

August 2010

CITY BIKE

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Mongolian Adventure

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Ghengis Gone: Seeing Mongolia from a Sidecar

Words and Photos:
Alan Lapp

My wife, Zina, won a 1-year fellowship to Mongolia, and we lived in the capitol, Ulaan Baatar (U.B. for short) in 2002-3. While we were there, we bought a used "domestic production" Ural sidecar, a very basic model. Kick start only, single-wheel drive, drum brakes, leading-link forks, and a funny little stamped sheet brass carb slide. Our example delivered surprisingly poor fuel economy, unresolved by repeated tune ups. Despite its shortcomings, it's howling good fun to ride—all hacks require certain mental adjustments be made: when the chair is on the ground, it "tricycle steers"—point the wheel where you want to go. However, when the chair wheel comes off the ground, it "motorcycle steers"—counter-steer to go where you want. Part of the fun of a sidecar is flying the chair around turns: it's the hack equivalent of wheelies. But, and this is a big one: you must mentally switch gears about how to steer it the instant the wheel leaves contact with Terra Firma.

Another thing to understand about Urals is that they're 100 percent reliable: you can absolutely count on the fact that at some point, it will stop running. I never went



Our friend, Battai, my wife, Zina, and myself.

anywhere without tools. Over the course of the year, we had a variety of maladies stop the bike: contaminated gas, the kill switch shorted internally, a broken battery box shorting the battery to the frame, the condenser wire broke off, the alternator bolts fell out, the carb tops would mysteriously back off, causing the motor to idle too fast, the sheet-metal hack fender kept breaking from the vibrations and the plugs would foul with regularity that would please a Swiss

watchmaker. I learned to ask for "Orsiin hamgeen sain" spark plugs—"From Russia, most good quality." There is no force in this universe that will resurrect a fouled 30-cent made-in-China spark plug. Plugs are like White Castle burgers; one won't get you far, better get six.

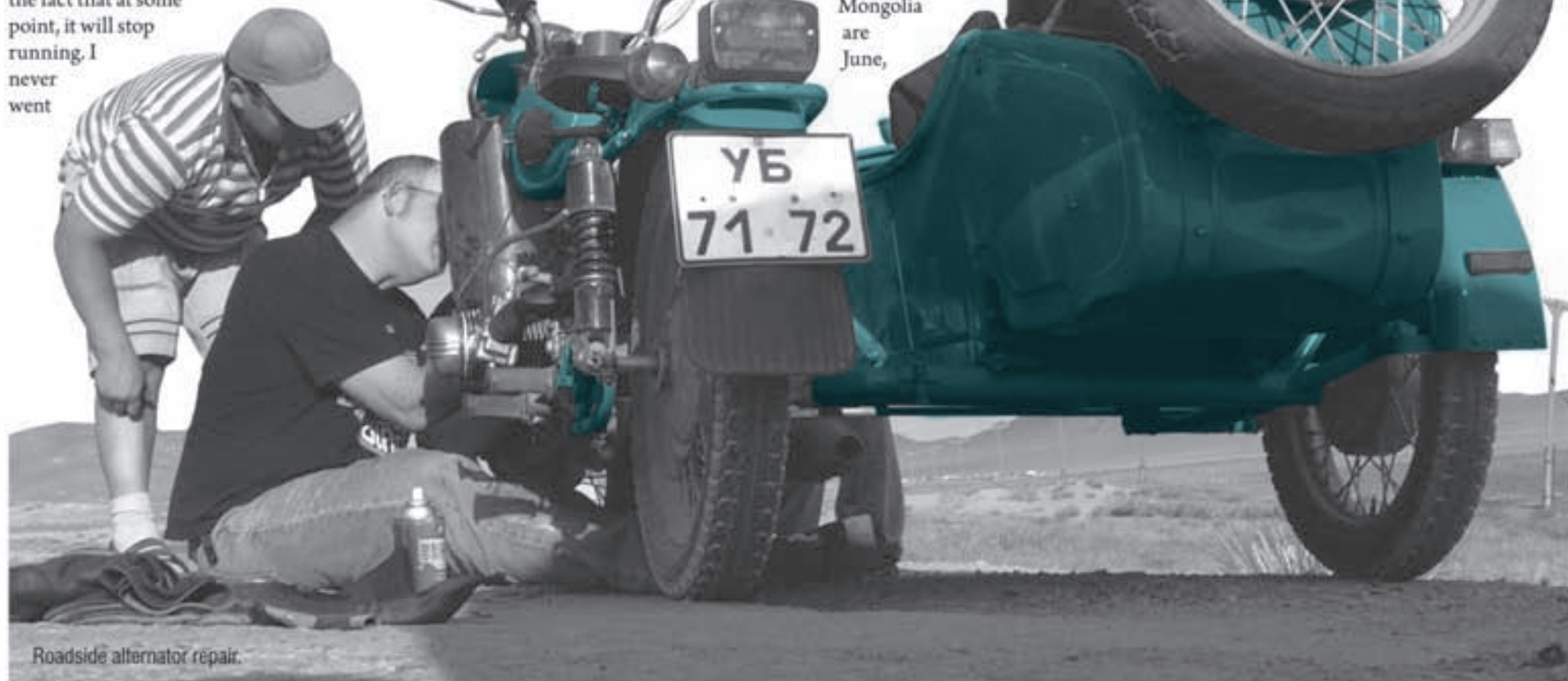
When the weather was above freezing (as an aside, the four seasons of Mongolia are June,

July, August and winter), we rode it frequently in the city, and out into the nearby countryside for picnics. Toward the end of our stay, we made plans to take a roughly 500 mile trip for a week, making a loop around the Buddhist monastery at Kharahorin, the Orkhan Khurkruu waterfall, and Ogii Nuur lake. In preparation for the trip, Zina and I went to the gravel pits just outside town to get her acquainted with driving the hack.

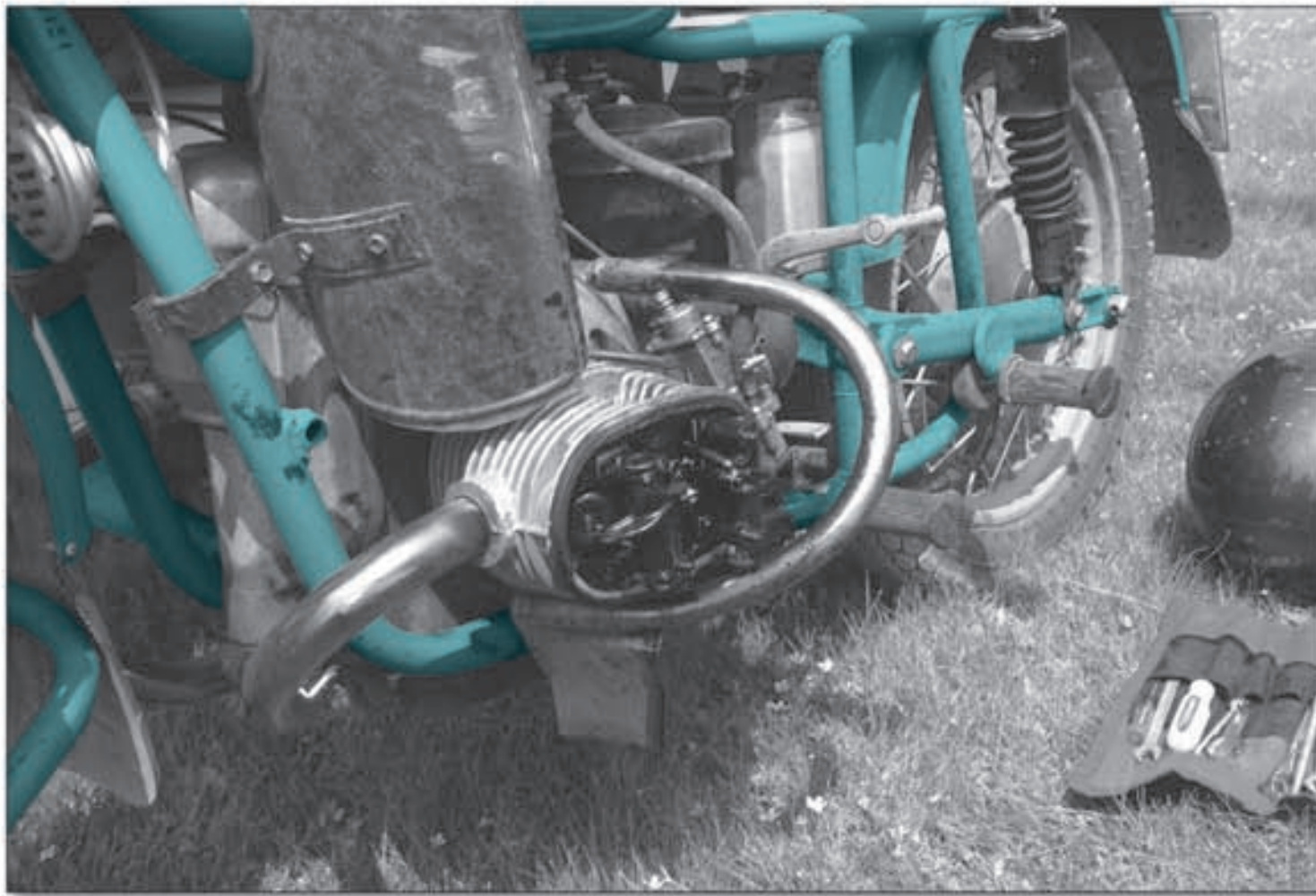
Mongolia is twice the size of Texas, has the population of Philadelphia, and half of that population lives in U.B. Ironically, if you're on a road, you're not far from help, despite the thinly-spread population. In part, this is due to the weather: nobody drives past a stranded vehicle, as it's a matter of life and death in the winter. The second thing to know is that at the time we were there, Mongolia had over a million miles of roads, with fewer than 500 of them paved. Riding a motorcycle beyond the city limits is by default an adventure ride. With that in mind, I stocked up on spare tubes, patch kits and spare spark plugs and points.

We left U.B. following behind a *Forgon*—a Russian mix between a four-wheel-drive military jeep and a V.W. van, which seem to be

invariably painted olive drab or slate gray. Inside this *Forgon* were our friends from the



Roadside alternator repair.



Busted flat in Ulaan Baatar. Notice that the crash bar is bent nearly to the footpeg, and the Toyota paint on the shin guard.

We promised the road crew that there would be a bottle of vodka and a carton of cigarettes in it for them if our bike was mostly still there when we returned in a week. We brought the spare tire into the round felt tent (called a *Ger*), and locked the bike with a skimpy little chain. We piled into the *Forgon* to continue our journey. The sights were wonderful, but I had a nagging feeling that I'd have enjoyed it more on the Ural.

When we got back to U.B., I headed over to the *Technikiin Zak*, or technical market. The Ural "dealer" had new replacement parts for everything from the head gasket up in stock. The total cost was \$80, and that was probably the higher, 'foreigner' price. I imagine doing the same repair on a BMW GS would cost many thousands of dollars here in the states, and you'd probably wait three weeks on back-ordered parts.

Once home again, we endured another long slog in the *Forgon* over the horrid paved road to Luun, where we delivered the vodka and smokes as promised, as the bike was unmolested. In keeping with the tradition of helpfulness, the bike was quickly surrounded by a Mongolian Horde of mechanics, and I was relegated to handing wrenches into the huddle. The bike was quickly repaired, a great cheer

States, Cory and Dan and their girls, Claudia and Carleen, and a fellow scholar, Ben. We carried fuel, spares and tools—our ordinary luggage was stashed in the van.

The first part of the ride was on the highway, and I use that term loosely. It's a paved road that leads north, and is in miserable condition: narrow, highly crowned, littered with potholes. It's impossible to go faster than about 40 mph on this road. Both comfort and ease of driving actually improve when the pavement ends just beyond a town called Luun. After a short break to switch pilots, Zina took the helm, and quickly caught up to the *Forgon* just as the pavement ended. As we crossed onto a narrow gravel bridge over a large culvert, an oncoming Toyota Landcruiser startled Zina by moving toward the center of the road. Zina's well-developed motorcycle brain overwhelmed her fledgling sidecar brain, and counter-steered us directly into the side of the Landcruiser, shearing off most of the left-side cylinder head, littering the road with smashed aluminum bits and hot oil. It happened in an instant, and was over quickly, but I tasted the tinny flavor of a massive surge of adrenaline.

If you absolutely must hit a brand new Landcruiser, Mongolia is the place to do it. The driver was more concerned about our well-being than the nearly full-length scrape in his truck. We agreed that it was our fault, and the driver suggested \$50 to replace the gouged rear tire, which we were happy to pay. We towed the hurt and bleeding Ural to a road construction crew about two miles further down the road. They were working on the Millennium Road, a joint Mongol/Chinese boondoggle to allegedly improve trade between the countries. Inexplicably, the road is 75 miles away from any population center.



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Tankslapper

NO FAT BIKES!

Maynard,

I'm 100 percent in agreement with you regarding the global motorcycle obesity problem you so eloquently pointed out ("An Eleven and a Three," July 2010). I believe choice is good and everyone should be able to buy a steed that speaks to them but lately it feels like the industry might be

your horrific use of that slogan "Ride Fast Take Chances." I have never ridden over 85 in a Catholic school zone in my life, nor do I do pop-a-wheelies, or burnt-outs on my Zundap ACLU 1235cc unsportsman-like bike! I do however leave it at full gas-on mode in the garage at all times, so when I am ready, she's ready! And I ride with all my gear: Birkenstocks, condom on my gimmick and my hockey helmet from my

I have never ridden over 85 in a Catholic school zone in my life, nor do I do pop-a-wheelies, or burnt-outs on my Zundap ACLU 1235cc unsportsman-like bike!

heading towards adding a roof as an option. Numero uno on my list of criteria for determining which motorcycle to purchase the last two times has been a road-ready weight of under 500 lbs. I'm always willing to compromise assorted creature comforts in lieu of tossability, my ability to pick her up and technical simplicity. I always find that I'm nodding my head in agreement with your view of things motorcycle-related or not, keep up the great work.

Alan Anttila
'09 Wee 480lbs. fully fueled

RIDE FAST TAKE CHANCES HORSE GETS MORE BEATINGS

CityBike:

Right On!

How did Gwynne ever learn those skills ("Tankslapper," July 2010) boasted?

Most times when another motorcyclist's foolhardy riding behavior pisses me off—when I sit back and think about it—it reminds me of me 20 years ago.

Keep the motto please, for all reason stated.

BT
Marin

Editors,

I am extremely and prematurely offended and defended, upended and suspended by

shortbus days, oh yes and dishwashing gloves so to you I say, "ride like a maple bar is on fire in your colon, take Prozac."

Godspeed brothers, sisters and wolf in Andrew Jackson's clothing!

James Willard McD
Oakland CA

James, you confuse and frighten us. And we like it.

Dear CityBike:

What is this world coming to? Who is this person? Their political correctness chips at American freedom.

Ride Fast Take Chances, offensive? What part is offensive? The "ride fast" part or the "take chances" part? I remember when I was 10 years old, taking my buddy's Honda 50 and going for a ride without my mom's permission. Then in college I would go to the beach on my girlfriend's Vespa with nothing on but trunks and flip flops. Stupid, I admit; but youth is wasted on the young.

Now in my forties, I look back at those days of riding, at what seemed to be insane speeds with reckless abandonment to my own safety, with apprehensive nostalgia. I wouldn't want my two boys to live like I did. No son, do as I say, not as I did. But for us, wanting to ride fast and take chances is as a visceral yearning as wearing pink is to a little girl. (I use "little girl" metaphorically, I don't mean females.)

I am saddened by those who can't admit to themselves they really want to live the life we chose. I think your rag advocates safety effectively, even though your motto is Ride fast Take chances. Life comes down to basically a handful of decision; so take off your dress and ride like I know you really want to.

Bob Beck
The Bay Area

Bob, we think Gwynne does indeed remove her dress when she rides, although she replaces it with leather.

Please send your thoughts to CityBike, PO Box 10659, Oakland, CA 94610 or do that email thing: info@citybike.com.



The Mongolian Horde of Mechanics.

went up when the bike fired, and we got on the road back home.

The motor was running like crap, and we made frequent stops: I adjusted the valve clearance, still crap. I adjusted the point gap, still badly missing on the damaged side. I pulled the plug, and discovered that a recently-new plug was oil fouled, and I'd left all my spares at home with our luggage. I cleaned it to the best of my ability, closed the gap significantly, and the motor propelled us, shuddering, homeward. Ever fickle, the Ural blew its main fuse just as we reached the city limits. Mongols have many wonderful, friendly, generous attributes. A sense of civic pride isn't among those attributes: the place is evenly strewn with a thick mantle of litter. This worked out pretty well for me in this case, a strip of cigarette wrapper bridged the fuse, and the aluminum coating restored conductivity.

Back home, I had time to consider the trip. On one hand, it had been a bust—we only got half-a-day's drive away from home, barely even got off pavement, and didn't get to see the sights from a motorcycle, which

has value to me. On the other hand, the fates had dealt us a pretty sour hand, and we deftly recovered with no real loss other than wounded pride and a serving of regret. It occurs to me that there are a variety of vectors that go into producing the outcome of an adventure ride. Personal disposition, riding skill, wrenching skill, preparation of spares and tools, adequate money and time, the number and character of riding partners, and support vehicles. And luck—one must never underestimate the value of luck. If one vector is lacking, another can compensate. We were fortunate that our inexperience was balanced by having a support vehicle. If you're a chronically bitter disappointment



Traditional Mongolian jacket called a Del.

magnet, the quality of your experience will be improved by increasing the values of all the other vectors. ☺

Alan Lapp is a soul-singing, hash-slinging, trash-talking director of art and crusher of bones. Send feedback about your Asian riding adventures to him: info@citybike.com.

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