



# IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF GENGHIS KHAN

With the backpacker-led tourist boom opening up more and more part of the world it's getting harder and harder to find true adventure.....unless you're on Britton Motorcycle Adventures' mailing list!

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Picture it. An enduro in a zillion acre paddock, one with no fences, no gates, no road, no arrows, nothing! A vastness intensified by few man-made features, rolling mountain ranges and sweeping valleys, where the treeless landscape distorts your depth of field and your sense of distance. Valley views so distant the horizon surrenders to the earth's curvature.

This – in a nutshell – is Mongolia.

New Zealand, for instance, is known for its striking landscape, its relative space and – consequently - its great trail riding. But compared with Mongolia we are a country of barriers - a craggy range we cannot cross, a road we must use, a fence between the Donald's and the Wilsons, a gate between paddocks, with a town here, and trees, forests and everything in-between there. These are things which limit our view and our riding horizons. What I always considered the best place on



earth for trail riding now seems almost claustrophobic. Such is the effect the wide open spaces of Mongolia have had on me.

## PROLOGUE

When the prospect of Mongolia entered a conversation with Mike and Angela [Britton Motorcycle Adventures] I said; "I'm in!" before Mike could finish his sentence.

Thus began research and planning for the inaugural tour of Outer Mongolia.

The tour was finalized and the itinerary printed with the following opening lines which seemed harmless enough 'cover ones butt' speak.

"Please note that routes may vary as most of Mongolia has no formed roads. Hazards may mean a change to our proposed route. We reserve the right to change the itinerary. Kilometres given are only approximate."

Although we knew that this tour was an experiment, and we'd be winging it at times, the statement was to be a prophecy



Ulaan Bataar is a surprise patch of civilization complete with billboards and Russian architecture (or lack of) but it evaporates immediately into wide open country side with a few tiny townships along the dusty tracks. The traffic included these old work horses crawling to market heavily laden with wool.

We flew into the capital, Ulaan Bataar, two days before the ride start to have time to recover from the long flight and take in the local tourist sights. The city sprawls along a valley with residential areas spreading up the hills. These quarter acre 'paradises' with their rough wooden houses or tents (Gers) contrasted sharply with the partly modern commercial centre and also with the empty space beyond the city fringe.

This place is so Russian! From 1927 until 1995 Mongolia was under Russian influence; the Russian alphabet had been imposed/adopted and all the signs have this Eastern Block look about them. Russian architecture (or lack off) dominates the cityscape. The large industrial plants are austere too. Much appears to have been built sometime ago and decayed in unison with the empire that built it. As we toured in our private bus it was hard to pick this as Mongolian, or at least our pre-conception of what Mongolia would be like (that lay in the countryside in later days).

A statue of Genghis Khan of course presided over the center plaza but all around buzzed Japanese and Korean used imports and the main road in from the airport festooned with billboards.

**THE RIDE BEGINS**

Our ride begins from a lockup on the outskirts of Ulaan Bataar. We are introduced to our quite capable looking Funkon MC300s. I found myself alongside a brand new one which was not just my good fortune. I'd been drawn instinctively to the shiniest and I sidled quickly to it.

We sorted our bikes with cameras, wet gear etc and headed out of town. However I had only done eight kilometers before deciding that my bike's front suspension was indeed locked in position without any damping and that was why my jowls were in harmonic overload.

The adventure is supported by Angela in a Land Cruiser, an UAZ 4x4 (Russian Kombi Van) and a V8 behemoth of a truck loaded with crew, parts, equipment and even spare bikes. I'm quickly saddled onto a replacement bike but at this point I'm wondering if the Funkon MC300 may not be as Funkon good as it looks.

The countryside appears almost instantaneously and we find ourselves riding along the plains in a strong hot crosswind that thankfully blows the dust away. Numerous flocks of sheep and goats appear along with an armada of old trucks laden down with wool heading for Ulaan Bataar.

The road has gone, replaced with a myriad of tracks crisscrossing into the distance. We pass just a few towns on the way. Just a strip of simple wooden houses, some Ger tents complete with satellite dishes and a pile of dung (read firewood) in the yard. The place is hot and dusty but your mind contemplates how cold it must be in winter.

We reach our destination Rashant and pass through to our tourist camp under an impressive rocky mountain and this is our first night in Ger tents. The tourist camp is sort of like a tent motel. More on Gers elsewhere but for now the temperature has plummeted and the small pot belly stoves are lit. The tents prove warm and dry, and yes it's started to rain!

**GENGHIS KHAN-VILLE**

The next day we all head off in fine, clear conditions. It's a good day for an impromptu camel ride and a visit to Kharhorin, where in 1220AD mighty warlord Genghis Khan built his capital. Today we would make relatively early camp. And this is where I learn that the Mongolian kilometre is an elastic measurement.

Having been told the camp was 'about 20 kilometers' I did notice a group of tourist tenting by a river some distance on the right. I did also notice Ian riding up a hill to the left as his free spirit often took him. But I thought nothing of it because I was armed with the knowledge that 20km is a good 18 kms further than I'd ridden so far and given I'd stopped often to take photos it wasn't unusual to be on my own.

I rode on ignoring the tourists and it wasn't till I stopped some time later for another photo that Ian barreled up to announce that those tourists were in fact us! Having returned to camp, I had some ribbing from others however Ian was content; he'd had a good blast catching me.

I didn't mind so much either having seen part of Mongolia twice and I suppose too the absent corner-man was content slumbering in his tent as I rightly motored by.

That afternoon we watched the Mongolian way of killing a sheep and had confirmed by Jan (the Vet) what we already could plainly see, that the Kiwi throat slit is a fraction more er... humane. Any vegetarians reading might like to skip the next bit, because (here it comes) the Mongolians make an incision in the stomach of the animal; then a whole arm reaches in and finds the aorta which is severed.

Needless to say, every part of the hapless animal is used. And we wonder what lies ahead for our dinner. Not a lot it turns out. Around the bonfire we wait in anticipation, but as the pot is handed round we all pick out bones and bits we cannot recognize (and a 'lucky rock' each - it was cooked similar to a Hangi).

We wonder where the rack and rump have all gone - the crew look content. As I crawl from the tent next morning I beeline to the cornflakes for sustenance. Angela explains to the cook the need for larger portions and the rest of the trip goes just fine on that front.

**A LITTLE PEAR....SHAPED**

There are no pear trees in Mongolia but things were going to get a little pear shaped from here on in. Let me give you the benefit of hindsight. Our lead rider Monko is usually the sweep (our usual lead was in the UAZ van recovering from a broken foot on an earlier ride). They have



The "Main Road" crisscrosses the plains toward Kharhorin where mighty warlord Genghis Khan built his ancient capital. Camp activity on this morning was somewhat subdued as Kevin, Tim and others assume the barf position. Thankfully it was the only food related incident of the trip

radios but they were flat that morning, the support van had a sat phone but that was turned off. Mike's was on but there was no one to receive it. The English to Mongolian was a little lost in translation and as already proven 10 kms could mean two or 22. To top it all off, the Funkons were starting to show signs of fatigue and their real shortcomings were emerging!

This was a very remote and striking piece of country. We saw very few nomads and their Ger tents. It's a volcanic area with grassed hills and a valley of impenetrable lava flows with pines growing in it's midst, protected from tree eaters, man or beast. It's been raining and the ground is surprisingly green but slippery. We have already experienced our rear shocks bottoming out and even locking down. Many have already been changed but the soft spring will ensure they will fail too. Alarmingly the electrics are not liking the wet conditions. Kill switches are suspected, CDIs are being changed, Coils insulated etc..

Towards the end of the day we have a very special excursion into a particularly remote and high volcanic plateau with forest and lakes. I'm aware that we have some failed machines behind us and son Tim and I have stopped to take pictures. I can just hear a bike in the distance. We carry on, stopping occasionally to listen, but the bike sounds have gone. We look for tyre tracks at each juncture but there are remarkably few bike-prints on this landscape.

I didn't fancy the night out in the open in this area and I've spent the whole day riding on the pegs weighted over the bars because my shock as gone entirely. So we decide to try one more ridge before turning back ('eight kms up this way' is now clocking 20kms). Thankfully we find the lead rider and a small group waiting by a wonderful lake. It's going to be dark soon and the lead was unaware of the bike problems behind so we ignore the view and immediately retrace picking up lost souls as we go.

**MIKE ON CRUTCHES!**

As the light dims our route takes us through some large rock falls. Baz and I strike a hefty rock on our now sagging foot pegs but remain intact but bruised only to have Mike collect the same rock in earnest, flying over the bars. He hobbles back on hoping we haven't seen and follows us to camp. We remove his boot to find a lovely broken set of metatarsals. Ride over Mike!

It rains all evening and is still raining the next morning. In fact it rains almost all day. And as we leave camp unbeknown to us the Land cruiser is stuck 100 metres into the journey. We carry on our soggy way, over-taking the faithful truck and crossing high misty ranges and swelling rivers. It is stunning scenery even in the gloom. But the wet plays havoc with the electrics again and a few have struggled with the slippery conditions.

It's a frustrating and long day with all sorts of misadventure along the way which I won't



Ger time! Farmer, beast and cart arrive on a grassy plain and thus begins a remarkably quick assemble of house and home. 70% of the population live in these portable Gers while grazing the land and in winter they move to permanent huts. The townfolk have their ? acre complete with fire-wood stack (see the pile of dung in the back corner.). Satellite dishes and solar panels are common



There is some striking natural landscape and this even more striking man made structure. The freezing and thawing of the land toys with the foundations of this bridge giving a "Lord of the Rings" look and a fresh trail riding opportunity.

recount now suffice to say it was about as pear shaped as the preceding day. I lamented I hadn't taken my very own bum/tool bag and it was just on dark before we arrived knackered and running only on fumes at our Ger camp.

We quickly stripped off our wet and muddy gear and soaked in the steaming thermal pools. Reflecting on the day it had still been a fantastic adventure made more pleasurable by being warm and dry in a Ger with roaring fire at day's end.

Now the weather had improved and also we had our second wind. It was a great day for playing 'squirrel'. Squirrels don't live in trees here. There aren't enough trees. These fellows live in holes like rabbits and they can run! As we approach, these guys race to their burrow and wait till the last moment before diving to safety.

They are so fast it would be impossible to bowl one. Except when three in front of me all went for the same hole and the resulting log jam left one exposed above ground. I skirted around him chuckling. He was lucky I wasn't one of the eagles that are always hovering above. Majestic birds of prey that swooped so low to us and always entertainment at lunch.

**DID I SAY LUNCH?**

Did I say lunch? The lunch turn should have been 10 kms ago! The Landcruiser catches up and they are thinking the same. Whilst hungry it was a turning point. It was time to gain control of these bikes. They weren't going to last the distance otherwise. The whole morning I'd ridden on a second failed rear shock and we'd stopped numerous times for sporadic failing ignitions. We decided to press on to Moron (pronounced Merern) and arrange some permanent fixes as this was our last town for the balance of the ride. We weren't leaving Moron until we were happy the bikes could do another 1000 klms.

Baz and I rode into Moron wondering what to expect. We were warned it was a bit 'Wild West' and it didn't disappoint. It was obviously the Far North trade center and had been important for the Russians. But now, the abandoned and stripped Russian buildings made the place look like a war zone. It could have been Kosovo, but the dirt streets were bustling with market day and we proceeded to find an engineering shop.

We found our man, equipped with an amazing exposed welding plant and a pair of sunglasses. He was also willing. The bits for the job proved harder to find and I jumped the language barrier by jumping the counter at the hardware shop, fossicking for bolts nuts, oil, glue, tape, etc to fix these bikes. Back at the weld hut we scavenged some exhaust flanges and our man in his sunnies welded up our rear shock spring compressor. Camp that evening was a bustling hive of activity as all sorts of improvements and fixes went on including a 'MacGyver' preload for all the shocks from suspension guru Baz.



The inhabitants of Mongolia are adept in their harsh environment. The horsemen seem to glide by, such is the technique of their short legged nuggety native horse. Sheep, goats and camels observe our oddity, however the squirrel is more focused on all the eagles above. Here the whole family can travel on a Russian two stroke or Ural with sidecar. Yet with all their resourcefulness, they still need a parking sign in this vast place! While the locals quietly exist, the Kiwi's are busy breaking and fixing things. Mike's ride is over with a broken foot. Baz is at work with the McGyver spring compressor adding pre-load that will ensure the bikes carry us to journey's end.



The work continued throughout the next morning on a depleted work force. We still don't know if it was the lamb curry or what but more than a few had hurriedly stuck their head out of their tent for a 'barf' that morning.

Thanks to our concerted effort the bikes are sorted and subsequently prove to last the rest of the punishing journey.

We progress to the northern-most point of our tour close to the Siberian border. We stay at Lake Hovsgol. This lake holds approximately 2% of the earth's fresh water and it's incredible to think that in a few months it will be frozen over enough for trucks to drive clear across! A rest day allows us a spot of fruitless fishing. Those huge trout are a myth! The reindeer nearby are impressive though and the local villagers come and sell us their handcrafts. Cashmere, yak wool, and camel hair garments, socks, felt hats, slippers were all really good mementos and worthwhile gifts.

**MONGOLIA -1 NZ - 0**

Now, whilst taking in the atmosphere and the culture of Mongolia it was only fair we should bestow some of our own. One beautiful evening, in a lakeside Ger Camp a drinking game, Fuzzy Duck, Ducky Fuzz, was introduced by young Tim.

Now youth isn't an advantage as such games, the old man handling himself quite well, but as the laughter grew we were joined by our whole Mongolian support crew.

Such was their stamina it soon was apparent they must be raised from birth on Genghis vodka. Even those riders on orange juice couldn't claim a perfect score!

Our route back to Ulaan Bataar took in four days of new countryside. We were to eventually hooked up with the main highway from Siberia to Ulaan Bataar. It's a main supply route from the North and it is all tar seal!

It carves through a more developed region and the fertile land provides Mongolia's wheat and vegetables. We weren't prepared for the fields of marijuana growing along the road side. Obviously this was a source of amusement and we rode 'merrily' through the stuff.

It wasn't till lunch we considered our boots and the other gear might now be of sniff-interest to some cute little beagle and his rubber gloved master at customs New Zealand!

The ride has been a long one. While the distances are long and countryside vast yet deceptively gentle in appearance, within lies plenty of obstacles, plenty of the unexpected and plenty of reasons to stay alert and ride with aerial up! But without risk there is no adventure. Jan can vouch for that, picking on a boulder twice her size. Mike lost his tussle with a rock. Glen was swallowed by a rut. Trevor found the reindeer so awesome, even he fell off. Ian and Tim were temporarily slowed by the vodka (a natural hazard in Mongolia), Brian high-sided on the food at Moron camp and even Baz was speechless by journey's end.



The Mongolian crew liked a bonfire just about as much as their vodka and big is better. We were amazed to see Marijuana growing wild along the roadside and here the sweep crew get 'lost' in it. At ride's end back in Ulaan Bataar everyone is elated and almost intact!

Thankfully no one needed evacuation in a very expensive helicopter which we did see in action one day.

You need to be a competent trail rider to do this challenging but incredible bike adventure. Luckily, or sadly (depending on your perspective) the Funkon infamous Funkon MC300s will no longer torment those doing the ride (we can report that it has now been replaced with WR250Fs).

That said, it was certainly part of the adventure to overcome their shortcomings and improve them. Through the constant challenge of maintaining machine and body in a place where vehicles just come to die one understands the endurance and spirit of the Mongolians in their great land.



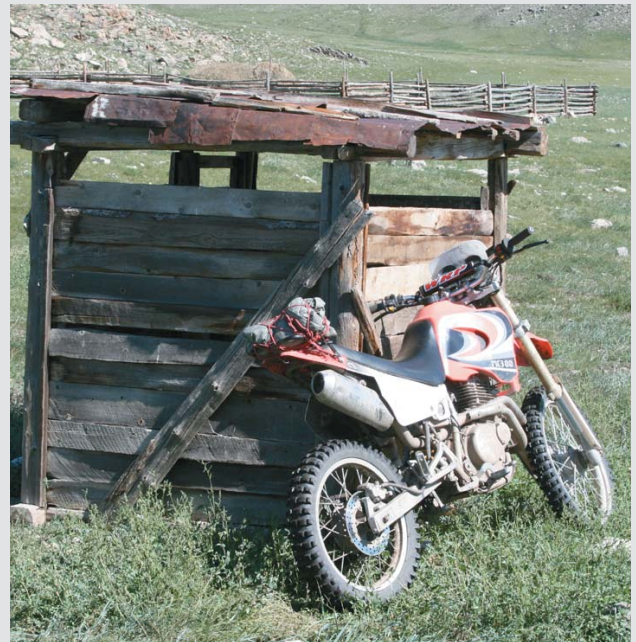
# TOILET HUMOUR

Have I mentioned toilets? In Outer Mongolia one can't be too choosy about the when and where. I mean really, where are you going to find a bush anyway? It could be five kms away! (more like 20kms eh Chris! Ed). Don't expect the long drops to be too flash either. Things will be just fine if you keep your feet on the planks heh, heh!

Now for some toilet humour from Lake Tariat. Dubbed 'the toilet from hell' by others I didn't think it was too bad but I'm blown if I'm going to put my toilet paper in that little bucket! Surely paper's biodegradable! Now it's a double cubicle wooden shack (yeah flash). As my toilet paper descends to the darkness below to harm the environment there's an almighty bang on the wall. And then as I repeat the gesture a double whammy bang bang on the wall. Could it be the toilet paper police are in the next cubicle? I have thoughts of standing on trial here for a dastardly dunny deed.

In truth Tim and Glen are outside throwing rocks at my toilet walls. They didn't know that in cubicle two was a very large and very cross Mongolian woman whose face as she emerged was as formidable as that of Genghis himself.

I know because as I emerged ready to be handcuffed by the toilet paper police I watched those two scurrying off like naughty school kids with the school mistress striding behind. This all on view from the restaurant dining room, providing great entertainment!



The Kids: This little girl looked at my weird clothes, helmet, helmet cam and without prejudice still gave me a smile and wave! The digital camera entertained instantly all who ventured near while we sat on cornerman duty, but alas no printout to leave them. The Funkon gets some admiration at one small town. Little did this little jockey know that the bike from China had it's issues.