

Have Engine, *Will Travel*

How three guys and one car (barely) made it to Mongolia

I assumed I was too old for comfort-deprived road trips. Sure, I'd spent my Ohio University years crisscrossing North America — but I'd outgrown that. At 29, I was content to work as a desk-bound, New York magazine editor and writer. Then I stumbled across a Web site asking: What if you want a bit of unknown in a world full of health and safety measures? What you need is the Mongol Rally.

Story by Joshua M. Bernstein

Photographs by Mims H. Wright





It doesn't take long to realize the Mongol Rally is a *terrible* idea — and one I had to sign up for immediately. Every summer, about 200 fancifully named teams (Starsky and Clutch, Prancing Pandas), raise more than \$2,000 each for charities such as the global humanitarian organization Mercy Corps and Send a Cow, which provides farmers with livestock.

The do-gooders then drive from London to Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar, in an eclectic convoy of barely functioning vehicles that range from broken-down taxicabs to ice cream trucks. No GPS systems. No roadside assistance. No mechanics. The reward for slogging across 8,000-plus miles of

fired up the ignition, the car growled like a lawnmower and blew exhaust willy-nilly. We took our car to a mechanic.

"You need a radiator, spark plugs and exhaust," he said, examining the Justy.

"Is that all?" Mims asked.

"Where are you driving?"

"Mongolia."

"You could also use some luck."

The rally commenced in a cacophony of honking horns, and in days we devoured France, Belgium, Germany and the Czech Republic. Poland and Lithuania disappeared in a blur of roadside kielbasa stands. In Riga, Latvia's ancient Baltic Sea capital, we welcomed our fourth Mr.

Dinosaur member: a sandy-haired Brit named Jon, whom we pitied after his Jeep's engine exploded.

"Guess my welding job didn't work," he said, climbing into our cramped jalopy as we motored toward Mother Russia. After passing a nine-hour gauntlet of snarling German shepherds and Cyrillic paperwork, we discovered our exhaust had ended its relationship with our muffler.

"No problem," said Jon. Like MacGyver, he reattached the exhaust with a plastic zip tie.

Our repaired Dino-mobile roared across spottily paved Russian roads lined with smoked-eel stands. We zipped through Moscow, with its tank-ready 12-lane roads, and aimed south past swaying



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Though the rally started with cheers at London's Hyde Park, it wasn't long before we were mired in mud, fighting losing battles with our barely functioning engines. Andrew struggles with the disintegrating exhaust system, which is held together by plastic zip ties. In the dusty wilds of Uzbekistan, fellow Mongol Rally team Bugs Meany gets its Daihatsu Hijet van stuck in the sand. **OPPOSITE PAGE FROM LEFT:** Josh, Andrew and Mims.

engine-eating mountain ranges, fording swollen rivers, bribing police officers and surviving parched deserts is a measly beer.

Luckily, I like the unknown (and beer). What wilds awaited in the vastness separating Krakow and Moscow, Samarkand and Tashkent, London and Ulaanbaatar? By last March, fellow Ohio University alum Andrew Coslow and friend Mims Wright filled out my rally-team roster. We named ourselves Mr. Dinosaur ("because stupidity isn't extinct," I reasoned) and acquired visas and immunizations.

On eBay U.K., Andrew bought a white 1994 Subaru Justy for \$590 — less than my monthly rent. For good reason.

Upon arriving in London, we realized rust crept around its edges, the radiator looked mice-eaten and the engine was covered in dark, congealed oil. When we





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Our travels were a contrast of new and old. In Kyrgyzstan, a nomadic woman sells dried cheese curds called aaruul, which taste like sour Parmesan and suck moisture from your mouth. Mobile structures called “yurts” dot the grassy countryside. The cultural divide is readily apparent in mountainous, majestic Kyrgyzstan.

sunflower fields and grazing cows.

“It looks like Ohio,” Andrew said fondly, as daylight and Russia dwindled. At the Kazakhstan border, a man ferried us across a moat separating the countries, depositing us in a land unlike Borat’s: Camels wandered the brown, dying countryside. Tumbleweeds blew. Paved roads dissipated into dirt tracks.

“I think,” Andrew pondered, “the rally just began.”

Fun fact: Kazakhstan maps present straight, paved roads, not the rocky, dirt courses apparently ripped apart by land mines that we inched across at 1.2 miles

per hour. Compounding matters, our muffler finally bid adieu in a knee-deep sand drift. We camped in dust storms. Passing trucks sent up choking clouds of sand, forcing us to wear bandanas bandit-style.

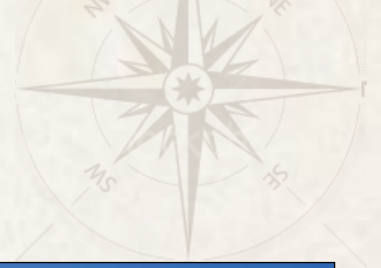
Kazakhstan disappeared, dirty and dusty, and was replaced by Uzbekistan: dirty, dusty, but with foie gras-smooth asphalt. In Moynaq, we clambered aboard rusting boats dry-docked by the receding Aral Sea, then sailed toward the Silk Road town of Samarkand, where we photographed mosques, drank sour goat milk and got pulled over for speeding.

“I gave him \$10, and he made the ticket ‘fly away,’” Mims said.

Dusty Uzbekistan relented to Kyrgyzstan’s snow-kissed mountains. Lower elevations were decorated with gurgling rivers, sturdy trees and wavy green grasses, a buffet to roaming horses, goats and sheep.

The beauty was short-lived, as we soon re-entered Kazakhstan, replete with still more jagged roads. Exhaust fumes leaked into the car, turning the backseat into a suicide parlor. Into Russia we wobbled, then across Siberia’s breathtaking Altai Mountains, where wood-house settlements looked like old Colorado mining towns. Finally, on the trek’s 27th day, we reached the Mongolian border. We’d





traveled nearly 8,000 miles, and we'd lost only our exhaust and muffler.

"I think we can make it," Andrew said as we entered the automotive death row masquerading as Mongolia.

The "roads"—rocky, unpaved, rutted paths carved by Jeeps and off-road vehicles—stretched across the horizon in a dozen directions. Signs were nonexistent. We hoped to drive the 1,200-odd miles to Ulaanbaatar in two days. By day two's end, our mileage numbered 180, equivalent to my Tylenol intake. Mongolian roads were washboards: Drop below 20 miles per hour and your sanity's rattled away; go faster and your car's shaken apart.

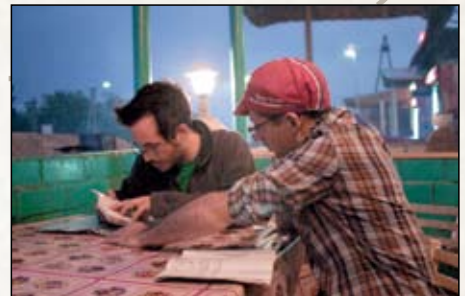
"G-g-g-g-g-g-g-o faster," I pleaded.

By day three, we lost our suspension and front and rear stabilizer bars. Our radiator thrashed, spurting green fluid. We subsisted on greasy dumplings called buuz, made from unrefrigerated goat carcasses, and vodka. We slept on brittle, prickly plants.

On our fifth day in Mongolia, our 32nd overall, we blew our last tire. Team Dinosaur was tired and testy. Sitting in the



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: We did make some friends (although Andrew wasn't trusted to hold the baby in Kyrgyzstan). At a roadside restaurant in rural Russia, Andrew and I "read" a menu written in Cyrillic. I hang out on the edge of a cliff in Kyrgyzstan with a fellow Rally-goer, as an aquamarine lake awaits a half-mile below. Our daily travel routine was a predictable mix of four parts sleep and one part confusion.



car made our backs ache, muscles soft as veal. Tempers flared. Silences reigned. What 8,000 miles couldn't do, Mongolia had accomplished in 500. On little more than rims and faith, we aimed for tiny Altay, 50 miles away, hoping for a miracle.

We found one: an English-speaking gentleman from Mongolia's Ministry of Finance.

"We need to put your car on a truck," he said, examining our sad, sagging Justy. His secretary helped us locate a driver willing to carry us, our spare tire, jerry can and tent for 300,000

Mongolian Tögrögs (about \$275). The only catch? The truck carried goat skins. (I'll spare you the details.)

"My vegetarian girlfriend will never forgive me," I said as we departed.

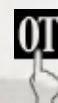
A few bumpy nights later, lights filled the dark horizon: Ulaanbaatar, a neon oasis filled with grey apartment buildings sticking up like bamboo. We had covered nearly 9,000 miles in just about 35 days. It was time to accept our reward. Lots of them. Mr. Dinosaur went to the finish-line bar, located near a hulking Genghis Khan statue.

"Prizes, please," I told the long-tressed

bartender, wiping road dust from my mouth.

She filled mugs of cool, amber ale, which we hoisted above our heads like shiny trophies. Then we drank our prize (and a few consolation rounds).

Joshua Bernstein, BSJ '00, is a Brooklyn-based journalist and critic who writes for The New York Times, Gourmet.com and Forbes Traveler.



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