

Inspired by The Long Way Round DVD keen Bay of Plenty rider Ian Bowden found joining one of Britton Motorcycle Adventures' Mongolian tours everything he had hoped for – and more!

WORDS & PICS: Ian Bowden

MONGOLIA

THE ADVENTURE RIDER'S ELDORADO

This adventure started for me when a workmate gave me the DVD 'The Long Way Round' featuring the adventures of Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman on their globetrotting BMWs.

I really became interested when they started to struggle in Mongolia! To me it looked like a great place; true adventure riding – off road.

I remembered seeing an ad in this magazine for adventure riding in Mongolia so I summoned up Mr Google and soon located the website of Britton Motorcycle Adventures. I sent off an email and Mike Britton's partner Angela Bruce replied, answering all my questions and giving me all the information on their upcoming adventure ride to Mongolia.

Now I've always been a person who asks himself the question "How can I make this happen?" Unlike a lot of people who tend to find reasons why they can't go, my attitude is look hard enough and you will always find a reason not to do something, so don't!

Within a week the decision was made – I was going!

I then had to choose a bike. The base price for the ride included a Kawasaki KLX250. For a bit extra I could have a Yamaha WR250F, or for a little more a WR450F. Having a liking for horsepower it took me two seconds to make that decision – the 450 of course! Which turned out to be the right decision.

DAY 1 – JULY 3 2010 Travel day from Auckland to Ulan Bator via Seoul, a long day. Mike and Angela greeted us at the airport and we all headed into town to get settled into our hotel for the night.

Day 2 – JULY 4 We had a look around Ulan Bator, the first recorded capital of the recent Mongolian empire which was created in 1639. It was great getting to know the rest of the team during the day. There were six of us on the team for this ride – myself from Tauranga, Stephen a kiwi fruit orchardist from Te Puke, Mark and Gordon our two policemen from Auckland, and Stuart and Sandra, dairy farmers from Dannevirke. An excellent lunch at a French-style restaurant was enjoyed by all, followed up later in the evening with a

traditional Mongolian style meal at another restaurant.

DAY 3 – JULY 5 Let the fun begin! It was an early start as we had a big day, 300 kms in total. It was all aboard our bus and off to the lock-up to meet up with everybody and get our bikes. The first thing I noticed was no number plates, registrations or warrants! On enquiring about this, I was told 'ah you don't need those things in this country!' I'm thinking... sounds good, could do with a bit of this back home, having just been ripped off to the tune of \$517 to register one of my bikes in New Zealand.

We were soon out of town and straight into the off-road riding, whizzing along at a good pace up this huge open valley – think of the biggest valley in New Zealand then multiply it by ten!

At our first catch-up and Mars Bar stop, I enquired as to where all the fences and gates were – 'ah don't need those things in this country!' I'm thinking this is getting better, remembering the tens of thousands of gates back home I've opened and closed.



Typical (top shot) Mongolian terrain and Ger accommodation along the way.

It works like this – the State owns the land, the farmers own their stock, and move about the country depending on seasons, weather and stock feed (grass). Farmers can move up to six times a year, packing up their Ger, which is a simple round structure of trellis and poles, lined with wool felt and covered with canvas. Winters are very cold and can go as low as – 50°C!

So there we were, with millions of acres to ride on and we didn't have to ask anyone, you can just go where you want! Hmm that's different, I sure could get used to that.

It was the Northern summer, and Mongolia was experiencing a hot one with temperatures around 30°C and low humidity. A little cooler in the countryside though, especially as we gained altitude.

Another good thing about this country is that the people are very friendly; we had no security issues for the whole trip.

After 140kms of awesome open trails we arrived at our lunch stop. Two big Russian trucks, one a mobile kitchen, the other loaded with gear (including a spare bike) were already there, and a lunch tent had been set up with a good spread of food on the table!

Gradually the rest of our travelling road show arrived, two more 4WDs plus all the required helpers including Kevin and his family. Kevin, who owns the bikes and equipment and assisted with the organisation for the Mongolian part of this tour,

decided to bring his family along for a holiday, which turned out great as we all got along fine.

The road show was the six of us plus Mike and Angela, Kevin and his family, drivers, a cameraman, an interpreter, a lead rider, manager, two cooks, and two mechanics.

After lunch we headed for Rashaant. Unfortunately our lead Mongolian rider Monkor went down hard after failing to see a drainage ditch in time, ending with a double somersault. These boys are tough, but he was hurt and couldn't ride on. We left Stephen with him and went to get our backup 4WD when we ran into our next obstacle – a sudden thunderstorm came rolling across the landscape with a big cloud of dust and heavy cold rain. Fortunately this didn't last for long and our injured friend was picked up. We regrouped at our accommodation for the night, a Ger camp in a beautiful setting tucked away at the

base of huge boulder-strewn hills.

DAY 4 – JULY 6 We had a new Mongolian lead rider now as Monkor had broken his wrist the previous day. His older brother, Monso, our tour manager, had to step in and take over as the lead rider.

We had an easier day with not as many kilometres to cover; our destination was Kharhorin 128 kilometres away.

After our lunch stop I got a little carried away roosting through the loamy countryside with Mike hot on my tail. We came across a washout at speed, a quick blip of the throttle had the front up as I leapt the gap, smacking into the other side with the bash plate and bottoming the rear suspension then bouncing off nice and square to a safe landing and away, the 450F proving its worth.

Mike wasn't so lucky, the WR250F not having the instant punch as the 450 in the higher gears we were using. He smacked into the other side of the washout much harder, doing a graceful over-the-handlebars swan dive into the dirt.

It was a good reminder to back off a little, and ride with more reaction time up your sleeve, as this was early into the tour in an extremely remote country.

We stayed at Kharhorin that night where (in 1220) the famous warlord Genghis Khan built the Mongolian capital. The ancient ruins of this imperial city are still able to be seen today. We had time to do a

little sightseeing and the tourist thing.

That night Mike had arranged for a private display from a local, authentic, Mongolian musical group using traditional instruments. It was the first time I had heard Mongolian throat singing, which was a real highlight and all of us thoroughly enjoyed it.

DAY 5 – JULY 7 Today we headed for Naiman Nuur. After leaving Kharhorin we entered this huge river valley, the scenery and views spectacular, as we headed east.

We lost one of our big Russian trucks today as it had overheated in the first day's storm and had developed a serious engine fault. No problem though, as it was simply replaced with a smaller 4WD and our friendly cooks had to use a tent to prepare our meals.

The terrain and conditions changed after lunch. It had been raining in front of us and the tracks had turned to damp loam. We travelled up beautiful green grassy valleys with forests of Larch, and occasional river crossings. Very picturesque, and excellent riding. It was hard to keep my eye on the trail as the scenery was stunning. We camped that night in a remote valley, setting up camp as our crew prepared fresh barbequed lamb for our dinner. It rained for most of that night.

DAY 6 – JULY 8 It was still drizzling when camp was broken early for the big day's riding that lay ahead. Several rivers had to be crossed and concern was expressed as to their state after the overnight rain. As it turned out the crossings were rideable and we managed well with only one bike drowning.

The rivers behind us now, the tracks had turned muddy from the rain as we rode through a mixture of Larch forest and farmland. This was trail riding at its best, and apart from our lead rider Monso breaking the golden rule of changing direction on a wet wooden bridge (for which he paid the price and went down hard), no other problems were encountered.

We made good time and beat our crew to the planned lunch break. While we waited Mike said he knew of a nice little loop we could do before lunch, so off we went. The loop turned out to be 60kms of fantastic damp forest trails, wide-open valleys of green grass and excellent hill climbs. We arrived back in time for lunch all fizzed up having now done 150kms of some of the best riding I have experienced.

There was then a little more riding after lunch before we reached Thenhar, where we stayed in a Ger camp, this time with a hot spa pool to go with the cold beers; what a way to finish a fantastic day!

Speaking of which, another great thing about this ride was the way we were able to climb off our bikes each day and

head for either a hot spa, cold beer or shower while the crew oiled the chains, refuelled and attended to any maintenance issues. The next morning we simply climbed back on our mounts, pushed the electric starter and vroom!

DAY 7 – JULY 9 Today we headed northwest towards Tariat, 225kms of more great trails before arriving at a Ger camp under the shadow of the Khorgo Uul volcano which fortunately is no longer active. That night we dined on Yak casserole and had Yak's yoghurt for dessert, which would prove to be our downfall the next day.

DAY 8 – JULY 10 In the morning, we climbed up the volcano for some photos and to admire the view. We then had a short ride to lunch on the shores of a beautiful lake.

Mark was the first to get crook and rode on ahead not being able to face lunch. I was next and started to feel green in the afternoon. Our western bellies weren't handling that Mongolian delight from the previous night! Fortunately, it was a shorter day with only 92kms of twisting trails!



Our first night camping out on Day 5 (top) then a typical under canvas lunch stop, Sandra taking a Camel for a test ride in the Northern Gobi Desert and finally Ian taking in the view on Lake Egginuur on Day 14



This is a land where conditions can change rapidly. Upon descending into yet another huge valley; we were greeted with a hailstorm and the temperature plummeted from the high 20s to around 15°C. That dampened down the dust for a final blast down this valley to a Ger camp in Jargaluut.

DAY 9 – JULY 11 Due to the team being crook, (we suspected the Yak's yoghurt), we decided to spend an extra day in the Ger camp at Jargaluut to recover. Which we did, gradually gaining strength throughout the day with the aid of some good tummy antibiotics. The next day we woke supercharged and ready to continue our ride.

DAY 10 – JULY 12 More forest trails of volcanic damp loam and wide open rolling hills. Just when you thought you'd done the best, more and more land and trails opened up. Mongolia is huge and the riding opportunities are endless, it's hard to do it justice on paper. Better still, farmers and the local people wave, shake your hand and welcome you, unlike back home where it's a constant battle with landowners and managers, and the ever-present greenie brigade trying to shut you out.

In fact the only greenies I saw here were the sandal-wearing western variety visiting the temples out in the country. The political ones seemed extinct here; maybe the wolves ate them all!

We clocked up around 150kms before arriving at the Stone River which was too deep and slippery to try and ride the bikes through. This was put down to the rain that had been falling back in the headwaters. Monkor (our original lead rider) who was now sporting a plaster cast, borrowed a local's horse and rode across the river. He then borrowed another local's farm bike and rode down the valley to locate a means of getting us across the river.

Camp was set up beside the river and the deck chairs rolled out...and we

proceeded to polish off half a dozen bottles of wine. Just prior to dinner a thunderstorm arrived – with a spectacular lightning display. Wind and rain came rolling in with huge bolts of lightning striking the surrounding hills and thunderclaps booming overhead. Definitely an impressive display that wasn't written in the itinerary. Our two young Mongolian cooks delivered a good meal of spaghetti bolognese, despite getting their kitchen tent blown over, a sterling effort.

DAY 11 – JULY 13 We were up early to a fine clear, day and were greeted with the sound of an approaching vehicle, an old Russian tractor pulling a four-wheel trailer. What a welcome sight, it crossed the flooded river and stopped at our camp.

Kiwis pride themselves on being adaptable Mr Fix-Its with a number eight wire mentality. I can tell you, we're mere amateurs when it comes to number eight wire and using what's available to keep things going. This tractor and trailer was something else, and would have long gone to tractor heaven in New Zealand.

There was a big crack in the side of the block with water leaking from it and the thermostat housing. That didn't seem to matter because it was also leaking diesel and oil; they just kept pouring water into the radiator! The tyres had huge splits and big patches bolted through the rubber. In fact, they had to borrow our pump to inflate all four tyres before they could even get the tractor to the river.

As if that wasn't bad enough the trailer had a broken chassis that had been wired together!

After each double crossing, towing either one of our 4WDs across or a trailer load of bikes and gear, it was shut down and the water drained from the sump, as it had a blown head gasket! The best oil was then poured back with a little fresh stuff and away she went again.

Oh, and I almost forgot. On top of all this we also had to make a gasket out of an inner tube and used Mike's tow rope to seal the bell housing cover to stop the clutch slipping.

However, after a couple of hours all of us and our gear were on the right side of the river and making our way towards Lake Egginuur, our next stopping place, nearly 300km ahead of us.

After more scenic trails down the valley, we arrived at a small town and opted for a quick lunch of Snickers bars, chocolate raisins, peanuts and water. Shortly after and sticking to the main roads (which were just faster dirt trails), we took a wrong turn. This resulted in more loamy fast riding. We were all in the rhythm and riding at a fairly brisk pace so it didn't really matter. It all came to a sudden stop though as we now had to cross the flooded Orhon River.

The depth was checked, then we carefully walked the bikes across, three riders to a bike with dead motors. It was very deep and water got into three air boxes necessitating a de-watering job. Nobody had any tissues left to dry out the plugs and plug caps. I scouted around for something else that would absorb water, and you wouldn't believe it, lying on the ground was a new packet of tampons in a sealed bag, which turned out perfect for absorbing excess water from the bike's recesses! How they got there is anybody's guess.

Fortunately all the bikes were up and running fairly quickly as we had to get a move on, the light was fading and we still had 80kms to go.

Finally nine weary riders rode into our camp at Lake Egginuur in the dark to a waiting beer and meal. We collapsed into bed at midnight after nearly 300km of first-class dirt riding.

DAY 12 – JULY 14-17 Another fine day greeted us and we headed into town around a very picturesque Lake Egginuur to refuel, the highlight being a mad Mongolian on a Chinese bike taking exception to being passed, and re-passing us all at around 100km/h on a bumpy clay track.

My sides were aching with laughter watching his antics from behind, I think the only thing that saved him was he never backed off!

Homeward bound now and heading back to Ulan Bator, but not before some dune blasting in the northern Gobi desert; that was fun.

It took three more days to get back to Ulan Bator, the highlight (apart from more loamy sandy trails) being a visit to a Ger family in the Gobi desert, and seeing the rare Przewalski wild horses in

the Hustai National Park. There are only a few of these true wild horses left on the planet.

LAST DAYS

Our travelling road show arrived back in Ulan Bator after 13 days of adventures. We had covered 1955 kms, very little of them on tar seal, in fact there aren't many tar seal roads in Mongolia anyway.

The day wasn't over yet, however. After cleaning our dirty gear with a pressure washer and taking the obligatory 'we made it' team photos, it was off to town for a quick restaurant lunch followed by a massage administered by lovely strong Mongolian ladies who had our tough cop Gordon wincing.

So much so that I had to give him some concrete tabs to harden him up!

Feeling totally refreshed we crossed the road (a dangerous exercise in downtown UB!) to the Casablanca Bar. As the seriously short skirted waitress served us ice cold Heinekens to wash the dust down, our eyes transferred to the big screen where we watched the All Blacks nail South Africa in the second test – it doesn't get any better!

That concluded the best adventure trail ride I have done in my 36 years of motorcycling. In my opinion if you love adventure trail riding this is a must do! I doubt there would be anything better and as varied on the planet.

We were away from New Zealand for a total of 18 days. The bikes were undamaged, and the only problems encountered were two punctures and a burst front brake hose on one of the Kawasakis (due to a badly routed brake line). Apart from our local lead rider Monkor breaking his wrist, no one else sported any injuries.

The bikes were all well maintained and I was especially impressed with WR450F; it made an excellent adventure trail bike. I couldn't fault it; the WR-Fs were all near new, the one I rode being brand spanking. It was also great not having to lug piles of gear around on the bikes, which would have meant riding much bigger and heavier bikes.

We all agreed this was an exceptional adventure, and thanks to Mike and Angela of Britton Motorcycle Adventures for putting this fantastic experience together. Thanks to the expertise of Kevin (the Pom) and his family and staff residing in Mongolia, for supplying the bikes, spares, equipment, knowledge and friendship. It was well worth the cost when you realise the logistics of doing this in a country such as Mongolia where you can't even buy a knobby tyre or any dirt bike gear or spares – everything has to be imported!



Top shots shows ancient tractor and trailer 'acquired' by the team to ferry bikes, vehicles and supplies across the flooded Stone River then Mike and co exercising extreme caution crossing the flooded Orhon River a little while later after a slight route 'detour.' Finally a couple of 'only in Mongolia' shots with a Russian Planeter motorcycles (a 350cc 2-stroke) popular in city and country alike, and yes, this is the real thing, a genuine Mongolian country cop car!

But wait there's more!

Gordon thought he got the last laugh winding me up about full body searches at the airport in Ulan Bator, when staff came looking for me after they found a spent 50 calibre cartridge case that I'd found out in the countryside in my bag. Fortunately this was soon resolved without the use of rubber gloves!

And I got the last laugh when the kind staff of Korean Air gave me a Business Class upgrade for the long haul from Seoul to Auckland, a fitting end to a wonderful trip indeed. **KR**