

IT SEEMS ironic that no sooner had Paul managed a temporary repair to our broken shock absorbers, than we were not only nursing the Landy along some of the most punishing roads we've ever encountered, but were also towing a fully laden, broken down, Mercedes C Class, 40km in the dark. In a country where most people will offer help to others on the road we were happy to do our bit.

The next day though, the inevitable happened. Without warning or signs we were caught unawares by a particularly vicious speed hump as we approached a narrow bridge. We thought it a strange phenomenon in a country whose roads are mostly rutted and pot-holed. But it was fatal to Paul's repairs and once again our weakened front shock absorbers gave up the ghost.

Reviewing our situation it was obvious all hope of leaving Kazakhstan within the timescale of our visas had gone. Expecting to arrive in Almaty on Sunday, with our visas expiring on the Monday, we plodded on, all the time clinging to a thin hope of getting a short visa extension in exchange for some precious US dollars. Sometimes the roads were new and good. As often as not they were old and bad.

hospitality in an inhospitable land
With broken shock absorbers driving was hard work. But we still found time to marvel at the acts of kindness that were beginning to characterise

Main
Huge skies, vast plains – typically awesome roads in Mongolia.

our experience of Kazakhstan. Almost everyone we met was friendly and helpful, even the police at the roadside checkpoints.

We had already met Abram when we stopped at his hotel in Aqtobe. An Armenian immigrant from the age of ten, he knew everyone. Despite him speaking only a little English, we communicated our need to get our visas registered. Abram's word opened the back doors to the immigration offices and our visas were authorised in record time.

Anticipating our next encounter with Kazak bureaucracy to be a much tougher call, we stopped for a late breakfast in Sheili. The café we chose was closed because they were preparing for a wedding banquet in the restaurant next door.

While buying some groceries in the shop instead, the manager handed us her phone and the voice of the English speaking owner insisted we wait. Ten minutes later, Ait was showing us round her kitchens, and we were served samples from the banquet for free. Ait then invited us back to her house where we could shower, rest, do our washing, sleep and stay the night. She and her family were going out for the day and would not be back until the early hours of the morning. We had the house to ourselves.

Although there were others, for me the experience that stands out as an everyday example of the generosity

we encountered was the lorry driver who saw us parked by the roadside. When he had checked we were OK he climbed on to the roof of his cab, got out six big red tomatoes and gave them to us as a gift before driving off without even giving us his name.

Almaty at last

As we approached Almaty we found soldiers putting up razor wire fencing along the border – a stark reminder of the political and social tensions in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan.

That night we got talking to a Turkish lorry driver who invited us to drink tea with him in the back of his truck. It was time to relax. The next day we would need to find the immigration office, Mongolian embassy, garage and internet café, as well as a solution to a significant technology problem that has been bugging us since we left England. No small task on a Sunday in a country where we barely speak the language.

What happened next is almost surreal. While packing some groceries into the back of the Landy a couple stopped to talk to us. Max, having travelled himself, had been drawn by the sight of our hi-lift jack. Hearing of our visa and mechanical challenges he and Zaire invited us to stay at their home and over the next week put the services of their English speaking staff at our disposal.

As a Kazak citizen, Zaire knew her way round the onerous Kazak

MONGOL MEMOIRS

After carrying out the repairs to their broken shock absorber, Paul and Helen limp the Landy towards Mongolia

Words and Pictures by Paul and Helen Crittenden



Above
Stuck in the bog in Mongolia.
Right
Paul settles into the first camp in Mongolia.



Above
One of the many
Petroglyphs at Tamgaly.
Below
The Landy gets a long
overdue wash.

bureaucracy and our visas were quickly extended. Others helped locate garages and spare parts and get a new stop solenoid and ignition switch fitted. Paul ordered other parts from Foundry 4x4, who certainly lived up to their promise of 'Cast Iron Service' with startlingly fast international delivery.

In turn, Max and Zaur's company's arrangement with DHL was utilised to get the parts through customs in a couple of days instead of the usual month. IT experts helped finally resolve our technology problem and we had as much access to the internet as we could manage.

moving on

Finally, Paul was able to fit the new heavy duty shock absorbers from Foundry 4x4. It was only then we realised that despite having ordered heavy duty shocks from a Land Rover dealership in the UK before we left, they had in fact provided standard front shocks.

At the same time Paul re-seated the offside front spring that had been fouling the chassis and bump stop on extreme articulation.

Eventually, with just six days left on our extended visas, it was time to move on again.

Taking a detour, back the way we had come, we went to see the Petroglyphs at Tamgaly. A UNESCO protected site far from the nearest habitation, these ancient carvings are astounding for their number and clarity and something we wanted to see and share with the children following us on the Landy's Adventures. We were not disappointed. And to cap it all, after all that attention, the 110 was running a treat.

Nearing the border a few days later we camped just outside Semey, where we had a huge space all to ourselves, and found the Kazak roads had continued to take their hidden toll. With screws and bolts having continued to loosen, the bonnet was now rattling.

More alarmingly though, we found the radiator and water hose clips had worked loose. No major damage done but, with a small hole already developing, the bottom hose needed replacing. We are fast learning that driving off-road for seven hours a day needs more than just simple maintenance checks.

After replacing a rotted radiator mounting bush, re-securing the front radiator panel, replacing the damaged water hose and replacing the bonnet screws that had fallen out due to the vibration, Paul took the opportunity to do some more of the jobs he'd not had time to do before we left. This included securing our Goodwinch ground anchor in the rear of the cab, adding a couple of stowage nets, tidying up the wiring behind the dashboard and getting both the horn and 12v sockets working at last.

A crucial job to be done before we crossed our next border was to

'create' a new front number plate. The original had disappeared while we were in Aqtobe – we suspect taken as a souvenir. With the aid of some white paint and black indelible marker, Paul created a very convincing number plate on the bumper itself.

Back in Russia the improvement in road conditions was instant and we took pleasure in the amazing scenery of the Altai region. Reaching 1,800 metres we noticed the Landy struggled a bit and made a mental note as we have plenty more driving at this altitude still to come.

Having passed through the Russian border control at Tashanta we continued on reasonable quality tarmac through no-man's land. Ahead we could see the new border post sign, showing the point where Russia ends and Mongolia begins. At exactly the same point the tarmac ended and the Mongolian dirt track began. We were soon amused to be charged \$10 'road tax' to drive on dirt tracks.

into Mongolia

Mongolia is massive, with vast open spaces of land as far as the eye can see. When people refer to 'roads' here, they really mean routes. Main routes consist of a variety of meandering vehicle tracks, sometimes covering 50 metres across, most of them already badly corrugated. Potholes and ruts catch the unwary off-guard. Almost always we have been driving over rocky or stony ground, glad our General Grabber A2s have stood up to the test so well. Elsewhere the roads are sandy or muddy.

With so many 'tracks' making up the main 'roads' it's often hard to tell whether you are still following the

main route, or whether that track you thought was taking you round a hill is in fact a minor road going off somewhere completely different. Checking our GPS readings against our paper map has been essential much of the time.

Secondary roads are little better. The only real difference being that they tend to be only two or three tracks wide. By the time we reach the end of our time in Mongolia we will have found the best roads to drive on are the ones shown on the map as minor roads. Usually only one track but having less traffic, they are often far less corrugated. The only disadvantage is that they are usually only used by the locals with some hair raising consequences.

Finding a small river to camp next to on our first night, we ended up staying three days. We soon discovered how unabashedly curious the Mongolian people are. Men passing on horses or motorbikes would stop, come over to our camp, and watch and wait until we spoke to them. Or should I say until Paul spoke to them. This is a truly patriarchal society.

The men would not greet or respond to me unless Paul spoke first. So many stopped we could have opened a coffee shop. We learned that most of them were travelling to or from work in the marshes, gathering hay for the winter feeds. They warned us that the main road to Ulaangom was too wet to pass and we should take a detour around the marshes

where the mosquitoes were rife.

Although we had good intentions and checked the map, the sheer scale of this country caught us out. We were not sure how but we knew we were heading for the marshes.

The ground below us was getting wet and boggy and Paul was doing a valiant job of keeping us moving. Then the inevitable happened, and a rear wheel sank up to the axle.

We wriggled around inside the car, zipping up fleeces, pulling our Buffs over our faces, trying to make sure as little flesh was showing as possible in anticipation of the mozzie feast awaiting us outside. Then we emerged, like Ninja warriors, and Paul set to with the spade (we've only got one) while I took a couple of photos.

In our first attempt at freeing ourselves, the ground anchor sliced through the wet ground like a knife through butter. Clearly more digging and bridging ladders would be needed. Each attempt to move found us with another wheel spinning in the mud, until all four wheels were working themselves deeper and deeper.

Our friends did some more digging. One pointed to the hi-lift jack but when we tried to use it, it too just sank into the mud, until one of the horsemen galloped off and came back with a 40 kilo rock and dropped it in the hole behind the wheel.

Finally, with the hi-lift jack at an alarming angle raising the rear offside axle, bridging ladders under two of the other wheels and the ground



From top:
You definitely wouldn't want to hit this pot hole in the night.
Repairs at the campsite just outside Semey.
Below:
Replenishing water supplies at a spring in the Altai region of Russia.

anchor's slicing slowed by some slightly firmer mud, we were free.

Most annoyingly, we left behind our 'toilet seat'. It was only really a novelty but it made a useful camp stool. Our Mongolian friends had already had a good laugh at it and now no doubt one of them has a prize souvenir of the silly English couple who didn't do what they were told. Our now muddy ground anchor will never again be returned to its stowage place inside the cab and is on the roof for now.

Looking back Paul reflected on how he might have done it differently. We had little opportunity to follow David Bowyer's advice: always make a cup of tea before taking action.

LRM

We left our toilet seat behind: it was only really a novelty, but it made a useful camp stool

