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FINALLY WE made our final departure from the Russian border. The official in red and white pointed to where we should go when we joined the wrong queue. No hard feelings. All's fair in love and border controls.

The Kazakhstan passport control office belies the terrain to come, yet ironically is an indicator of this country of contrasts. It's a cavernous building and is tiled, pristine clean and air conditioned. Once on the road the dust and heat soon hit us as we headed further east, passing between the Caspian Sea and the desert scenes of western Kazakhstan. Our windows were all closed but the fine sand was billowing in through the door seals and other holes and gaps, providing us with the opportunity to more easily locate and gaffer tape over the larger holes in the hope of reducing water intake later on. Before long, the black interior took on the colour of desert camouflage, and we began to reflect on the decision to remove the air conditioning to save weight and aid acclimatisation.

Kazakh roads

It is hard to comprehend the vastness of the land we have been driving through. Desert and plains as far as they eye can see. Amazingly, on roads with hardly any

traffic and only the occasional side turning leading to a tiny village or farmstead, there are bus stops and zebra crossings anything up to 60km or more apart. Who uses them?

The languid looks of the cows as they respond to the beeping of other cars' horns (the Landy's rarely works) shows their disdain for the intruders in their land. Camels, standing by the roadside, staring and turning away in turn, seem to have learned that a new animal has joined their space, and rarely try to cross paths with the 'machina'. Together with sheep, goats and horses, they are free to wander the land. Sometimes flocks and herds are led down the road, mingling with the traffic, or across fields in search of fresh pasture. At other times lone cows can be seen making their way home through the village streets. There are few if any fences and vast open landscapes as far as the eye can see.

Of course, any reference to roads in Kazakhstan is a relative term. Where there is a hard surfaced road – remnant of the soviet network installed to carry its war machine around the country – pot holes have grown until they have joined together, to leave once tarmac roads mere hard core with patches of tarmac. So bad in places are the roads, that most people choose to drive off-road, resulting in two or three roads running parallel along vast stretches. Pleased we have



Above:
Dust was a serious problem, not helped by the many gaps and ineffective door seals.

an off-road vehicle ideally suited for what we consider farm tracks, we find ourselves being overtaken by VWs, Ladas and who knows what else. Lorries kick up clouds of billowing dust as they pass by. Vehicles remaining on the original roads weave back and forth as they attempt to avoid the hard edges of what remains of the tarmac. When we stop, we pick the stones out of our General Grabber AT2 tyres and are thankful that is all we have to do with them.

a country of change

But things are changing and changing fast. An enormous road building program is underway, a part of a new network linking China to Western Europe by 2013. Old roads have been graded, while new tarmac roads, five feet thick, have been laid parallel to the old road, and we find we are being made to switch back and forth between the old and the new. At the same time other roads in the rest of the country are being repaired or renewed. Amazingly there is hardly a bollard in sight. However, the road improvements have opened up a new opportunity for the Kazak driver to prove he can be even more kamikaze in his overtaking than the Ukrainian drivers we met last month.

unwanted repairs

The vast open spaces of desert, savannah and steppes has meant wild camping has been much easier

TROUBLE LOOMS

Crossing the border from Russia to Kazakhstan, Paul and Helen begin to hear ominous noises coming from the Landy

Words and Pictures by Paul and Helen Crittenden

than earlier in our trip. Having a lie-in we have, on a few mornings, enjoyed the gentle rocking motion caused by the small herd of cows trying to push us out of their way as they have been led out to pasture. With no knock on the door asking us why we are camped in their field we have felt it easier to let them pass than risk being trampled in descending the ladder. Thank heavens for the roof tent.



Although our visa schedule remained tight we began our time in Kazakhstan by being able to ease back a little and enjoy morning tea with a Kazak shepherd (who didn't like our strange English tea), watching a dung beetle carry his dinner and dig his nest from start to finish, and revel in the delight of being able to see the stars in a night sky absent of light pollution. We looked forward to sampling more of the delights of this huge and little known country. But under the bonnet and wings, problems were looming.



Above: Bodes by the Land Rover dealership in Stavrapol led to this – bushes fitted in the wrong place, with some parts missing altogether.

A light tinny rattle, faintly audible since crossing the border into Kazakhstan, was becoming louder and more worrisome. Several times we stopped in a parking bay or had the Landy up on some roadside ramps. Nuts and bolts were checked and tightened here and there. Stowage was made more secure. Various rattles and noises were eliminated. Still, the tinny rattle got louder, but remained undiagnosed.

After a day down at the Aral Sea, taking photos of rusty ships, camels and seashells on the desert floor, we headed back to Aralsk. The road was a punishing 70km of non-stop corrugations, each way. Paul found the optimum speed at which to maintain the smoothest possible ride and I had shown my appreciation for his hard work by dozing soundly in the passenger seat. Our General Grabber AT2 tyres coped admirably with what Paul described as a white knuckle ride, with both steering and braking



severely compromised by the reduced contact with the road surface.

Finally arriving at a roadside café we stopped for Paul to have a well-earned break. Then, fed, watered and toileted, we jumped back into the Landy, ready to find ourselves a campsite for the night. The only problem being that the engine would turn over but not start. Setting to work to find a solution Paul considered fuel starvation the most likely problem. Having had no running problems, he eliminated air in the fuel line. Removing the air filter and spraying WD40 in the air intake while cranking the engine proved the engine will run on WD40. Power was getting to the stop solenoid so eliminating an electrical supply fault. Having disconnected the fuel supply line to the injection pump he used the hand operated lever on the lift pump and found it to be working OK. Paul was now getting worried. Despite being outside a café we really were still miles from anywhere and not in a good place

for a serious breakdown.

The only thing left is the stop solenoid itself. Removing this proved easier said than done. We have every size of spanner up to 19mm but the nut on the stop solenoid is 24mm. The adjustable spanner fitted the nut but was too large to use in the confined space. Fortunately, I managed to borrow the right sized spanner from a lorry driver in the car park next door. Having removed the internal spring and plunger and replaced the solenoid the engine started just fine. Paul was amazed. This is the first time he had known a stop solenoid to fail before. The lorry driver has already reclaimed his spanner and left but Paul tightened the solenoid by hand and we were on our way again. Now however, we can only stop the engine if we deliberately stall it, we still have the tinny rattle and we have gained a broken ignition switch, which no longer returns automatically to the run position after starting the engine.

nice and tinny

The next day the tinny rattle was getting much worse and the handling was deteriorating. We stopped to jump start a white Mercedes E series with a flat battery. The three uniformed police travelling in the back were not sure what to make of this strange vehicle and you could see them eyeing us up, wondering if they should be checking us out. But in the end they were happy to be on their way, for now. The next time we passed them they waved us on, the problem was obviously more serious than a jump start could solve.

We finally found the cause of

I screamed when the Landy's front wheel slid, and the hi-lift jack went sideways



what was now a serious clanking sound when we stopped to remove the dead bodies of the huge crickets that had been swarming in front of us. We were shocked. The Land Rover Dealership in Stavrapol had incorrectly fitted the brand new Polybushes we had provided. Some parts were upside down, the rear suspension parts had been incorrectly fitted on the front, and some bits were missing altogether. The miracle is that the Polybushes themselves had, with only one exception, survived intact. The rest of the suspension system was completely and utterly shot. Hardly surprising with, in effect, no bushes in place.

Effecting a temporary roadside repair sufficient to get to Almaty, where we hoped we could get new parts, would be an all day job and although we had food on board we were low on water and decided to press on. Road conditions limited us to about 10mph and so we were pleased to see a small town appearing on the horizon just ahead. Not a mirage but for all the help we would get there it might have been. Surrounded by drunks keen to practice their English, Paul decided it was not the place to undertake extensive and complicated mechanics, and we moved on again until eventually we came across the

Café Camel and, being already dark, happily curled up in the front seats to sleep for the rest of the night.

Café Camel proved a good place to stop. Popular with lorry drivers suggested the food would be good, which it was, and they didn't seem to mind us dismantling our car outside.

serious repairs

After some gentle coaxing with WD40, the hi-lift jack, provided by Foley's, agreed to work and one wheel was soon removed. Jacking higher to get at the removed wheel and the spare underneath, I screamed when the Landy's front wheel slid across the ground and the jack went sideways. However, Paul soon secured the vehicle with the two wheels under the tree slider and a bottle jack to protect the brake hose.

In the meantime my scream had heightened the interest of the lorry drivers around us and Paul quickly found one of them half under the Landy completing the passenger side repair before he drove off in his lorry.

Additional damage to the threads on the top mountings were made worse by the helping hand of another lorry driver who, with the aid of brute force on the end of a hammer, had forcibly removed the shroud, rather than easing it off over a filed weld. The threaded section of the shock



Top: Repair stop at the Café Camel.

absorber was bent and the threads needed to be re-fettled.

To make matters worse, while making a die out of one of the nuts by producing a cutting edge on the thread and then re-cutting the threads on the shaft, Paul managed to slice his hand open with the hacksaw and so create our first real delve into our first aid kit.

Job done, we know the repair is only temporary and, on rough roads, still very vulnerable. We still need to take it easy. But that's only one problem.

Our Kazakhstan visas expire in eight days. Our chances of getting to Almaty, getting parts and repairs completed, and making it to the border with Russia in time are getting slimmer by the day.

We are increasingly resigned to the fact that we, and our expedition, are in trouble.

LRM