is at his best when things have gone to hell. After Roger's crash, he calmly fashioned an X-brace out of two riding jerseys and torque the offending clavicle back in place. His eye-of-the-storm competence is one reason our many clients are so faithful. Anyway, behind the scenes, he got together with our translator and local guides, instructing that each day's mileage should be shorter and that there would be no more pup tents, no more squat-on-the-rock lavatories. The show – and the story – would go on, after all.

Not that you'd know it today, but at one time the Mongol Empire was the greatest the world had ever known, stretching from Korea in the East to Hungary in the West, from Moscow in the North to Vietnam in the South. Led by the ruthless warlord Genghis Khan, the Mongol hordes – deadly archers on fast-moving horse-ponies – swept all before them. It's been translated that Genghis Khan claimed his greatest pleasure in life was to 'cut my enemy to pieces, seize their possessions, witness the tears of those who are dear to them, and embrace their wives and daughters'. One suspects The Great Khan did not use the verb 'embrace'.

Khan's heirs continued his empire building, taking over much of the Arabian Peninsula and all of China, which they ruled for a century. The Forbidden City, Beijing's best-known landmark, was actually built as a palace by Kublai Khan, grandson of Genghis. One massive misstep was the attempted invasion of Japan in 1281. Some 140,000 warriors set sail for the island nation, almost assured of victory, only to have their armada swamped in a fierce typhoon. To this day, the Japanese credit this 'divine wind', or kamikaze, with saving their country.

Warned by a defeated Chinese General that 'you may conquer on horseback, but you cannot govern on horseback', the Mongols gradually gave up power and territory. By the 1800s, China controlled much of the country, and in 1924 the Russians arrived, setting up a puppet Communist government.

With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, Mongolia was cut loose, though Russia's influence can still be seen. Mongolians have adopted the Cyrillic alphabet, most speak Russian as a second language, Soviet-designed cars, motorcycles, busses and aeroplanes abound, and the capital – universally known as 'U.B. City' – is a desperately dull place populated by featureless concrete structures that only communists can do so badly.

Today, Mongolia is a struggling democracy dealing with growing pains, 45% unemployment, a 5-year drought and a sparse, crumbling infrastructure. Of our 1500 miles in the country, only the last 200 into U.B. City were on asphalt, pretty poor stuff, too, peppered with rim-bending potholes. For dual-purpose riders, though, this is prime territory, with everything from sandy two-tracks to dry river bottoms to the great gravelly plains of the Middle Gobi, where you gas it up and head for the Earth's curvature beneath phalanxes of big billowy clouds.

'Montana should stop it right now with all that 'Big Sky' silliness', someone proclaimed, 'and immediately cede the name to Mongolia'.

My companions through this vast remoteness were an interesting lot, all affected with a peculiar type of wanderlust for exotic, out of the way locales. Silver-haired Henry has rafted the white-water rivers of Russia, dog-sledded in Norway, hiked through Tibet, ridden solo around Australia on an R1100GS. He's done Europe on a bike too, but dismisses it as almost too ordinary. 'Nothing worth mentioning', he says.

To be sure, Mongolia was hard work. Everyone crashed, everyone except the iron-stomached Henry, came down with a case of the dreaded 'Delhi belly'. But these are the *yins* that make the *yangs* so great.

As Jim said, 'none of my friends understand why I go. They ask, "don't you go anywhere normal?"'.

The answer, of course, is no. Jim has the luxury of free time. When he's not riding Enfields in India or F650s in Mongolia, he can be found in Ecuadorean jungles or on Indonesian islands, tracking down rare begonias. (Speaking of *yins* and *yangs*, Jim also owns – and campaigned – the Britten V1000 racebike currently on display at the Guggenheim Las Vegas.)

Of back-country travel, he says, 'it's dirty, hot and sweaty, the food sucks, the toilets are sketchy, and don't even think about deluxe accommodations. But it's magnificent, it's different, you know you're someplace unique'.

Trip photographer Malcolm, an expat Kiwi living in Japan, rode two-up with 8-year old son Shaun, who'll hands-down win the What-I-did-on-my summer-holiday contest back in Tokyo. Malcolm's philosophy for 'Third World' touring is simple: 'you eat when you can, you sleep when you can, you wash clothes when you can'. Other than that, expect the unexpected and deal with it.

Steve, recently retired from the banking industry, travelled extensively as a student, and did Mormon missionary work in France, logging 20,000 kilometres on a Solex moped. 'I had the travel bug bad', he says. 'I joined Citibank not because I was all that intrigued by banking, but because I knew they sent entry-level employees overseas immediately'. In his 50s, Steve rediscovered motorcycling after retirement and runs a BMW GS at home – when he's at home. 'The World's an extremely exciting place, and you just want to see more of it', he says. 'Doing it on a motorcycle is like a 'two-fer'. You get the excitement of riding with the adventure of travel'.

You've heard of the infamous 'ugly tourists'? These guys aren't them.