



RON'S DIARY

BY RON MOON



Magic in Mongolia

It's a feeling I love; one of unfettered freedom, vast vistas and unlimited horizons. The two wheel marks that were the track we were following stretched away, seemingly for eternity. On most maps you can get, the track is actually more grandiosely known as the 'AO201', the major highway south from Mongolia's capital. But this is Mongolia and what is actually on the ground bears very little resemblance to what is drawn on a map. It was a lesson we had learnt very quickly once we had crossed the border from Russia.

Now, as we headed deeper into the Gobi Desert, we revelled in the freedom of the wide open spaces and imagined, for just a moment, that we were as free as the nomads we saw herding their cattle and goats around us. Needless to say we had quickly fallen in love with this awesome country and its stoic, hospitable people.

About the size of Queensland, with a population of about 2.4 million, it's one of the least populated countries on earth. But contrary to most people's perception, it is much greener than you may think. In the north there are vast areas of forest dotted with lakes and cut by fast flowing mountain-fed streams; in the west are great, permanently

snow-capped mountains; while the heartland is rolling, grassy steppes. In the south and south-east the grassy plains give way to semi arid desert country but, as we were to discover, there was variety and magic among these as well. But it is a harsh country and we were seeing it at its best - in late summer, early autumn. In winter much of the country suffers with temperatures as low as -40°C, while Spring is dry, dusty and windy; summer on the other hand can bring rain storms while temperatures can climb to over 40°C in the desert country.

The camping, though, is fabulous no matter where you are. With no land ownership outside the cities, and a heritage that endowers the nomad with special privileges, you can wander at will and camp wherever you want.

There were only a few times when camped that we weren't approached by a horseman, a family in a LandCruiser, or a couple of young kids out collecting water or cattle dung to be dried for fuel. Invariably they were friendly and just as curious of us as we were of them. Their stock were also curious and if any came by they would mill around the camp, sticking heads into tents, billies, pans and vehicle doorways.

We had quickly fallen in love with this country and its people

Mongolia, though, must be the last country on earth that relies so much on the horse for transport. Every village we visited exuded a 'Wild West' atmosphere with wide dusty streets, timber buildings and horses tied up to hitching poles while cloak-draped cowboys straight out of a 'spaghetti western' walked the sandy streets or lolled against a post smoking.

We also encountered herding families on the move with their stock and all their possessions loaded onto camels and horses. It was a great sight with a dozen or so heavily-loaded camels strutting along behind their human leader; horses dancing under their rider's guidance; dogs rounding up the huge mobs of sheep and goats; while a little separate were a group of young kids on their horses pushing along a mob of cows.

Ubiquitous in Mongolia too, are the herders' gers. These tents dot the grazing lands like white mushrooms and spring up just as quickly, taking about four hours to erect. Low and round they allow the wind that seems always to blow to flow over them, their felt walls not flapping or cracking like canvas but instead muting the outside sounds. They are also surprisingly warm and with a small dung-fed stove in their centre they provide the nomads with a secure, warm abode.

That's made even more homely with the satellite dish and small solar panel that feeds TV straight into the ger and to a small colour TV sitting inside. We found the contrast amusingly contradictory; like the cloaked cowboy that would pull out a mobile phone to ring home, a girlfriend, or to find out the latest cashmere wool prices. Our sojourn into the Gobi was also one of contrasts. We had headed south to the Gurvan Saikhan National Park, just one of a number of parks and reserves that cover much of the Gobi - 13.7% or 21.53 million hectares of the country is inside reserves of one sort or another - this one is the country's second biggest (2.7 million ha) and protects much of the spectacular range country and the area's varied wildlife.

We had walked into the Yoly Am Gorge, which during winter is filled with ice but is, at the end of summer, just a trickle of water flowing through a steep sided narrow ravine. At one point the creek flows over a low waterfall.

Later, we drove through nearby Dugany Am Gorge, the track like many in Australia, following a creekbed the whole way. When water started flowing down the banks we couldn't help but stop and camp in this magical spot!

Next day we travelled across a vast plain with mountain ranges to our north and south. Closer, and in the lee of the mountains to the south, was the long tongue of sand known as the Hongory Nels, the biggest dunes in the Gobi. These dunes stretch for more than 100km, are 12km wide at their widest point and up to 300m high. We were hoping to see them from a camel's back but the Gobi had one more surprise in store. That evening it started to rain and it didn't let up for 36 hours; the dunes and mountains were shrouded in mist and the wind blew like the harbinger of winter. In fact it was; next day when the rain stopped and the weather cleared, from a point some distance north we looked back over rolling desert plains. The dunes were hidden, with the mountains standing proud and now dusted with a fresh coating of snow.

A few days later, after a bogging or two, we were back in Ulaan Baatar, the hectic capital. We were preparing to head for Russia, the final leg of our trip across Europe and Asia, but will be hard pressed to beat Mongolia and all the pleasant experiences we had there!

Regards,
Ron And Viv

From top left: driving through 'The Pinch' Dugany Am Gorge; Gobi herder waters his stock; crossing the Gobi after 36 hours of rain; camping in the remote north-west of Mongolia; a family of herders on the move

Many streets resemble the old 'wild west'

Every high pass has a small Buddhist shrine

From top: crossing the Bormoron Gol River; busy market day in the city of Tsetserleg; our camp in the magical Dugany Am Gorge