



乘驾

2010 Mongolia Bike Challenge.

Changing Ger



Main. Onwards into the desert. **Far left.** Satay, China style. **Left.** The indomitable Yaz. Not even yaks and snow can halt it! **Top right.** And just when you thought it couldn't get any tougher, it snows. **Right.** The Mongolia Mountain Bike Challenge was a truly international affair.

THE CURSE OF HELEN

"I'm just packing" Helen said down the mobile. "Just parking?" questioned Wendy back. "No packing; we're not flying until 2:30pm" she replied. "No you're not. The flight's at 10am!"

It was 8:30am and seven of us were at Sydney Airport. Six had checked in, but not I; Helen had my passport. With 45 minutes to go, she came sliding into Departures with a bike, half her planned luggage and my passport. We just made it but The Curse of Helen was not over. Jenny, Helen and I managed to get lost whilst transiting the vast expanses of Shanghai airport and missed the flight that the other five took to Beijing.

We eventually regrouped in Beijing for the flight to Ulan Bator, Mongolia's capital and the only city of any size in the country. Willy Mulonia was at the airport to greet us. An Italian living in Spain, Willy had brought together this



乘 驾

“
They charged, Mad Max
like, across the landscape.”



Left. For every descent you must pay a price...in this case the price was dear, in the form sand dunes at the valley floor.
Bottom left. A new paint job for the author's bike.

first event that had been his dream for five years. 91 riders had followed his dream. Italians and Spaniards dominated but there were riders from most European countries and a team of local Mongolian cyclists too.

In early 2010 an email had dropped into my junk folder for the Mongolia Bike Challenge. I didn't need the temptation but sometimes it pays to be weak willed. Mongolia is a wild country of open plains, deserts and high mountains with hardly a fence line. The unattractive city of Ulan Bator was not representative of the wilderness beyond. Housing around half Mongolia's population and benefiting from its own mining boom, Range Rovers cruised the streets and it houses more stilettos and miniskirts than Sydney CBD on a Saturday night. Our first meal was entertained by Collingwood vs Hawthorne on the screen.

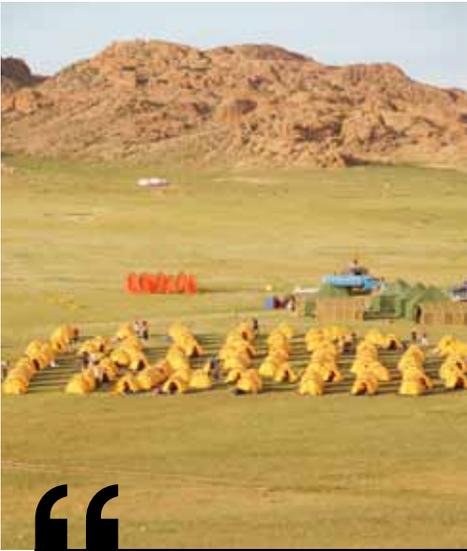
Mongolia's favourite son still dominates. Ghenghis Khan gives his name to everything from Irish pubs to energy drinks. The race's opening ceremony took place in the main square, below a massive statue of the man himself. We followed behind beautiful local women in national costume carrying flags and placards for each nation. Speeches from government ministers, dancing, and traditional throat singing all followed – all surprisingly pleasant given the Mongolian language can best be described as two cats spitting at each other.

YAZ CRACKERS

There was one more journey before we could take to two wheels. Our first experience of the Yaz, a Russian built, 4WD van, basically a Combi on steroids. A convoy of 20, bikes up top, filed out of the city to start the Mongolia Yaz Challenge. All of Mongolia is a highway; tracks themselves are braided as they cross the steppe or the desert. In many places you can drive anywhere and the Yaz drivers did. 15 abreast, dust plumes rising they'd charge, Mad Max like, across the landscape. With little regard for our safety nor for the occasional hollow that would see us skidding sideways or smashing heads.

Eight hours of driving southwards later, we fell, bumped and bruised, out at the first camp, a tent village set amongst a granite and grassland landscape. Many were keen to feel the legs after too much travel and pedalled down the track to loosen up.





“**Mongolia is treeless... there's nowhere to hide.**”

Above. A typical camp setup during the race. **Main.** A less typical camp setup! A lone tent, dwarfed by the magnificent landscape.

NOWHERE TO HIDE

It was pretty calm when, beneath the inflatable Start/Finish arch, 91 alloy steeds and jockeys waited nervously for the start of Mongolia's first mountain bike race. A multi lingual rendition of Happy Birthday echoed down the valley as Australian Jenny Caldwell, already, at 63, the oldest rider, added one more year to start the race.

"Shusha!" The Mongolian cry of 'let's go' and we were off into Stage 1, the first 100km. An early steep uphill sorted the men from us boys but from then on it was fast riding through undulating hill country. The vast majority of Mongolia is treeless whether on the plains, desert or up in the mountains. There's nowhere to hide. The girls at MBC soon learned to relieve themselves in groups of four; three to form a privacy screen. There is nothing to stop the wind, nothing to offer shelter of any form.

That first 50km was a pleasant introduction. Then the hell began. A vicious headwind arrived. Sand and dust whipped up to exfoliate our skin whilst forward progress was, on occasions, slowed to nothing. I was fading badly but reasoned that others would be suffering similarly. I was picked up by some Spaniards but their pace was too much. I went back to suffering alone.

An additional feed station, emerged from the dust. '12km to go' shouted Willy. The 5km to go sign appeared then the 1km sign, too, soon after. Was this Italian humour? But it was true and over a final rise the windblown camp appeared. Day one sent a few riders home.

DUST TO DUST

The logistics of putting on the Mongolian Bike Challenge were impressive. A team of 85 locals and Europeans moved camps in wild weather, set

up feed stations, prepared and served awesome food, provided showers, fixed bikes and bodies. That night, despite the wild conditions, a birthday cake for Jenny emerged from the cook tent. Some solace after smashing a derailleur early on her birthday.

The wind dropped away for the second day of racing; 118km deeper into desert country. Today sand and corrugations were our challenge, trying to pick the best track to follow as parallel trails marched across the vast plains. Camels eyed us nonchalantly and the odd isolated Ger was passed.

The Ger somehow defines Mongolia. This white, circular felt and timber tent is home to the nomadic people of the country. It has changed little since Ghengis lived in one. No-one has built a MacMansion Ger, no-one has added a pergola

to shade from the powerful Asian sun, no-one has cut in a window. Even in the towns many locals still live in Gers; taking this shelter, whose natural environment is unbounded, and corralling it on a quarter acre block with a timber fence.

I was feeling better on day two. Gwyn and I rode much of the sandy trail together but he left me when I hit a wall approaching the ancient desert valley of Tsagaan Suvarga, with 20km remaining. A descent into the valley on firm tracks offered relief but a big black magnet shape perched on edge of the far cliffs promised an uphill finish. Bodies lay in various states of distress around the finish arch, summoning energy for the cruel cruise to the camp 3km beyond.

Ominous black clouds approached camp but brought no rain, only a violent dust storm that hit as we queued for dinner. Plates of food took flight,

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20km of rollercoastering descent followed...Big grin!”



toilet tents rolled across the desert and Stephania wisely brought out her ski goggles. That night our little tents were smashed by the wind and dust blew in to cover everything.

Every day, at least once, the cry 'briefing' would go out and we'd troop into the large mess tent to hear the latest news in English, Italian and Spanish. Stage three had us heading 123km south west, exactly the direction the 60-70km/h wind was blowing from. The only racing that day would be in the Yaz. Even with dust storms sometimes reducing visibility to zero, it didn't stop the drivers from flooring it across the desert.

The vehicles pulled out of the dust to another temporary island of relative civilization. The following morning the wind was still screaming so we drove on through the town of Dhalangazbad. Despite the wind it was a relief to start a shortened Stage 4. The headwind made the 57km feel double that and you didn't want to be left alone to battle the wind. At one point my little group, heads down, almost ran headlong into some camels sat impassively on the track. We turned up into an impressive grey, mountain range that offered some shelter, before a final steep descent to camp.

In the racing, Deho from Italy was stamping his authority with a clear lead with the minor places jostling between Ossenbach from Spain and Tuguldur from Mongolia. However, the women's race was turning into a fascinating battle between Italian, Valsecchi, and Nines, from Spain; only four seconds separating them after three stages.

GOBI SMACKED

We were now on the edge of the Gobi, one of the world's great deserts. The morning sky, a grey blanket hemmed by rich red away to the east, offered cold and drizzle. We all sheltered in the mess tent waiting to start the 130km Stage. Whilst still windy, the force was nothing like recent days.

The first 40km undulated through the mountains. Then, cresting a ridge, the country opened up to a spectacular view of ranges and ridges. In front the trail angled down, down....20km of rollercoastering descent followed; speed checked only by the odd sharp pinch or sandy creek. A Big Grin descent for sure!

At the 80km feed station the grin subsided just enough to realise we were now upon the Gobi Sands; an 80km line of crescent dunes dumped between mountain ranges. We turned and followed the dunes for 45km on a rocky trail that hammered me on the hardtail all the way to the finish. We arrived to a beautiful scene that was no desert mirage; ice cold Ghengis Khan Ales waiting at camp. Mongolian mountain biking at its best!

INTO THE MOUNTAINS

A transport stage was always planned to take us north for 200km. After the adrenaline of the previous day and the earlier stage missed due to the wind, we were keener to ride. But it was back into the Yaz for a hot, uncomfortable 10 hour journey with numerous stops to fix punctures and steering rods.

The profile for stage six showed a continuous

Main. Camels were just another obstacle to be overcome. Along with yaks, snow, dust, epic distances....not to mention the continual risk of death by Yaz!

climb for 1000 metres over 105km. Twenty or more of us hopped on the train with only a few playing Thomas and doing the towing. Creek crossings with water, a novelty, split the train and we rode out of the desert into grassy valleys. The Gers were closer together now. Local kids offered impromptu feed stations of goat's cheese or handed out alpine flowers as the winding track climbed to a grassy camp at 2400 metres. Even here the Italians paraded around camp in dressing gowns, a garment not seen too regularly at mountain bike events.

The next few days would see us wind through the mountains. Yaks replaced camels as we rode to altitudes nudging 3000 metres. Stage seven began in light rain with 130km, five mountain passes, 2600 metres of climbing and numerous creek crossings to look forward to. It was a bloody tough day but one that showed off some awesome scenery and superb riding. There were steep, rocky descents from the passes and valleys rising to mounds of hills. My fear of pinch flats on the descents was well founded, frustratingly suffering a couple only 5km from the finish.

At the pointy end, Deho was cruising to a victory. The women's race had opened up a bit with Nines fading a little, but Austrian World MBO Champion Michaela Gigon picking up a couple of

乘 驾



“It had been a wild, tough journey in an uncompromising landscape.”

Main. Horse power trumps horse power. **Right.** Dust storms wreaked havoc in the camp. **Far right.** Yak milk. Less delicious than you might imagine.

stage wins to push Valsecchi.

The temperature was plummeting and spare clothes were shared around to those riders whose luggage had yet to arrive. A wild, cold wind hit camp and rain hammered down sending everyone scurrying to their tents.

ALL WHITE ON THE NIGHT

I pushed the tent fabric up from inside and the snow slid off. When the grey dawn arrived we rose to find 91 bikes of every colour were now all painted white and calls of 'Merry Xmas' in various languages sang out. Understandably there was real doubt about proceeding with the next stage. The route climbed another 400 metres where the snow would be deeper. While decisions were being made, I wandered up to some nearby Gers to watch yaks being milked and pondered on the challenge of finding a white Ger in a snowstorm.

Stage eight was cancelled. By the time vehicles were dug from snowdrifts and pulled out of deep rivers it was another nine hour trip. From the highest passes we descended out of the snow into a route of rocky trail, creek crossings and a landscape more rugged than the day before. It would have been a rough but magnificent ride.

THE GREEN GRASS HOME

Riders jostled for position by the fire on a freezing, frosty morning, leaving the dash to the start line



until the last minute. At 144km, stage nine would be the longest. There were numerous passes to cross but the surface was generally firm and fast. And with a 20km downhill to finish there was little to complain about. The valleys were more open and I'd certainly not expected such vivid greenery in Mongolia. Even our Ger accommodation that night had 40cm of lush grass growing inside!

One final stage; 100km to the famed Buddhist centre of Karkhorin. I finished the Mongolia Bike Challenge as I had started it. This time there was little wind to blame, just legs that turned slower than I wanted and the aftertaste of fermented mares milk playing havoc. From over 5km away, the black arch could be seen silhouetted on the mountain pass. The finish was a scene of emotion, hugs and photos with friends new and old.

En masse we rode down to Karkhorin for



a photo opportunity at the monastery before finish day celebrations at a tourist camp, then it was back to Ulan Bator for the presentation dinner. Willy had done nothing by half and now statuesque Mongolian models in heels paraded in a mix of traditional and modern in a fashion show only the Italians could have thought up.

The first edition of MBC was complete. There were 65 finishers out of 91 starters, including five of eight Australians. It had been a tough journey through varied landscapes in a wild and uncompromising landscape. Sure the cancellation of two stages took away some of the rhythm of the race but as always the weather is rightfully the master in such places. **AMB**

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