

INTO THE ABYSS

With their Russian visas quickly running out and paired with the heavy damage sustained by the on-road collision, Paul and Helen's trip hangs by a thread
Words and Pictures by Paul and Helen Crittenden



Following on from the collision with a horse, the bashed-up Defender sits in a local garage, in need of some crucial bush repairs.

AFTER HITTING a horse on the Siberian highway we were emotionally at our lowest ebb to date. Our fan was broken, our radiator had been badly holed, power steering fluid had spilled all over the highway. The last thing we wanted to do was start the engine and drive 70km with no coolant. However, in the absence of any truck facilities in Siberia, that was the only choice we were faced with.

Each nursing our own fears and worries, we had set off, stopping every so often to allow the engine to cool and nervously top up the water in the radiator, remembering our disaster way back in the UK when we cracked the engine block by adding cool water to a hot engine. We managed not to repeat that mishap. Once again we were encouraged and delighted by the thoughtfulness of the 'knights of the road' who stopped to offer help when they saw us by the side of the road with our bonnet up.

Although we had used the winch to straighten out

think we would make it.

We turned the engine off and waited, despondently watching the snow fall in front of us, and looking longingly at the café just a couple of hundred yards further on, not wanting to leave the Landy and miss the police. Finally the cold drove us into the café and we left a note on the car to say where we had gone. The police turned up an hour and a half later.

salient solutions

Sitting in the café we discussed our dilemma. We already knew a block on imports from the UK meant we couldn't get any new Land Rover parts. What we needed was somewhere we could dismantle the damaged parts and assess what repairs were possible. But first, we wanted a warm night's sleep, and somewhere safe to park our Landy.

In pigeon Russian we asked the woman behind the counter if the town had a hotel? Yes there was, but she struggled to describe how to get there. She called over to



the bodywork at the crash site, the bonnet was seriously bent and the catch would not hold. We nervously negotiated the bumps in the road, occasionally having the bonnet fly up with a clang to conceal our view of the road ahead. And now snow was falling again.

Eventually a small town appeared on the horizon: a cluster of drab, mainly single storey buildings. A garage marked the edge of town. This was where the Russian police had told us to meet them so we could collect copies of their paperwork: evidence that the accident with the horse had been properly reported and recorded. Despite the problems with the Land Rover, we were on time. The police were not there – perhaps they didn't

another customer. He spoke no English but indicated that if we waited for ten minutes he would lead us in his car to the hotel.

We followed Dzenya to the hotel, weaving our way through a maze of streets of the town we now knew was called Khilok, an old Russian industrial town whose main industry is locomotive repairs. Finally, we pulled up in front of a group of run down apartment blocks. Dzenya indicated we should wait as he entered one of the buildings. The bricks along the side wall were bulging from decay and age. The heavy metal door was weighted down with heavy bolts. The windows were covered in decorative metal bars, their deterrent purpose nonetheless apparent. On the wall



to work in. Paul set to, diagnosing the extent of the damage, first removing the shattered cooling fan and shroud, radiator, shattered power steering fluid reservoir, holed windscreen washer reservoir with smashed pump, and broken front lights. Peering into the hole that was left was disheartening. Not knowing where or how we would get replacement parts or repairs carried out was something else.

Paul removed the bent and buckled inner and outer wings and front panels. Our winch bumper from

Dzenya, an ex-police officer who set up his own security company a year ago, showed us round the town's auto parts shops, where we manage to buy Russian Uaz lights to replace the Landy's broken ones. Unable to find anything that would replace the broken power steering fluid reservoir Paul glued the remains of the old one back together with twin pack epoxy.

Beyond repair, the windscreen washer reservoir was discarded, despite being unable to find any reasonable replacement. An end

access to the solder joint. Then, using a blowtorch to heat up an old block copper 'iron' provided by Dzenya, he very carefully melted the solder and closed the holes in the header. It took three painfully slow hours, but the end result was a watertight radiator and a big grin.

Early the following day we received a message that Dzenya would pick Paul up later in the day, and try to find a replacement fan. At about noon, he arrived, and they both piled into his car. Arriving at the parts shop, Dzenya didn't pull up in front of the shop, but instead drove around to the rear, pulling up alongside a wall among a handful of repair shops and old brick buildings. Dzenya said something in Russian, and indicated there would be a wait.

Across the yard, a door opened and a large Russian emerged, looked left and right, then started across to the parked car, opened the back door and climbed in. An exchange in stern Russian followed, and some deep laughter. Dzenya reached behind the front seat, and for a moment, Paul imagined him drawing out a pistol and demanding dollars. But instead, he drew out a bottle of vodka, leaned across and opened the glove box to take out three ancient soviet era shot 'glasses' in stainless steel, etched with CCCP.

In the end, the trip to the parts shop proved fruitless, but with Dzenya on the case, we managed to buy a secondhand Uaz fan from a salvage yard that was a good match in diameter for the original Land Rover fan. Dzenya introduced Paul to a supervisor at a local locomotive repair shop, and before long they had taken the old central mounting plate from our Land Rover fan and welded it onto the Uaz fan centre.

The blades are thicker, wider, heavier and fewer in number than the Land Rover model, but just fit into the space available.

With everything back in place and apparently working for now it was

Far left
Paul uses whatever he can find to rest the panel on as he beats it back into shape.

Above
The shattered radiator shroud.

Below
The town of Khilok is extremely proud of its train heritage.

time for the finishing touches. Nobody seemed to have heard of using primer or undercoat so it was straight on with a few layers of white spray paint over the newly reshaped wing panels. Then some black spray paint over the cardboard that had been cut to shape around the new Uaz lights, and the bonnet and wing chequerplating, and we were fit to go. The bonnet catch even works better now than it did before we left England.

the proud parents
Finally, just as friends and family back in England were finishing off their breakfasts and we were looking forward to our evening meal, we flung wide the double doors and Paul reversed the Landy back out of the garage into the softening afternoon light. After all those days on the 'operating table' the Landy was brought out in the open again, bright and shiny as a new pin, if with a few scars to show for his ordeal. A lump rose in my throat.

Our food boxes stuffed with the gift of potatoes from the ladies at the hotel, the next morning Dzenya led us to another café a few miles east of town, where we bade sad farewells. As a parting gift, Dzenya gave us a bag of pine nuts to roast on the open fire, and we waved goodbye, once again overawed by the generosity and kindness of strangers.

After the culmination of delays earlier in the expedition we had been running out of time to complete our planned drive along the Road of Bones to Magadan. The collision with the Siberian horse had delayed us yet again. We now had a choice to make: risk the possibility of overstaying our visa and being both evicted and banned from returning to Russia, with a prohibitive fine that would force us to return home early; or continue our expedition to the Americas and Africa. With heavy hearts, we decided we must accept that the Road of Bones would have to wait for another time. Our next epic task: sorting our passage to North America.

LRM

I procured a couple of empty baked bean tins which were fashioned to repair the fan shroud

Above
Soldering the radiator with an ancient copper iron.
Paul harnesses the Spanish windlass trick to pull the panels back into alignment.

Goodwinch had saved the engine from damage, but there was still a lot of work to do.

We spent every day in the garage, glad of the warmth, not yet used to the cold of the early days of Siberian winter. Paul drew on his metal working skills learned as an apprentice over 35 years ago, using our 7lb lump hammer to beat the inner and outer wings, bonnet and light guard back into shape. Four days later, patience and tenacity paid off when eventually everything went back together with only three bolt holes out of line.

After one of those bizarre conversations in a foreign language I procured a couple of empty baked bean tins from some other hotel guests, which were cut to shape and held together with pop rivets and gaffer tape to fashion a repair to the fan shroud.

of an era in windscreen cleaning. The washer jet nozzle had broken just before we left England so we had got used to hitting the spray button and driving into the spray to make it hit the windscreen. Now we only have our secondary solution left, using the spray from (hopefully clean) puddles to splash up on the windscreen.

radiating good ideas

With no possibility of finding a replacement radiator to fit, Paul brought his old soldering skills into play. Carefully tearing out the radiator fins around the damaged areas, he revealed the capillaries that had been punctured by the fan blades. With no flux, it was going to be impossible to solder the damaged capillaries, so Paul carefully prized them away from the headers, sacrificing them to gain



was painted the number 26a in white paint. Twelve hundred Roubles a night. About £30. Tourist prices. We accepted.

Dzenya indicated we should wait as he made a phone call. Twenty minutes later a woman arrived and we later learned that Lucy was a primary school teacher and Dzenya's sister in law. For now she acted as our interpreter.

let's fix this

They say you are never more than three steps away from the help you need. After we had hit the horse, the first step to help came from the police who directed us to the town. The woman in the café introduced us to Dzenya. Now Dzenya was offering to allow us to park in his garage, where the Landy would be undercover and safe. Not only that, but Paul would be able to use the garage to carry out the repairs. Once again we struggled to believe the miracle of human kindness.

The next day we found that Dzenya had pre-heated the garage, which was dry with plenty of space