

**This page:**  
*Deep in the former Eastern Bloc – the adventure has well and truly begun.*

**BETWEEN BELGIUM** and the border between Russia and Kazakhstan we slept upright in the front seats for five nights, wild camped with the tent for five nights, stayed in an official campsite for four nights and spend two nights in a hotel (compulsory in Russia in order to register).

Despite our delayed departure and desire to speed through Europe, we had wasted hours of precious time and fuel driving and looking for elusive campsites. The result is that we were tired, ratty and fast learning about each others' tolerance levels. We have had no significant illnesses or injuries and powered across Belgium, Germany and into Poland. Poland saw us digging deep into our anti-histamine supply as the mozzies attacked, and Paul was shocked at how quickly my bites swelled to gigantic proportions. However, we had not yet been truly tested. We were not yet overlanders, we were still merely travellers.

Our greatest driving pleasure was in Germany and Poland. It was not just the quality of the roads but the lack

of CCTV and 'safety' cameras. It didn't feel dangerous, it felt liberating. Not because we could get away with speeding – not exactly an option in a 1994 expedition prepared Land Rover Defender – but because we felt we were being treated as trusted adults for a change. Although we have both long complained about the encroaching nanny state in Britain, just the first week of our journey really brought it home to us how oppressive CCTV has made life in England.

This sense of freedom couldn't last of course.

**unknown lands**

While the Ukraine and Russia also have virtually no CCTV or speed cameras they do have roadside police checks every few kilometres. Even on long straight roads passing only through tiny villages you can guarantee there will be several police checkpoints. Still reeling from the liberation of CCTV we found the police presence more reassuring than oppressive, but we wondered how the locals felt. With an unusual vehicle and foreign plates we expected to be stopped regularly.

In fact we were stopped just once in the Ukraine, and twice in Western Russia. Our documents were requested, handed over and looked at. The police officer stared at them. We suspected he didn't

know what he was reading but they were obviously genuine documents and the names all matched up. We were asked where we had come from and where we were going. The police are friendly and they seem to have stopped us more out of their own curiosity than anything else. They waved us on.

While the roads in Germany, Poland and Russia were good quality tarmac and well maintained, Ukraine was something else. With their advice to keep to public transport and avoid encountering drivers whose national pastime is kamikaze overtaking, the Bradt guide is of little use to the foreign driver struggling in Ukraine.

On roads whose ruts, corrugations, potholes and broken tarmac turn the suspension of normal road cars to jelly, Ukrainian drivers weave in and out of oncoming traffic with margins of just seconds and centimetres. It doesn't seem to matter whether they are driving one of the elderly Soviet buses or lorries, a modern TIR, the latest VW or the oldest Lada.

As a reminder of the perils of reckless overtaking in the Ukraine, the vehicular remains of crashes are mounted on poles at junctions. Familiarity with the sight probably makes them as ineffective a deterrent as the road signs in England. We were less sure of the

purpose of the hardboard cut-out police cars we saw in Russia.

Even the Landy didn't like the Ukrainian roads too much, losing one of the nuts from the hi-lift jack and other nuts and bolts working loose. Our speedo stopped working and, after noticing the smell of leaking coolant, Paul had to by-pass the heater unit when the matrix developed a fast leak. All the worst aspects of bad roads, none of the joys of off-roading. Still, these first three weeks gave Paul the chance to crack on with some of the finishing touches to the Landy's expedition preparation.

**kicking up a fuss**

Our General Grabber AT2s have admirably survived the rigours of the Ukrainian hard-edged potholes and ruts so we are confident of their performance over the rough terrain to come.

Earlier in the trip, we stopped at a major German DIY store that provided the plumbing to connect the on-board water tank to the tap on the back door. Unfortunately German manufacturing has not lived up to its reputation and a crack in one of the nuts we bought is proving the source of a small but persistent leak.

We had a forced two day stop at a hotel in Stavrapol, Russia in order to get our visas formally registered. It was ➤

Having departed the UK, the intrepid duo pass through central Europe and into the Ukraine and Russia where things get interesting

Words and Pictures by Paul and Helen Crittenden

# INTO THE EAST





**Above:**  
The regular ritual of setting up camp (left); new wheel bearings and ball joints in Kazakhstan (right).

## Ours was the first pre-computerised Land Rover that the main dealership had seen

an opportunity to hunt out the Land Rover dealership on the outskirts of the city. Well designed and laid out, all the car dealerships are together in one area. Four or five dealerships to a block, they share cleaners, service areas and administration blocks. This was the first pre-computerised Land Rover they had seen and our Landy attracted a high level of interest.

However, after two weeks on the road, with an accumulation of dust from Ukraine, we also caused some consternation. We've got used to mechanics wearing protective gloves but here the spotless ceramic tiled flooring that ran from the showroom through the glass partition into the service area meant the Landy had to have a full jet-wash before it was allowed in.

My pigeon Russian was not up to explaining what work we wanted doing but Paul's mechanical sign language did the trick. Fully prepared with all the parts their eyes popped as Paul pulled part after part, oil, grease and other accoutrements, from the side locker compartment. I can imagine them dining out at Russian Land Rover conventions for years to come on the basis of the mad Englishman with the pre-computerised Defender. They won't do so bad on the proceeds of the bill either.

Leaving the Land Rover dealership in Stavropol we knew we were better prepared for the next stage. The Landy feels a lot smoother and quieter thanks to the amazing Polybushes newly fitted. Having come so far on somewhat aged

standard Land Rover items we are immediately grateful to the generosity of Polybush in supporting our expedition. We can't believe just how smooth the ride is. We also know that these tougher bushes will cope well with what is to come.

Paul has been to Kazakhstan before and experienced the demands of driving between cities, so it has also been timely to fit the diff guards donated by Dave Marsh

drive flanges all round and a heavy duty A-frame ball joint, all of which Paul fished out of the side locker for them. They immediately recognised the Bearnach logo on some of the items. Clearly a global brand.

A full service rounded off the work done. Some parts we didn't have with us, including several oil seals that need replacing but the Russian Land Rover dealership did not have these immediately available so we

at Qt Services – two superbly built pieces of protection that will cope admirably in any conflict with the Kazak soil.

After a full suspension and transmission diagnosis the Russian Land Rover mechanics had established the Landy was in need of new wheel bearings all round and urgently required a new set of steering ball joints. Given the terrain we expect from Kazakhstan to the Russian Far East, we opted to fit new rear half shafts, heavy duty

hope they will hold out until we get to Almaty in Kazakhstan.

Although it's still early in our trip we have already experienced the kindness of multiple strangers. Perhaps it's being a stranger in a foreign land but it's not something we've experienced much at home in England.

Just one example came when Paul's phone was lost somewhere in Poland. We were anxious to buy another as soon as possible. Astrakhan seemed the place to

get this and we managed to buy an unlocked phone after some extensive pigeon Russian, sign language, pointing and drawing of diagrams. However, our problems were not over and it was only at our next store that we learned that it is illegal for anyone to buy a sim card in Russia unless they have a Russian passport. We knew from Paul's previous experience that an Orange sim card will work in Russia, Kazakhstan and Mongolia, but the alternative of having either a phone or sim card sent to us from the UK turned out not to be an option due to another regulation refusing such electronic equipment to pass through customs. With my phone provider (Three) not having any reciprocal agreement with any Russian provider we were feeling completely isolated.

### reciprocal kindness

There was no way round the problem. Until in stepped a stranger. We cannot tell you too much about who helped us but suffice to say we obtained a sim card illegally thanks to an English speaking Astrakhan resident who had previously benefited from the kindness of strangers when they were travelling abroad.

From Russia, we tentatively made our way to the Kazakhstan border. We wondered what this border crossing would hold for us. The customs officers there were determined to get a good look at what we were carrying. We removed various bags and opened them for inspection.

We were asked two questions: "Do you have any guns?" and "do you have any drugs?" We said no to both. We declared our medical kit on the customs form but they decided to search it anyway. Opening the medical kit they saw a year's worth of prescription drugs – packets



and packets, all in neat polybags – their eyes lit up. We were sure they thought they had found two drug runners.

They checked every packet individually before alighting on our strongest prescription painkiller, Tramadol. More customs officers were called.

There was much discussion going on in Russian, sealing of bets with laughter and the shaking of hands, until finally a document was produced stating, in Russian, that Tramadol is a banned narcotic and our medical kit was divested of our entire supply – straight into the pocket of a customs officer.

We had declared the cash we were carrying, mainly dollars and a few coppers in sterling and Euros, a gold ring and a gold sovereign. They wanted to know about everything and they wanted to see everything. A coin collector among them was pleased with the offer of a pound coin

**Above:**  
With a delightful wedding party – and their tough Lada Niva – in Russia.

and a 20p piece.

We convinced them that the fake gold we had acquired as the consequence of falling for a scam in Poland really was fake (it is). Then finally, after three hours and almost every bag having been checked (and glad we had not had to explain the bedroom toys or the she-wee), we were, thankfully, allowed out of the country again.

We are still really only travellers and not yet true overlanders, but we are learning fast. Kazakhstan and Mongolia will test our relationship, our resilience, our resolve, and not least our vehicle.

We come to learn that a shiny ceramic tiled floor in a dealership does not guarantee mechanical competence. Beyond our belief, we experience even more the depth of the kindness of strangers. **LRM**

