

INSIDE

an adventure rally

"It was unpredictable weather
as wild as the landscape itself."

by lauren johnson

It was hot in the car, but that wasn't why everyone had handkerchiefs tied around their faces. With the frame of the tiny Citroen Saxo 1.1 liter car splitting in half, the body was riddled with cracks and holes and the powdery sand of the Mongolian steppe was pouring through the vents like flour through a sifter.

The roads had long ago ceased to exist and we, along with our two-car convoy, were driving through the steppe with nothing more than a compass and an outdated Russian atlas. We had less than three days to make it to UlaanBataar and we knew for certain that we were way off track.

The Mongol Rally launched in late July, 2010 with over 400 teams departing from the Goodwood race track in Britain, and from similar start points in Italy and Spain. There was no set route, the point of the rally was the adventure and planning your own route was part of the fun. We plotted a route using maps and compasses, foregoing the technology of our era in favor of a bit of old fashioned navigation. Studying sun and star navigation techniques was an interesting lesson in respecting our forefather's sense of adventure.

We set off through Europe, Eastern Europe and into the clutches of the former Soviet Republics, including Moldova, which was at war with separatists when were



traversing the country. Uzbekistan was in the middle of a fuel shortage that left us scrambling for black market imported petrol, and Kazakhstan and Russian were havens for corrupt police who attempted to extort cash from our little convoy at every bend in the crooked road. Finally, and overcoming daring odds, our tiny convoy arrived at the Mongolian border in late August.

Mongolia is a country unlike many in terms of its adherence to a nomadic lifestyle and the vast, unbroken distances between families on the steppe. Arriving in Western Mongolia, we cut a direct south-east path toward Ulaan-Bataar following what we heard were decent dirt roads. The roads were sometimes decent, by which I mean there

were no boulders and a path was cut across the steppe like a scar on otherwise perfect skin. Sometimes the roads disappeared, and the steppe had reclaimed its territory, kicking all signs of human presence off the landscape. Even worse, sometimes a single path would diverge into 5-10 smaller paths that spread out like the tentacles of a delta, with no signs or landmarks indicating which road one should take to reach a particular settlement. The maps became a joke early on, and showing one to a rural Mongolian was like showing a rural American the Rosetta Stone and asking for a translation.





During the day it was hot, dusty and windy while at night temperatures sank to below freezing, and if it rained the moisture turned the roads to small rivers of mud and rocks. It was unpredictable weather, as wild as the landscape itself.

The car was shattered. With a tiny engine, ill-suited tires and a frame designed for soft road use, the Citroen Saxo did not last long. The frame split in half over the back tires, and continued to ride lower and lower until we had to dump all of our supplies in convoy cars to keep the weight down. Everything was covered in a thick layer of red powdery sand. Sealed containers became little swamps of sand, grass and moisture, all of which found a way into every nook and crevice. Our clothing was dirty, sweaty and we could find nowhere warm or dry enough to hang anything so washing was out of the question. In the final weeks of the rally, no one changed his or her clothes. We became like cartoon characters, forever stuck wearing what we were drawn in when we entered Mongolia.

Corruption is a word for officials who abuse their power, but to rural Mongolians, it is a way of life. Only an idiot would charge a foreigner who owns a car the same price for meat as a local. Only an idiot would give foreigners fuel for anything other than all the cash in his

wallet. We were at the mercy of the people of the steppe, who were in turn at the mercy of a harsh climate with an even more barren landscape as company. Renting a ger to sleep in at night once our tent ripped in a storm was an ordeal more difficult than I imagine arranging a wedding would be. Finding clean water to purchase for anything less than what we paid for the car proved to be impossible. We withstood the corruption, and owing to the desolate nature of the area, forgave it instantly.

Mongolians are not an unhappy people. Looking up at the stars one night outside his ger, one Mongolian man lit his pipe and turned to us and said, "From here you can see the stars, and know you are lucky." He told of his degree in engineering from UlaanBataar and his wife, who was an accountant at a bank before retiring to a nomadic lifestyle. They were less than forty years old, and childless but with aspirations for a third member of the family soon. "This is our way" he finished, and suddenly we knew that living under the stars with exactly what you needed to survive and not much else was a lifestyle many sought after, and didn't want to escape from. I was envious of his lifestyle, but then how can someone raised with laptops, ipods and the internet ever be mentally calm enough to stare at the stars for too long. We hopped back into our mud-covered car and continued the journey.