

**HITTING THE** narrow window of the two week Siberian autumn, just north of the Mongolian border, the scenery was stunning. Surrounded by miles and miles of silver birch and pine trees, the contrasts between the yellows, greens and whites was striking. The autumnal sunsets bathed the forests in a rich red glow.

What better reason could there be to take the short cut, following the minor road on the map through the forest, to visit Lake Baikal before heading off towards our main destination, Magadan. The couple of minor roads running through the forest between the A165 and the town of Babushkin on the M55 by Lake Baikal shouldn't be too taxing for the navigator, and the track itself looked to be perfect driving for an expedition Land Rover. No tarmac, but a clear track with just enough bumps and turns to make it interesting. With the expiry date on our Russian visa already closing in on us we wanted to keep the real adventure for the famed 'Road of Bones' from Yakutsk to Magadan. And so it was we turned west off the A165, and camped that first night in Siberia just outside the small town of Gusinoye Ozero.

The next morning, it was easy enough to pick up the trail as we headed out past a small lake and over a railway line. To our surprise, the track was obviously well used, fairly rutted with plenty of water-filled ditches in the road. We soon found



**Above**  
*Suspended over a 'pot hole' on a track in Siberia.*  
**Main**  
*From the deserts of Mongolia to the lush forests of Siberia, the scenery changed very quickly.*

out why when the track opened up before us into a myriad of tracks not on the map. Passing a logging truck, and obvious signs of logging, in the forest provided the explanation. Our 1:1000,000 map became virtually useless for anything more than pointing us in the right direction.

Several times we followed a track only to find it peter out at the end of a logging trail. More than a few times the track became temporarily invisible as the streams and rivers had taken it over for their course downhill.

We delighted in what was a greenlander's paradise. Our best off-road experiences yet. Plenty of puddles to splash through and rocks and boulders to clamber over and the driving was often challenging. Often we reached the end of a track and had to turn back. We didn't mind coming across fallen trees blocking our route, marked with bear tracks in the mud. We mused contentedly that if this was a club outing, we'd be hacking at the tree to get to the boulder rise in front of us. But as we have an expedition vehicle, we often have to make the sensible decision. Heavily laden and alone we stood little chance, and so reluctantly turned back.

**the importance of 'spotting'**  
Coming across another stretch of track that petered out after 200 yards of boulders that formed the basis for a downhill water runoff, the decision to continue was much

easier. Too busy with the video up ahead I was not around when some spotting would have been useful and Paul inevitably dropped a wheel into a water filled hole and ended up going nowhere. The front passenger side wheel was deep in a hole with vertical sides. The driver's side front wheel was off the ground and spinning freely. The driver's side rear wheel was spinning in mud. With no purchase on those three wheels the passenger side rear wheel was unable to climb out of a second, slightly smaller, underwater hole.

We were stuck and the only way out would be with some recovery gear. Jacking the passenger side levelled up the wheels at the front and we filled in the hole with small rocks and stones we found by the trackside. With enough purchase now on the front wheels we were able to reverse and free the back wheel from its hole. Forty-five minutes after getting stuck we were on our way again, this time with the video camera back in the bag and me spotting the way through the rest of the boulders.

Although our hi-lift jack and Qt diff guards had saved the day, only later would we realise we had not escaped completely unscathed. The ominous clang we had heard was the steering rod being bent on a rock leaving us with

slightly splayed out front wheels. Not so good. But for now it was onwards and upwards.

After a few more episodes of having to double back, we finally felt we were on the right track. The compass told us we were heading in the right direction. From the condition of the ground we figured we had finally found the original track shown on the map. And finally, checking the latitude and longitude readings we could see we were pretty close to where the road was marked on the map. Having tried every other road in the region this had to be it. We got excited at thinking that in just about an hour we would be camping on the shores of Lake Baikal for the night.

We passed a cosy looking hunters' log cabin, with its cooking fire pit, and headed up the hill before us. Double checking our map and GPS readings we were convinced we had found the right road, and Babushkin was barely an hour away.

One final hill rose before us. The

hill steepened. This was no longer a gravel hill, rather a one in three, scree slope. Driven on by visions of reaching Lake Baikal and making camp before dark we made three attempts at the hill, each time getting a little less far than the previous attempt.

**fighting gravity**

Not only were we no longer moving forward, we were sliding backwards. The steepness of the track combined with the scree beneath our wheels made the brakes totally ineffective. Gravity was winning the day, and even with the brakes fully applied, we slid backwards down the hill, out of control. In a heartbeat, with the steering also ineffective, we slid backwards into a deep rut on one side, tilting alarmingly into the trees, wedged diagonally across the track. ▶



# TRANS SIBERIAN DISTRESS

Having travelled thousands of miles already, Paul and Helen have had many adventures but it was their arrival in Siberia that signalled one of the most significant parts of the trip

*Words and Pictures by Paul and Helen Crittenden*



➤ Safely stationary again we assessed our options. Driving up the hill was out of the question. The prospect of winching ourselves all the way up the hill was at best risky, and with no certainty that the track would be passable further on. We reluctantly decided that reversing back down the hill and finding another way was our only realistic option. But first we had to get ourselves unstuck.

The closest birch and fir trees were slim, with shallow roots. We extended the winch rope as far as we could and found a potential tree stump to winch from, but before we moved an inch we had pulled the stump from the ground.

On our second winch attempt the

**Below**

*The road through the Siberian forest quickly turned into a riverbed, littered with hundreds of pot holes. The Qt diff guards were a life saver in the riverbed.*

Landy inched forward a little before the silver birch gave up its hold on the soil and the Landy sank back down again, and the engine petered out and died. Our angle on the hill was so severe that half a tank of diesel was on the wrong side of the car, unable to reach the pickup. The light was fading fast. The next winch attempt had to work, or we would be starting a walk-out for help in the morning.

Paul pulled out every bit of winch kit, ropes and strapping we had on board. The next tree would be the sturdiest we could reach. With no engine power, and just the winch to rely on, Paul threw the winch switch and hoped for the best. Slowly the Landy moved forward enough for

the diesel to level out in the tank and for Paul to gun the engine back into life. Scrabbling with every control available, working brakes, clutch, steering and accelerator, Paul worked with the winch in a valiant effort to stabilise the Landy's perilous position on the scree slope.

**drivetrain disaster**

In the whirl of simultaneous control movements, and with the Landy lurching violently, Paul noticed he'd not yet released the X-Eng handbrake. Explicit warnings of damage caused by driving with the disc handbrake applied rushed into his mind, and he panicked. Releasing the handbrake with the revs too high found the weakest point in the drivetrain, and a loud bang signalled the shearing of a half shaft. All we knew at that time though was that we had suddenly lost traction, and most of the gears. We were now also sitting almost parallel to the track.

After gathering together and packing away the winch kit, Paul engaged reverse and edged the Land Rover carefully back down the hill using what engine braking there was. We had reverse and first and second gears in low range, and so we headed back to the level ground by the hunters' hut where we finally set up camp for the night. The night was ink black, and it was fast getting cold. We cooked up some pasta in pasta sauce as the frost formed, ate in dispirited silence, and climbed into bed, exhausted.

The morning sun warmed the tent walls long before we were fully awake, and the forest looked just as beautiful as it had the day before. The silver birches were shining yellow and gold in the sun. We could hear the sounds

of a woodpecker in the distance. The occasional gust of wind sent cascades of vivid yellow leaves down to the forest floor like nature's confetti. The sky was a pure clear blue, not a cloud in sight for as far as we could see between the treetops. The only mar on the day was a nagging worry about how we were going to get out of there.

We explored our campsite a little, the hunters' cabin with its fires and stream running nearby. With a few trapping skills it would be easy to live here. We tried not to think that we might have to as we thawed our on-board water to make a cup of breakfast tea.

Encouraged by the sun, and having eaten breakfast we assessed our predicament. We had not seen any other traffic during the whole of the previous day, so any hope of someone passing by and offering help was out of the question. Even if we could find the right track we were probably a couple of days walk from the nearest town. As for the Landy, the good news was that the engine started and ran OK. The gears were another story.

Some of the gears were working intermittently in low range, and with a working winch we stood a chance of making it out of the forest under our own efforts.

It was hard driving. The gears kept jumping out and drive could only be maintained if one of us held the low range selector lever in place while the other drove. There were crunches and clangs going on all the time. Nasty, complaining bangs, and sounds of metal gouging metal. Going uphill was a tense nightmare.

We were still closest to the town of Babushin by Lake Baikal and our first attempt was to find the elusive track through the final 50 or so kilometres of forest. Heading west, pointing straight towards the town was a track

we'd not tried before. However, this track too soon became impassable due to dead trees having fallen across it, and the forest having reclaimed the ground. More great terrain for off-road clubs with several vehicles, winches and time for fun and games, but not for a lone injured Landy in need of a lot of TLC.

**go west**

There were no other tracks leading west. We'd tried them all. Sadly, it was time to go back the way we had come. Using our marine GPS we could see all the various tracks we had followed, and trace the best way back towards the main road.

Paul's highly tuned mechanical sympathy was in overdrive as he listened painfully to the clangs and bangs coming from underneath the car. We were still not sure of the extent of the damage but our assumption at that stage was severe damage to the transfer box. Fearing expensive and long winded repairs Paul was dispirited, struggling not just with how to nurse the Landy and ourselves to safety, but also seeing his long held ambition to drive the Road of Bones to Magadan fast evaporating. This had become much more than a practical challenge for him, and his mood was sombre.

Struggling to climb uphill through a pass, we discovered the Landy would drive slightly better if the hand brake was partially applied. Removing the rear prop shaft as a result led to some improvement in mechanical noise, but brought other disadvantages. A three ton Land Rover, with only front wheel drive, limited gear options, and in slippery off road conditions, was not an ideal situation to be in.

By working a combination of the gears that were available to us, along with both the foot and hand brakes, Paul coaxed the Landy up



**Above**  
*Paul removes the propshaft, which relieves the strain on the transfer box and reduces the clunking and grinding sounds.*

**Below**  
*Setting up camp in Siberia for the first night.*

the remainder of the rise through the pass for another couple of kilometres. Cresting the top of the pass we were relieved to find ourselves going downhill again. Cutting the engine to try and save what was left of the transfer box, we freewheeled downhill in our heavily laden Land Rover with pointy-out wheels over what was a badly potholed and rutted mud track, gouged by deep water run-offs. No engine control. Just a foot brake. And the occasional slowing down caused by the natural dips and rises in the track. I suggested I would feel happier at a slightly slower speed than 47kph and Paul eased the Landy back to a more sedate 35kph. I suspected this was still a far from safe mode of travel but chose not to ask.

After some 10km of the forest equivalent of the Cresta Run, the hills parted before us and a lake came into view. Never before have I been so relieved to see a lake. On the other side of the lake two tall chimneys belched out smoke, surrounded by electricity pylons. It was the small industrial town of Gusinozersk. We just had to get around the lake and across the railway line, but that was to prove the phrase 'easier said than done'.

[www.goingoverland.com](http://www.goingoverland.com) **LRM**

It was hard going. The gears kept jumping out and drive could only be kept by holding low range in place

