

Wide steppes, wild horses and two mountainbikes

Mongolia Mountainbike Expedition (1996)

Andy Heßberg & Waltraud Schulze

The planning and preparation

Mongolia. We have decided to explore this country by bike. But, there is so little information available on Mongolia in general, and on biking in Mongolia in particular. We organized the whole tour by ourselves, half a year of planning prior to the tour. Since we had no reliable information on whether or not one could buy food in back-country towns, and if so, what kind of food that would be, we decided to bring all the food with us, we were going to need for our seven week's tour. The advantage of this was, that we were totally independent and we had the type and amounts of food we needed. We planned for 4 Mcal a day which was about 800 g dry weight of food a day. You can imagine that for seven weeks, a lot of stuff accumulated: when we left for Mongolia, we were carrying a total of about 90 kg of food, consisting of dried fruit, a self made cereal mixture, pemmikan, self made candybars (something like Cliff bars), powerbars, milk powder, noodles, rice, instant mashed potatoes, instant souce powder, marzipan, a mixture of nuts, tea bags, soybean oil, and sugar. The only things we ever bought during the tour was sugar, and some noodles (we wanted to eat more than our food plan allowed us). In addition to all the food we were carrying our personal camping gear (about 15 kg per person). Now there was a big question: How the hell do we get 120 kg of equipment plus two bikes to Mongolia? We decided to travel by train. This had the advantage that the luggage was always with us, and on the train they don't charge for overweight. So we spent one and a half week traveling from Prague to Ulaan Baatar via Moscow and on the Transsiberian Railway. This worked totally well and we arrived in Ulan Bator with all our luggage complete on September 2nd. We spent two day in Ulan Bator (we had booked a family stay with a travel agency: this was cheaper than any hotel) packing our gear for the tour and looking around the city. UB itself is absolutely ugly, dusty and dirty. The only nice thing is the monastry which is at the moment being restored. Anyway, we were glad to leave the city on September 4th!

Out in the steppe

Our first goal was the town of Harhorin. During Chingis Khan times this was the capital city of Mongolia and it also has a famous monastry. We were lucky to have the first 300 km paved road. This allowed us to get used to the bikes and all the weight, and of course to the BOB trailer. When we started, Waltraud's bike had about 40 kg of food plus personal gear and 20 liters (20 kg) of water (since there was no water available for the first 300 km). Andy was pulling the BOB (30 kg) and had about 50 kg of stuff on the bike. Both of us were using two panniers in the back and two panniers in the front. Since the road was paved for the first 300 km, we made good progress and rode 100 km each day. The landscape was typical steppe, with mountains and grassland (no trees). Along the roadside we saw gers, the type of tent of the local nomads. Also, everywhere there were animals (cows, horses, goats and sheep) grazing the grassland near the gers. Sometimes we also saw something that could be called little towns, basically consisting of one or two concrete houses with many gers surrounding. At these towns, it is possible to buy things in little kiosks, but you can never be sure what they have. We decided to ride on and not to stop at any of those towns. People from the towns and also from the gers along the road waved to us, and they never could imagine that someone travels by bike! We basically had the feeling to be THE attraction for local people. Whenever we put up our tent somewhere we thought it was nice, we could almost be certain that within half an hour one, or two Mongolians would arrive at our tent and just look at all those things we had. And especially the bikes. They were always looking for a motor and were very astonished to not find one. Also the gears on bikes was something they did not understand at first. We had shifting systems with rapid-fire levers. These had a little window that indicated which gear we were riding. Mongolians always thought it was a system for counting kilometers, like in a car! Although it was usually very nice to have locals visit our tent, we decided

that we do want to avoid towns and bigger accumulations of gers. It would just take too much time before we could get going on again. Here it proved to be of real big advantage that we brought all our food and thus were completely independent of kiosks (and: you can buy rice and noodles there, and sometimes bread, but no high energy food, as we needed it).

A visit to the famous monastery

After three days on paved road with only minor hills, we had our first experiences with Mongolian gravel roads. One has to know that the soil in Mongolia, especially in the very wide river valleys, gets totally muddy in spring. This is one reason why we decided to travel in fall: it simply is the driest time of year, and we can expect the roads to be dry and firm. Very often it was a clay surface and since it was dry, it was hard like a paved road. For bikes ideal, however not for jeeps: they have four wheels and thus have to go through twice as many bumps and holes. With the bike we always found a track that was great. Also, a common phenomenon in Mongolia is, that each track is good for maybe one or two years, then it gets too much eroded, or someone ruined it by getting stuck in spring, etc. Since roadwork seems to be something unknown, people just open up a new track next to the old one. So, sometimes you see up to 10 different tracks all going in the same direction. This is really convenient, if you think, your track is no good (too much of corrugated surface, too many holes, too sandy) just pick the one to your left or right and try it out. Usually there is one track that's good for bikes. The only thing we could never understand is the way they lead roads across hills: basically the road goes straight up on the one side and straight down on the other. Winding roads are not known, and even building a track around a hill is something they never do.

Harhorin, the town where we wanted to end up, lies in the foothills of the Changai-Mountain range, so we encountered many steep inclines and even steeper downhill. On one of those downhill stretches the CrMo front rack on Andy's bike broke. And this basically at the beginning of the tour! Luckily we were able to repair it (it cost us two hours), and a lot of the weight from his front panniers had to be distributed to the trailer or Waltraud's bags. A few weeks later, Waltraud's front rack also broke, and it was brand new - no reliance on those stupid things. In the morning of the fifth day we reached Harhorin. The monastery really is worth a visit. There is not much left of it, basically the walls and three buildings. These buildings have been turned into a nice museum. Currently the monks are rebuilding and restoring the monastery. We had no desire to spend more time in the town, and thus headed for Tsetserleg, a province capital city in the Changai Mountains north-west of Harhorin. We were looking forward seeing the forest that covered higher mountains (in the lower elevation in the steppe it is too dry for forests).

Into the Changai Mountains

After 500 km on the track, we reached the capital of the northern Changai Province, Tsetserleg. It is one of the nicest Mongolian towns (if the word "nice" applies to Mongolian towns at all!). Tsetserleg lies in the Changai Mountains at an elevation of 1760 m. We looked at the Monastery there, which was turned into a museum and therefore has not been destroyed. Also we had a look at the town's market, a place where you can buy food, clothes, and animals. At noon time we left the town on our way to the Volcano Chorgo and the White Lake. Immediately behind the town we had to cross a steep mountain pass: from 1760 m to 2000 m on a distance of 2 km. We did have to push our bikes at times, but the downhill was worth it! We were then riding in a very wide valley directly west to a small town Ikh-Tamir. There we crossed the river that made the valley, and started the incline for another mountain pass. Since we had strong western wind that day, we did not make good progress. The wind was even worse the following day, and at noon time we only had made 17 km. the dust blew into our faces and it was rather cold, too. We would have put up our tent and waited for the storm to pass, but we needed to make it to the next river to get water... Finally we reached the Volcano Chorgo (it is now inactive, but has really big lava fields) is in a "National Park" (sometimes I think "National Park" means that tourists have to pay to enter, but nothing else!). We decided to spend two days in the area hiking, servicing the bikes and doing some fishing. We were especially fascinated by the forest that covered the hills and also the lava field. It was a pure larch forest, and when we were there mid of September, the leaves were all yellow - a great contrast to the black lava and the blue sky. Speaking of blue sky - here we did have half a day of rain! After having explored the Volcano and lava field, we moved our camp to

the shore of the White Lake. The lake was made when the lava blocked the nearby river. It is said this lake has a lot of similarities to lake Hovsgol. And it does have big Salmon! This area was the highlight of our stay in the northern part of the Changai Mountains. We now were on our way to Uliastay, the oldest city in Mongolia. It lies at the western most point of the Changai Mountains.

The first snow

To reach Uliastay we had to cross two major passes, one at elevation 2600 m and one at 2560 m. Actually, the Volcano and the White Lake are at about 2000 m. It was funny, but we never felt like being at such a high elevation, because oftentimes we were in very wide valleys and the mountains did not look as rugged as you may expect for a mountain range. For the first pass we had to cross, the weather did not look good. It had been quite stormy for days and every morning we got up, we saw the mountains covered with snow up to about 2400 m. The day before we intended to do the pass, our tent was snowed in over night. And the wind was stronger than ever. Still we decided to give it a try. About 10 km before the summit a truck passed by. We did not even make a sign, they just stopped and asked if we wanted a ride. The temptation was too big, and the weather too bad. So we did another truck ride. When we saw the summit and the road being covered in snow, we actually were glad to be sitting on a truck and not working our way up those steep roads. Pretty soon after the pass we decided to bike again - the landscape was too fascinating for having it pass by on a truck. The whole mountains were covered with yellow larch forest and small streams were running in the valleys. It was a great place and we decided to camp in the larch forest. Also very interesting were the few gers that were on meadows between patches of forest. They did not anymore have cows, but yaks.

The southern Changai

The closer we got to Uliastay, the drier and warmer it got. Soon, the forest was reduced to the very highest peaks and we were in the steppe again. The next mountain pass was rather easy, it was by far warmer and not as windy. From the summit of that pass it was a 40 km downhill to Uliastay! Too bad the road was so rugged - holes and really bad washboard patterns. Uliastay was a shock, we had not been in a town for eight days. We really felt the dirt in the air, and the noise. After having bought sugar on the market, we quickly left the town, followed by a crowd of children (some of them on Russian bikes). A few km behind the town we put up our tent on a saddle and enjoyed the wilderness again. From here on we traveled east in the southern foothills of the Changai Mountains.

Our next goal was Bayanhongor. There we planned to stock up on fuel for the MSR stove. From Uliastay to Bayanhongor we used small roads that had very little traffic (one car per day). The landscape was absolutely fascinating. Pretty soon after Uliastay we had to cross another pass and then ascend in a valley to an elevation of about 2400 m. The road followed a stream, which at this time of year was almost dried out. However, the road at times basically consisted of large boulders, as found in a river bed. It was really hard to bike on that! But again the fascinating landscape rewarded for all the work. A view of the highest Mountain in the Changai Range was the highlight. Its ice cap was a great contrast to the dry, and yellow grass of the steppe. We were lucky to find a spring in the late afternoon, and put up our camp next to it. This meant we could cook a lot (there was no need to save water). We decided to have pudding as a desert. Interestingly at this high elevation we did not find any gers. Actually we did not see any ger for three days! We had to cross several passes, and again up to 2600 m. However, these passes were in great contrast to the 2600 m passes in the northern part of the Changai: it was warm and totally dry, no trees and sometimes even salinification of the soil. After seven days since Uliastay we reached a big river, Baidrag Gol. (We actually had found smaller streams on the way, so water was not a problem). Here we spent half a day washing clothes. We actually had been cycling for 22 days now. And another 22 to come... From here to Bayangol it was three days, and the landscape looked more and more like desert. We had a day of following a dried out river and it really looked like desert already. In Bayanhongor we stocked up on fuel and some noodles and left town again for Arvaycheer. The 200 km between Arvaycheer and Bayanhongor basically also are a high plateau to the south of the Changai Mountains at a rather high elevation (1500-2000m) Speaking of a high plateau does not mean it's flat! There always are some passes to cross so you'd get into the next wide valley. Sometimes there were interesting rock formations looking like pancakes.

Shopping experineces

Arvaycheer is the ugliest town we saw! Basically it consists of rotten concrete buildings and a power plant that produces totally black smoke. We only entered the town to buy some cookies and bread (we somehow felt like having bread, even though we did not need to buy any food at all). This was the biggest mistake we made. It took us two hours to buy bread, simply because on that day there was no market, and all the stores I could identify as such had only Chinese clothes and household goods (but no toilet paper!). Asking someone local for bread resulted in one of us being lead into the hotel (which we at first did not know that it was the hotel) where the owner offered us to eat (for payment, of course). It took me a while to make clear to them that we wanted to buy bread and not eat right now! At least then we were showed the correct store. Again it was hidden somewhere in a rotten building. We were really glad to leave the town - even if the owner of the hotel was not happy at all!

From Arvaycheer we took a small road south, following the river Ongi Gol. We therefore did not need to worry about water for the next 200 km. Our goal was Dalanzadgad. Before starting this last part of our two months tour, we had to do another major repair: the tire of our trailer had worn off pretty badly, so we had to repair two holes with some pieces of rubber.

Into the Gobi Desert

South of Arvaycheer the landscape becomes totally flat - a new experience for us, since we basically came from the Changai Mountain range. It was fun speeding through the steppe, which eventually turned more and more into desert. The track was really good: the soil was so hard, that no washboard pattern had formed. For two days we had such flat landscape and it was about to get boring when we reached the small town of Saykhan Ovoo. It is at the river Ongi Gol. We camped 5 km behind the village at the river. Here we met a really nice Mongolian family with three children. They were totally astonished that someone travels by bike, something they never saw before. They did not even know what a polaroid camera was, and you can imagine how delighted they were when we took photographs of their children. We knew already that we had too much supplies of rice, so we gave the wife our additional 600 g of rice. She was so happy, they brought cooked meat and airag (fermented milk) to our tent.

The next morning we had to work our way through a small mountain range. We were looking forward to that, because it meant a change from that flat landscape. However, all the valleys among the rocks were sandy, it must have not rained here for a long time! In addition to the fight with the sand, we soon had another problem, the damn tire of the trailer. There was a big hole in the tire's profile, and the only way to fix it was by mending it with a string. Since the tire had holes, of course the tube had holes, too. So we spent maybe two hours mending the tire and patching holes in the tube. And this turned out to become a daily routine from now on... After 8 km through rocks and sand, we suddenly found ourselves on a flat plain again. We were glad to speed ahead again for a few km.

The river Ongi Gol feeds into a lake, Ulaan Nuur. This lake dries out during summer, and so does the river. Near the town of Mandal Ovoo, we filled our water tanks with a total of 28 L and shortly after that, the river had disappeared. Also, the vegetation had changed, we now had less grassland but more of thorny wooden species. We soon noticed how nasty those thorns were when we kept having flats. So no more "leaving the track once it's bad" - a technique that has proved to be very useful. We had figured out that usually riding on the grass without a track can be nicer than staying on the track when it has a real nasty washboard pattern. However, on this road we were rather lucky, it was good most the time. Maybe this was due to there not being so much traffic - we were cycling for three days and did not see a car or truck. Since Ulaan Nuur was dried out when we were there (early October), we did not bother about it much and went on directly to Bainsag, some sediment cliffs, where the fist Dinosaur Eggs had been found.

The desert mountain range

Also in that area there is a "forest" of a special tree species that grows on sand dunes and sediments and has especially long roots to be tapped to the ground water. We were so fascinated of this patch of green in the desert, that we spent half a day just wandering around among the bonsai sized trees. Acutally, the Gobi is not as barren as the word "desert" may make you think.

There are wooden dwarf shrubs all over and we found a lot of smaller plants flowering. The next day was the hunt for Dinosaur eggs - not really, but we looked at the cliffs. Especially during sunset they have a fascinating red color. These cliffs are a major tourist attraction. Dalanzadgad is only 80km away, so a lot of tourist visit the cliffs. That meant also, that from now on we had more traffic on the tracks. Dalanzadgad is located near a mountain range called Gurvan Saykhan. Its highest peaks are around 2800 m. We now were at an elevation of around 1000 m and basically the landscape was flat again. When we approached Dalanzadgad we always saw the big mountain range at the horizon. Especially seeing the highest peaks being covered in snow made us decide to do an extra trip to see the snow - a real contrast, since we were in the desert.

The day we did the ascend to 2400 m was among the worst experiences we had. Not because of the road (it was fine) but rather because of the trailer's tire. By the time being, we had repaired 24 holes in the inner tube, and used three different strings (with each having a different color) to mend holes in the tire. Of course, since we had a few flats in our bikes tires due to thorns, at some point we ran out of patches. And then came the day we ran out of glue. And then one has to know that obviously Mongolians don't use vulcanizing glue for repairing flat tires. A truck driver had given us some glue he said he used. But it simply did not work for our tubes. From now on we spent three hours repairing a small hole or pumping the tire every 30 min. Eventually we found a way of keeping the air in the tube for at least half a day, and actually that saved the last part of our trip! We did not bring any spare tires for the trailer, because it was brand new, and I did not at all expect the tire to wear off like that! The first signs of the tire being worn off were after one week (500 km)! Our bikes tires have 6000 km and are still perfect. Anyway, due to our great improvisation skills, and a well equipped tool kit, we could spend the final days of our tour in the mountains.

Here in the mountain range is another famous tourist attraction, a gorge that has ice in it all year long. We also went to see the gorge, and since it was off-season (mid October) nobody else was there. The director of the small museum up there was so glad to see someone, he invited us to sleep in a ger. The museum is really tiny and next to it there's a concrete ger which is furnished in traditional Mongolian manner. It is for tourists so they can dress up in Mongolian clothes and have their picture taken. We were invited to sleep in that ger. It was really fun, especially, and that was important to us, we had our independence. We cooked our food in "our" ger and only went over to the director's ger to have a tea with his family. Here we stayed for two days doing day trips (without all that luggage) in the area. Among them was riding through the gorge. It is 8km long and has a small river running in it. The narrowest space is maybe 2 m. The river at this time of year was very small and also the ice sheet at the bottom of the gorge was at its minimum. It was a challenging off-road tour crossing the stream a couple of times and riding on river gravel. It was fun though!

A challenging bus ride back to UB

From Dalanzadgad (which is only 40 km from that gorge) we took the bus back to UB. At first we had planned to take a truck (or, several trucks, depending on how far each of them went). The distance to UB is 560 km and we did not have enough time to cover it by bike. When we entered the town early in the morning (around 7 a.m.) we were looking for trucks in front of the hotels, and then we saw the bus. Immediately, we decided that this would be the best way of traveling and bought tickets. The fare was \$10 per person. We were really lucky, because we were the first ones to load their stuff on the bus - all the luggage was stored inside the passengers cabin. We put the bikes behind the last row of seats and buffered them with our bags. Also, we were lucky to pick a good place to sit. Once we were on the bus, the driver went all over the town to pick up people. And don't think anyone went on the bus without carrying big sacks of whatever, huge bundles of fur, and boxes. By the time we left Dalanzadgad, the bench behind me was occupied by a bundle of goat furs, the aisle was totally filled with sacks and boxes, every seat was occupied, and people were even sitting on the luggage in the aisle. I guess it would have been impossible to load two bikes, 8 panniers, and a trailer if not right at the beginning.

The ride was 19 h, and all of it was unpaved road with really great washboard pattern! There were a few pee-stops and two stops for eating. During the ride it was absolutely cold, simply because someone always opened the window for what ever reason. We were glad to have a warm jacket available. The bus arrived in UB at three in the morning (I don't understand it: why don't they

depart later and arrive maybe at six or seven in the morning???. Of course the long distance bus stop in UB had no lights, so it was our job to find all our belongings basically in the dark and put our bikes back together. Well, the bikes had survived the tour pretty much o.k., apart from one tire, which was poked through by some sharp metal thing. But that was rather easy to repair. Now, where to go in UB at three in the morning if you don't speak the language?? We decided to go to the nearby park, and sleep on the park bench for a few hours. I have to add, that it was end of October, and it was pretty cold. We had experienced the last few nights that our water bottles were frozen in the morning. And sleeping without a tent was even a little colder. However once we were lying in our sleeping bags we quickly got warm.

Since we had three more days before our flight back home, we decided to leave the city again and look at another Monastery in the nearby mountains. It was located near Zuumod. This monastery also had been destroyed, but currently is rebuilt. It is among the standard tourist attractions for each Mongolian tour. When we were there, it was off-season and we could enjoy the place all by ourselves. This last trip allowed us to see some of the spruce forest in the mountains near Ulaan Baatar, something we have not seen during the rest of our tour. So, altogether we have pretty much covered all there is to see in that country.

Well, when we returned to Ulaan Baatar we were able to go to the same family we had to book our overnight stays with (for the invitation). We stayed in UB for another day (repacking, buying some souvenirs etc.) before we had our flight back home.

For more information: <http://www.mountainbike-expedition-team.de>