

THE MARVELS OF MONGOLIA

Bigger than any European nation but with a population of just 2.5 million, Mongolia is as

close as you can get to seeing what the world looked like before mankind came along



The authors' first and last ovoo ritual: The idea is to walk around the cairn in a certain pattern then add a stone of your own to the top, and as a traveller it will bring you luck. Clearly, it worked, because the road was very kind to them during their time in Mongolia

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We've been lucky enough to explore many different countries during the lifetime we've spent on the road aboard our Toyota Landcruiser. Some of them are seldom seen by overland

travellers – and Mongolia is certainly among them.

Yet this is one of the most evocative, beautiful and welcoming lands you could ever visit. We covered some 4000 miles there during the course of two and a half months in 2010 – and for

overland expedition travel, it's almost uniquely attractive.

This is because Mongolia is a big place. And the roads are almost always unsurfaced. Most are simply there because that's the route people have taken for centuries; away from the larger towns and

a few major routes, planned road building is almost unheard of.

It's this, and the special landscape, that make Mongolia so attractive. A branch of the Trans-Siberian Railway runs through it en route from Irkursk to Beijing, and towns and larger villages are

connected to the mobile phone network via satellite, but in rural areas life is very much as it always has been.

We hadn't long crossed the border from Russia when we started seeing traditional yurts, the tents which have remained almost unchanged in use since the days of Ghengis Khan, and ovoos – huge cairns topped with prayer flags which are revered as sacred by Mongolian people. Practically, they also serve as waymarkers in a country where road signs are rare!

Our plan was to head for the Gobi Desert in the south of the country. But first, we had one of the most perfect camping experiences of our entire lives, sitting by a crackling wood fire next to a lake overlooked by snow-capped mountains. As the wind rustled through beautiful larch trees around us, a group of nomads on horseback came to visit. Friendly and curious, they saw our camera and offered to pose for pictures, even turning around on their horses to get the best angle in the setting sun, and expecting nothing in return.

And this was just our second night in Mongolia. The first full day's driving had seen us climb high into the mountains, across barren steppes and up to a height of 2800 metres, from where we had a sweeping view of the white peaks around us and deep green valleys far below.

National parks are a very big deal indeed in Mongolia. The country has been at risk of being torn to shreds by western industry since the fall of the Iron Curtain, and much to their credit its leaders understand how important it is to balance development with conservation. They're not national parks in the European sense, though: they're totally natural environments.

We entered our first, Altai Tavan Bogd National Park, via what can best be described as what was left of a bridge over a river which has clearly seen come violent times. Parking in front of a closed gate, we were ushered into a yurt and given grain buttermilk to drink by the park warden's family while he sorted out our tickets. The park is close to the Chinese frontier, so we needed border passes too.

Something else we needed was our Toyota's snorkel. Everywhere, water was pouring down from the mountains and seeking a way to Lake Khoton on the plain below. Where the tracks meet the many rivers, often there are wooden bridges – which, when they're still intact, can lull you into a sense of false security – but rather than risking them in our heavy vehicle, we would usually find a fording point instead.

Normally, the water reached no higher than tyre height. The tricky part lay in avoiding large boulders



The nomadic lifestyle is still common in rural Mongolia, though these days people use motorbikes and UAZ 469s to get about on. Yurts are still incredibly common, though – and on the inside, they're far bigger and more homely than you might expect



hidden beneath the surface – and, having scaled the bank on the far side, finding our way back to the track we'd been on.

The end of the lake is only four miles from China, and here a pair of border guards told us very strictly that when we got to the next junction, we must not turn left. Understood... except where exactly was this junction? We ended up among some yurts, whose owners looked at our map and pointed back the way we'd come. Finding a faint trace in the right direction, we followed it and next thing we knew we'd come to a huge, ferocious and fast-flowing river.

No way were we fording this, so we followed the bank until we found a long, narrow bridge made of tree branches. Would it hold a 3.5-ton Landcruiser? We're very fortunate to have a bit of civil engineering knowledge on our side, and having examined the structure we were confident that we could cross. Correctly, we're happy to say – this would be no place for miscalculations!

There was a bigger river ahead, this time with a much more permanent looking bridge... guarded by a large herd of goats who didn't seem to understand that they need to get out of the way. These are the

hazards they don't teach you about at off-roading school...

They do teach you about rock, mud, sand and water, all of which we had to drive across, or through, as our route went on. And that's Mongolia: a delightful combination of scenic beauty, navigation and technical driving.

You can add regular vehicle checks to that list, too. One of them showed that a bolt securing the long-range fuel tank had sheared off. Not for the first time, either; we'd need to find a better solution next time we were home, but for now a trail fix was in order and the remaining three bolts were shored

up by ratchet straps lashing it to the chassis rails.

Back out of Altai Tavan Bogd, we found ourselves encountering traffic. Actual traffic! These days, Mongolian nomads use Russian-built UAZ 469s; you see them packed with families and, remarkably frequently, carrying a carpet on their bonnet. A guide we met told us that our arrival had coincided with an annual migration.

Following a lot of time bumping along in backed-dry ruts, our auxiliary fuel tank was holding firm. But one of our shock absorbers had absorbed its last shock – the top mounting eye was no longer an eye



but a question mark. We knew it would happen, and of course we had spares, so the next morning was dedicated to changing them.

As we were finishing up, a man appeared on horseback, greeted us then simply sat on his haunches and did nothing. He only comes to life when the spare wheel needed to be hoisted to the roof, whereupon he immediately jumped up to help. Then we shook hands and went our separate ways.

Heading south-east from Ölgii, we encountered some horrendous corrugations on the rough track. The landscape was beautiful but

the going was very rough, and here and there there were steep, partially eroded climbs. And up ahead, we could see dark clouds emptying themselves on to the land...

Soon, we were ploughing through a big, muddy mess of huge puddles and murky pools. It had obviously been raining here for a good while, and soon the road disappeared into a muddy lake. Detours were not possible – and there was no way of knowing whether deep ruts dug by commercial vehicles were hidden under the water.

It was a little alarming but, to be honest, a lot of fun. Muddy but

undaunted, we finally reached a visible path once again – then after another mountain pass we dropped from 2500m down to 1700m in less than ten miles en route to the town of Khovd.

Beyond here, hours of rattling on more corrugations (this was the main road to the capital, Ulaanbaatar) worked one of our anti-roll bars loose. We made an impromptu camp while fixing the problem – after which all our troubles melted away to the sight of a beautiful rainbow and sunset.

We stopped for provisions in Darvi, a proper one-street town full

of men in long coats and boots. The resemblance to a Wild West town was remarkable! And after that, the trail finally started making the transition into the Gobi Desert.

And guess what? We hit a beautiful, smooth road, one on which we could easily cruise at a steady 50mph through the parched, barren desert. This took us all the way to Altai, a town of some 16,000 people and the capital of the Gobi province, where we broke with our habit of always camping and checked in to the Hotel Altai. This isn't what you'd call modern, but we fell in love with our room's



Left: Mongolian bridges can look disarmingly rickety, and every so often you'll come across one that's been washed away in the middle. But they're surprisingly strong – enough to take a 3.5-ton Landcruiser in many cases, though where there's the option of fording a river it's usually safest to do that instead





'Let's go on a city break to Ulaanbaatar' is one of those 'said nobody ever' things. If you want to eyeball a giant mountainside carving of Ghengis Khan, though, it's on a shortlist of one. Elsewhere, the village architecture is a lot more rustic – and proves that there's more to Mongolia than just yurts



colourful rugs, curtains and, best of all, hot water!

If you were to describe Altai in one word, it would probably be 'dusty.' It's not a pretty place. But as we progressed towards the Gobi Desert proper, Chandmanie and Bayantsagaan were wonderful, clustered around traditional stone buildings in village centres where there are shops selling everything from clothing, engine parts and satellite dishes to bicycles, soaps and food. All that was missing was chilled food, because the people look after that themselves with their animals; no problem, we'd do without that for a while.

Something else we found was that the people were much friendlier and more cheerful than in the west. Their yurts are smaller, too, with nicely decorated doors, and whereas everyone on that side of Mongolia drives UAZ 469s, here it's all light trucks from China. Well, light trucks and mopeds: we happened upon a father and son who were trying to get theirs to start, and made friends by helping them fire it up.

The next day: sand dunes! At last, real desert terrain! And it was wonderful to drive on after the relentless bumpy track that took us there. The sand was hard-packed, too, making it easy to drive on. And even easier to get lost in, as it turns out. Oops. Not to worry, power lines in the distance gave us a target and soon we were back on the track, after which the sand became gravel and we found ourselves first in a

landscape of rolling mountains then winding for miles between the imposing dark brown and jet black rock walls of a deep gorge.

Pulling over to make camp for the night, a man on a motorbike stopped to warn us about animals that bite. That's what we understood from his gestures, anyway. Did he mean scorpions? Snakes? The fabled Mongolian death worm? We were on our guard...

You tend to think of deserts as very uniform places, but we found that the Gobi is extremely varied. It's a mixture of sand and rock, plains and mountains... and it's not entirely deserted, either. In Gurvantes, we filled up at a strikingly modern fuel station en route to our next national park, Gurvansaikhan, whose wave-like sand dunes we could soon see in the distance.

As we progressed through a landscape of steppe, mountains and wonderful sand dunes, the wind started to pick up and storms approached from the south. Next thing we knew, it was dark all around us and the Landcruiser was being pelted by rain. The dry, red dust started to turn into mud, and watercourses started springing up before our eyes. It was awe-inspiring, beautiful, a little scary... just like every desert in the world, really, only this time with some freak weather thrown in!

Earlier on, we spoke about how difficult it can be to find the correct route when following tracks in the Mongolian steppe. Interestingly, after a few weeks in the country

we found that we were always taking the right route first time, as if by instinct. We must have learned the ways of the desert!

That wasn't enough to keep our front shocks alive, however. They had finally given up the ghost, which meant it was going to be a very bouncy ride to Ulaanbaatar – the

only place in Mongolia where we could get a new set.

That didn't stop us from meeting more wonderful people, both Mongolians and fellow overlanders alike, seeing beautiful sights and enjoying idyllic camping spots. Well, some were more idyllic than others – the one where we had to move

halfway through the evening after discovering how close we were to the carcass of a dead calf won't go down as a classic...

The last few miles in to Ulaanbaatar were on tarmac, which came as a sort of relief – though we'd still been enjoying the copious surface water on the road up to then, even with duff shocks. The city itself is a sprawling metropolis, a mish-mash of modern buildings and traditional architecture – including, of course, the ubiquitous yurts. Believe it or not, around half the nation's entire population live in the city – and at times it seems like every single one of them is trying to

drive on the staggeringly congested roads all at the same time.

Having stopped at the airport to renew our visas, we headed for the Bayangol Hotel – which had been recommended by a tour guide we met along the way. We were given a lovely spacious room on the twelfth floor, with a splendid view of a vast hillside carving of Genghis Khan overlooking the city. We love overlanding, we love camping and we love being self-sufficient, but a hot shower and dinner in one of the country's best restaurants was definitely a welcome pleasure!

Still, better not get used to the life of luxury... The following morning,

we drove to a camp site where we'd wait for our new shocks to arrive, and soon we were making friends with various other overlanders. One couple told us they had just been robbed on their way back from the market, in the process losing a camera with seven weeks' worth of photos on it. Ouch.

Talking of things that make you go ouch, Gerard needed a dentist for some emergency work to replace a broken crown. We found one – a

German one, would you believe – and before long our team was sporting fully restored teeth and shock absorbers. All ready to round off our adventure in this unique nation with another meandering journey, this time through towering mountains, en route back to the Russian border.

In total we covered 6160 kilometres (3828 miles) in Mongolia, by far the majority of them off-tarmac. And we lost count of the water crossings! The country is a paradise for overlanders, with driving, navigation and landscapes of the very highest order – as well as fabled hospitality of its rural people. We were less taken with those we met in the urban areas – but no-one ever went off to see the world's cities in a 4x4, did they? For incredible, unspoiled landscapes and a traditional way of life that remains as unharmed as possible by contact with the modern day, Mongolia really is in a class of its own.

The authors must be among the best-travelled 4x4 drivers of all time. Since 2002, they've been exploring almost non-stop, aboard a variety of vehicles and on every continent in the world. Their website tells a whole world of tales which will make you yearn to pack your life into your truck and head off in search of adventure – you can find it by visiting www.exploringtheworld.nl.

