

EASTERN DESPAIR

Paul's ambition to drive the legendary 'Road of Bones' hangs in the balance, as the Landy's wellbeing is entrusted to a Russian mechanic with almost no English Words and Pictures by Paul and Helen Crittenden

AFTER SUFFERING some significant, but as yet not fully diagnosed, damage while alone in the Siberian forest, we had coaxed a seriously complaining Landy with few working gears and no rear propshaft nearly 70 kilometres through forest tracks. Having crested the final hill, we had been careering downhill for the last 10 kilometres with no engine braking and no hand brake. It was a relief to see the hills open up before us to reveal the belching chimneys and apartment blocks of the small industrial town of Gusinoozersk on the other side of a lake.

Gravity had brought us as far as possible over the rough terrain but now the ground was beginning to flatten out. Running the engine again did at least give us our front wheel-drive-back, but also the added worry about what damage we might be doing with all the clanking and banging that sounded as if it was coming through the transfer box.

safe and sound

In Gusinoozersk, red and blue flashing lights behind us indicated the police wanted our attention. Had we committed some traffic law infringement, did they want to fine us because our car was so dirty (a common source of police income), or were they just curious? We gave them little chance to tell us as we



Above
Paul sits in Gusinoozersk on one of the underground heating controls.

Main
The somewhat bleak view from our hotel window of Gusinoozersk.

greeted them warmly (always a useful disarming tactic with Russian police) and asked the way to a hotel. Initially bemused, they quickly led us back the way we had come to the only hotel in town.

We were happy to pay 700 Roubles (£16) a night to get secure parking for the Landy, comfortable beds, en-suite cold water shower, and a toilet. And a big advantage: the staff were able to register our visas for us, at little extra cost.

We later learned we were the first Europeans most people in town could ever remember having seen. Despite having no tourist industry to speak of, the hotel sold fridge magnets with faded pictures of the power station, the same scene we were greeted with as we bounced over the hill on our way out of the forest. Needless to say I had to buy one.

That night, we debated long and hard about the pros and cons of what to do next. Would we be able to fix the Landy ourselves or should we try and find a competent garage and spare parts? Would we be able to find a decent garage in such a small town, or would we need to limp our way up the A165 to the city of Ulan-Ude? If we started the work but couldn't get it finished – because we couldn't get the parts – we would be worse off than if we had driven on.

The next day was Friday, and with

only intermittent access to the internet to get advice or order parts and a weekend looming, Paul dashed off emails to Simon Rafferty at X-Eng and Dave Ashcroft at Ashcroft Engineering for advice. Their speedy responses were much appreciated and helpful, although Simon's news that Russian customs had a backlog of 250,000 unchecked parcels from the UK, causing shippers and suppliers to stop sending anything to Russia, was worrying. Our debate about what to do next moved up a notch to the point of farcical, and a sense of despondency started to settle over us.

an artist at work

But then, as is often the case when overlanding, events took an unexpected turn. A Russian man called German, who used to be an English teacher, now worked as a builder at the secure car park where the Landy was safely ensconced. He knew a good local mechanic, he said, who was willing to have a look at the Landy. At 8pm that evening Dima, the mechanic, summoned Paul: "Come now, we look".

Paul and Dima worked together through the night. Paul was entranced. With neither speaking the other's language, he and Dima had communicated through signs and a shared understanding of mechanics.

That night Dima was the expert, Paul his apprentice. Dima ignored Paul's attempts to direct him to the transfer gearbox as the source of the problem, despite Paul's protestations that that was where all the clunks and bangs were coming from. Instead, Dima had Paul wiggling and turning various parts, while Dima concentrated on the resultant sounds.

The diagnosis came as Dima placed an ear to a screwdriver, the blade of which was placed delicately against the outside of the rear right hand wheel hub, while getting Paul to slowly rotate the rear propshaft from below the Landy. At that point Dima's eyes lit up and he smiled, said something in Russian, sat to one side and lit up a cigarette.

The power surge as Paul had released the hand brake while trying to get the Landy upright and back on the track in the forest had not broken something in the transfer box, the shock wave had broken a rear half shaft.

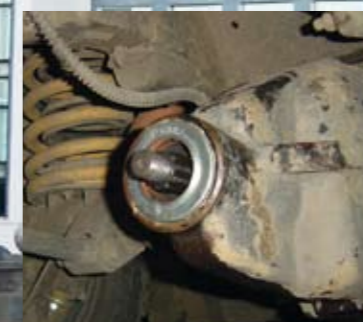
With the diagnosis made, Dima worked with the cleanliness and precision of a surgeon, and the flourish of an artist, stripping first the wheel hub, then the damaged half shaft, and finally the entire differential crown wheel and pinion assembly, laying all the parts out on clean white paper on the dusty workshop floor in the order they were disassembled. He



then fabricated improvised bent wire tools and cleaned the oil and broken parts from inside the axle casing. Every last spec of debris came out and was pieced together like a 3D jigsaw to ensure there were no rogue bits left inside to cause further damage.

At nearly 2am, as Dima reassembled the differential pan to the differential casing, his actions typified his love for his work. By this time, a lesser man would have been finding ways to speed up the job, but not Dima. Cleaning the mating faces with petrol, he then blew onto them gently for a minute or two to ensure the petrol had evaporated. He then ran his finger slowly around the faces, checking for minute flaws or grit. Finding none, he applied silicone

sealant to the pan rim, working with tiny smears of sealant each applied in slow caressing swirls around the bolt holes and formed mating surface. He regularly held the pan up to the light to inspect his work, and worked around the pan rim slowly and diligently until finally the whole rim had a smooth, consistent smear of sealant applied. It had taken him almost ten minutes, and he sat back on an upended log, took out a cigarette, lit it, and drew a long satisfied drag. "Den minweets" he announced, signalling the time it would take for his work to be dry enough to assemble.



A statue of Lenin in Ulan-Ude.

Above
The spotless garage belonging to Dima. His help and knowledge will never be forgotten as he diagnosed a broken half shaft.



➤ At about 2am, Dima began fitting the differential oil seal, and, finding he didn't have the right size tool to press it in, measured the diameter of the various parts with his vernier gauge and disappeared into the dark yard outside. After twenty minutes he reappeared carrying an armful of bits and pieces scavenged from the hubris outside. An old gear wheel, the inner and outer races from a tapered bearing, a small block of mild steel, some large bore steel tubing that may have been a scaffolding tube offcut, and various nuts and bolts. Then he expertly built a horizontal pyramid of parts and secured them in place with the differential input nut. He then proceeded to wind up the nut, constantly checking and adjusting the arrangement of his pyramid, until the seal had been pressed fully home with no damage to its flimsy casing whatsoever.

Seven hours after they started, the rear half shaft had been replaced by the spare we had on board, and a new diff nose seal fitted. With the shops closed, it was the next morning that they returned to buy oil for the differential and finish the job.

Wanting to make up for lost time, we set off next morning, paused briefly at Ulan-Ude to admire the Lenin Head in Lenin Square, and headed on towards Chita, trying to get as many miles behind us before camping for the night.

The Russian main highway was straight, wide and with good tarmac surface and we made good time on the road. As night fell we stopped for a meal at a café before continuing on. With little traffic on the road, our roofrack mounted spotlights cut a swathe through the dark night, briefly cutting back to dipped headlights when the occasional car came towards us on the road.

game on, or game over?

As the approaching car dipped its headlights in response to our own courtesy, Paul's subconscious responded to a sudden sense of danger, and he hit the brakes hard. As their grey shapes flashed left to right in front of us, the huge shapes of seven wild horses were semi illuminated in our dipped lights. With a car approaching on the other side of the road, and our lane filled with horses, Paul's instinct to brake hard in a straight line was the right one.

But it wasn't enough. With our tyres still screeching in protest, the Landy pounded into one of the horses at 50mph with a deep, sickening thud, sounds of wrenching metal, and an explosion of escaping coolant and steering fluid.

Even as we slewed to a halt we could hear the ominous sounds of



When a moving Land Rover meets a stationary horse on the road at night the result is not great for either party.

hissing steam through the instant silence of the aftermath. One glance at the road and it was clear most of our engine coolant was gone. In that moment Paul knew that all hope of driving the Road of Bones had died with the horse. I cried "I don't believe it" over, and over, and over again. Our first day on the road after all Dima and Paul's loving repair work and the Landy was badly damaged again. At least the horse appeared to have been killed instantly and had not suffered.

It was to be a long night. After we had hit the horse, it had been flung across the road and caught the rear of the oncoming car. The other driver indicated he was off to call the police as they would need to be informed. That's the system, and we understood that. We would all have to wait until the police cleared us to move on. An hour later, a van turned up with a woman proffering a first aid box. When we all said we didn't need it, the van left again to return from whence it came. After the first statements were taken by the police, the other driver left while we faced a cold night in the cab with temperatures outside well below freezing. With a gaping hole in the radiator we couldn't even run the engine to keep warm.

We wrapped our coats around us and dozed fitfully in the darkness. Privately, we nursed our thoughts and fears. How bad is the damage? How much will it cost? Will we be able to carry on? Our whole route planning

had been designed to include driving the Road of Bones to Magadan. Our schedule had been getting tighter and tighter with every delay so far: Kazakhstan, Mongolia, the Siberian forest. And now this. Paul sank into his own despair as he realised we could no longer make the Road of Bones without breaching our Russian visas.

As dawn broke, the police returned with an interpreter, confirmed our statements, and by mid-morning we were cleared to move on.

Before they left, Paul enlisted their help to connect the winch to a nearby tree to pull the front roughly back into shape. His inspection of the engine bay confirmed the fan had broken off in the accident and smashed a hole in the radiator. The power steering fluid reservoir was smashed too, and the system compromised. When we asked the police if we could get a recovery truck they shrugged, and told us they don't exist here. We were on our own. They recommended we drive to the outskirts of the nearest town 70km away, where they would give us copies of the paperwork, the important evidence we would need to prove that the accident had been reported to the Police.

Seventy kilometres with no engine cooling, and no power steering. We set off, with real concern about causing further damage, but with no other option but to find our way to those important documents, and a town with the prospect of help. **To be continued...**

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