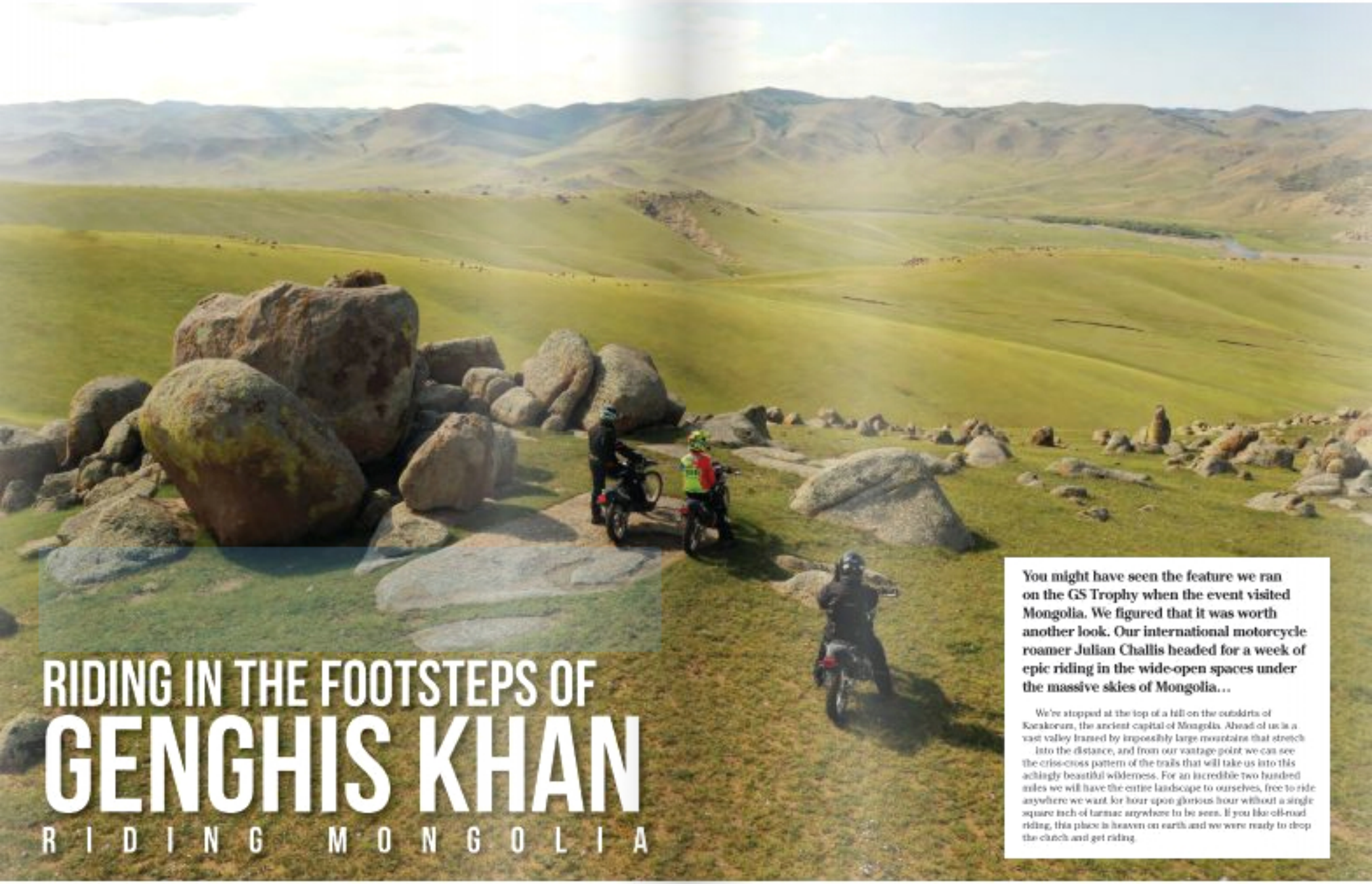

RIDING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF GENGHIS KHAN

RIDING MONGOLIA

You might have seen the feature we ran on the GS Trophy when the event visited Mongolia. We figured that it was worth another look. Our international motorcycle roamer Julian Challis headed for a week of epic riding in the wide-open spaces under the massive skies of Mongolia…

We're stopped at the top of a hill on the outskirts of Karakorum, the ancient capital of Mongolia. Ahead of us is a vast valley framed by impossibly large mountains that stretch into the distance, and from our vantage point we can see the criss-cross pattern of the trails that will take us into this achingly beautiful wilderness. For an incredible two hundred miles we will have the entire landscape to ourselves, free to ride anywhere we want for hour upon glorious hour without a single square inch of tarmac anywhere to be seen. If you like off-road riding, this place is heaven on earth and we were ready to drop the clutch and get riding.

A trip into the wetlands.

I'd arrived in Mongolia a few days before, touching down at Genghis Khan International Airport in the unnecessarily crowd-rich city of Ulaanbaatar in the early morning sunshine.

Having already got my visa, I breeze through customs with surprising ease and once my kit bag rattles off the carousel, I'm relieved to see a driver waiting for me, name card in hand.

The city is a strange mix of faceless Soviet-style shops and blocks of flats for mile after mile before we reach the jarringly modern glass-clad skyscrapers that surround the central square in front of City hall, suitably bedecked with more heroic statues of Genghis Khan, the only Mongolian the rest of the world has ever heard of. The hotel is alongside the square and seeing my tired-looking face, the receptionist sends me off for breakfast while she organises a room.

Hours later I'm refreshed and rested, and I catch up with Toby from Ride Expeditions who's just arrived from South Africa via Dubai. I'm here to join him and another British rider Paul for a recce trip prior to running full tours in the country next year. Ride Expeditions' video guy and drone operator Ian is due to join us too, but as possibly the unluckiest man in the universe, the chances of him arriving on time are remote. When he eventually staggers into the hotel looking like a hobo who's found some cameras, he's ready for dinner, so we jump in a cab and spend an hour travelling about a mile in Ulaanbaatar's gridlocked streets to reach a 'hot bowl' restaurant. We spend a good couple of hours cooking our own soup of delicately diced vegetables and finely sliced horse accompanied by arguably too much of the predictably named Genghis Khan Vodka.

The next morning it's time to get riding so we take a frustratingly slow trip out to the dealership where we've organised to pick up the bikes. We were originally going to use Royal Enfield Himalayan's, but not being sure we could rely on the weather or the trails away from the tarmac, we went with a safe and lightweight option in a trio of Yamaha XT250s with their tempery but reliable air-cooled engines. We also meet up with our guide, the impossibly smiley Tolga and, as we need to cart about luggage, camera equipment, fuel and our cameraman Ian, our support

UB city scape

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truck with its driver Dorje. His truck is a Russian built UAZ-452, which looks like a VW Camper on steroids with massive ground clearance, four-wheel drive and legendary off-road capability. Sadly, the truck lacks either power steering or a synchromesh gearbox and it's a wonder that the diminutive Dorje hasn't got shoulders like "The Rock" Dwayne Johnson.

All loaded up, we set off out of the city, the UAZ making slightly slower progress than the XTs as we weave through the morning traffic. It's more organised and orderly than many places I've driven in Asia, but still requires a high degree of concentration to survive unscathed. As the buildings begin to thin out, we pass through what is clearly the slaughterhouse district of Ulaanbaatar, with packed lorries loaded with uncertain looking livestock waiting outside menacing looking warehouses, the air thick with the coppery tang of spilled blood.

Yak ride...

In an instant the buildings and cars have gone, and we are into the massive open plains that form the backdrop to the pencil straight roads that slice across the country. We've got a lot of distance to travel today, so we keep the 250s pinned to eat up the miles. As we travel, the wide green plains are populated by assorted livestock, from the solidly built horses favoured by the Mongol warriors over millennia to the well-fed cattle gently mowing the grass as they roam across the flat landscape. Occasionally, vast herds of goats flow across the road ahead of us in a stream of black, white and brown. Tolga revving his bike to make a path through the sea of animals, as overhead eagles swoop away towards the distant hills.

The road continues west with the occasional climb over a ridge breaking up the long straights, as between us we take turns to lead. With no turnings to make there's no navigating to be done, so we can just enjoy the bright sunshine and perfect riding conditions, even if the occasional deep pothole or oversized roadkill keep us on our toes. By midday we've travelled some 85 miles, so it's time for a stop, and it's clear that in such a sparsely populated land, everyone else on the road has headed the same way. The roadside restaurant is packed and deservedly so as we are served an unexpectedly tasty home-cooked meal chosen from their extensive menu.

Suitably refreshed we're back on the road for another 80-mile schlep to reach our evening destination. After about an hour, Toby decides we need to break away from the road and ride down to the river half a mile or so away from the tarmac. Paul wisely stays put, but I bravely go along with the plan and in fairness the first hundred metres are fun, but then we enter into a huge flood plain covered with tufts of grass surrounded by water. The Yamahas bounce up and down and we're getting progressively damper and muddier. I stop and a few minutes later Toby is forced to concede defeat.

At five o'clock, the profile of the enormous Elsen Tasarkhai Sand Dunes appears on the distance horizon and in such a green landscape it looks like it's been CGI'd into the scenery. The area is known as the 'mini Gobi' and for good reason, the mountains of soft sand cutting across plains like a deep slash. It's a popular place to visit, with tourists catered for by a community of locals and their camels and horses that plod across the dunes. Not keen on the four-legged options, Toby disappears into the dunes and does his best to turn his little XT into a Dakar winner. After half an hour or so, both he and the bike are exhausted, so we press on alongside the dunes to our first overnight stop at a yurt camp. The support truck arrived not long after with a smiling Dorje and, more importantly, cool beers. After bouncing around in the truck for seven hours, Ian is smiling less, and his mood isn't improved when his vegetarian option looks suspiciously like our lamb stew with the meat carefully removed. But the beers flow and with the arrival of an unexpected bottle of Jägermeister, Ian's spirit lifts and the night slips away under the star-filled sky.

After a chilly night, we're up and loaded by half eight, excited by knowing that we reach the start of the off-road riding today. The morning passes quickly, our progress only paused by a decision to do a bit of camel herding when we spot a small group of them to the right of the road. As the three bikes head towards them the camels trot off, their two humps flopping from side to side and they move together away from the bikes. It's a wonderful sight and Ian has sent the drone up to record the action, a film that would have been so much better if he'd pressed the record button!

Riding along the river

Julian by the gorge

You had one job mate ...

After the camels, we head down to a rare border post, although what quite they are checking for is uncertain. It's handy we've stopped as Paul has picked up a rear puncture, so we wait while Tolga and Dorje whip out the tyre and replace the tube in double quick time. Fifteen minutes later we head into Karakorum, the former capital city of Mongolia. We visit the museum, although faced with cases of ancient artefacts, we default to schoolboy mode and bugger about, get told off for taking photos and trying on the silly hats in the gift shop.

The temples in the remains of the walled city are slightly more captivating, as is the huge golden

Riding round the crater

By the lake

eagle that Toby pays to be perched on his arm. Its young minder encouraging Toby to wave his arm about frantically to get the massive bird to flap its wings.

We grab a leisurely lunch at a very luxurious western hotel with super-fast internet, and knowing it may be our last chance for days, send off a flurry of essential emails and social media gloating. With the world now aware of our location and liberally supplied with fresh images we're back on the Yams, riding between the loose grid of wooden houses and up behind the town. And then it's there – a massively wide valley with a web of sinuous trails weaving their way down the side to the valley floor and disappearing into the distance.

It's picture book beautiful and waiting to be ridden.

The afternoon passes in a blur of great trails and wonderful riding. We swoop along the trails drifting the back ends into corners and popping wheelies like we're ten and on our BMX bikes. With nothing to stop us riding anywhere we want we're constantly criss-crossing over the main trail, one-minute

heading high up to the side of the hill, the next going all the way to the side of the river where wild horses are cooling off in the afternoon sun. The freedom is intoxicating.

As we climb onto a small plateau, there's a small group of yurts and when Tolga stops to chat to the people it turns out that we've arrived during wedding celebrations. As we are apparently considered good luck to have, we're invited in to sit with the family for some of the feast. It might be a great honour, but I can categorically tell you that horse cheese isn't great but it's vastly better than the bowls of fermented horse milk we're then offered. To recreate the effect, mix gone-off milk with vinegar and a dash of battery acid ...

The vodka and snuff that finish the festivities are more welcome than I could have ever imagined.

With wedding photos taken of the happy couple in their matching trilby hats, we head off again, climbing away from the valley floor and into a huge boulder field overlooking the valley.

As the truck catches up with us, we weave between the monolithic rocks and pretend we're Tony Bou. As we continue along the high ground, we pass a polo camp, the yurts clustered together on the side of the pitch, before the trail begins to drop down again to the banks of the river and leads us eventually to our second overnight stop at the Tuhben Orkhon River resort. The yurts are cosy, the showers hot and the spaghetti Bolognese is delicious.

When Toby whips out a bottle of Johnny Walker Red it's hard to imagine a better way to finish such a fantastic day.

After breakfast we're out to the bikes again and keen to see if we can ride on the other side of the deep river gorge that borders the camp as the drone shots will be epic. The plan hits the skids soon after we watch some horses cross the river, the water reaching to the tops of their legs. Sending the drone to capture the scenery, it's on westward along the valley where we meet a cheery if slightly manic French rider and his long-suffering pillion on a Chinese bike. He's carrying around thirty kilos of ancient camera kit and accessories, while his wife appears to have been

Fallen and abandoned buildings

allocated about a sandwich bag full of luggage space.

After around twenty-five miles, we stop to visit an incredibly beautiful waterfall that drops down into the rocks below. It's a popular tourist spot, so in Mongolian terms that means there are about seven people there. The trusty UAZ has caught up with us and Dorje and Ian have bought a selection of odd biscuits and snacks for an early lunch but after bouncing round in the truck as it speeds through the trails to reach us, Ian is looking decidedly green, so, goes for a lie down in the shade.

Back on the bikes and we retrace our steps for our about twenty miles to pick up a trail that follows a wide lazy river along the valley floor. Toby finds what looks like a suitable river crossing and decides that we should all cross over with the truck following as it will make a cracking drone shot. I'm unconvinced and suggest he tries on his own rather than risking drowning three bikes and more importantly getting my feet wet for the entire day.

When he plunges into the water and it comes up to just below the tank as he bravely powers the little motor through the torrent, I'm pretty sure I made the right call. The truck follows through successfully although the depth of the water means that Ian has to jump up onto the seat to keep his feet as dry as mine.

A few miles later we cross a much more sensible bridge and start a long climb from the valley floor that will take us towards a distant ridge. The trails are simply wonderful, and we swoop right and left either side of the main track as we head higher and higher. When we eventually arrive at the top of the ridge the view is beyond incredible, with mile after mile of massive hills and valleys in every direction, dotted with the occasional larch forest.

This place is just beautiful.

We slowly drop down from the ridge, carving through the landscape, one moment ripping along wide trails, the next cutting through cool forests over root strewn tracks. Dropping out of a tree, a large insect finds its way into Paul's helmet and stings him on the neck. He manages to shrug this off, but when the beast then tries to crawl across his face behind his visor, he loses the plot and the front wheel simultaneously, ditching the bike and rolling off into the long grass beside the trail. With the antihistamine tablets and cream quickly administered, order is restored, and the afternoon delivers hour after hour of stunning trails in truly vast landscapes. Even when Paul's exhaust can falls off, probably loosened in the fall, it doesn't spoil the day one jot. If you can't enjoy trails like this then you have no business on a motorcycle!

At just after six we arrive at the Dust Hot Springs and Hot Spa resort at Tsonkher. The woman who checks us in and escorts us to our yurt, bears an uncanny resemblance to Ray Orbison, but I'm not convinced she'll appreciate me pointing it out.

Camp at lake last day

Not wanting to miss out on the opportunity, it's off with the riding kit, on with the board shorts and straight into the deliciously hot bubbling spring water armed with a big glass of Mongolian beer. What a way to end a day!

We're up again bright and early and after a breakfast of pancakes and coffee it's back onto our trusty XTs and off out of the village. For such a modest little bike, the Yamahas have been wonderfully fun to ride, their compact dimensions but punchy little motor taking on the vast landscapes without complaint and best of all for adventure travel, the seat is comfortable all day long – maybe I'll send one to KTM to them show how it's done!

The trail climbs swiftly for a mile or so, and then we're up on the high plains again with nothing but wide-open space in every direction. Our guide Tolga leads us for mile after mile across wide valleys, up sweeping hill trails and through forests with nothing more than an incredible knowledge of his country – there's not a Sat nav or a map to be seen.

After thirty miles we drop down from the high country and head to the first town we've seen in two hundred miles to refuel and get supplies. Leaving the town, we have a mile or so of tarmac before we hit a long climb that is reverta to rutted and uneven gravel and is thoroughly unpleasant to ride. Apparently, they don't surface the hills because once the winter comes and the roads get covered in ice and snow, the vehicles stand more chance of getting up if it's rough underneath rather than smooth tar. Once down the other side, we regain the tarmac and ride for about a couple of hours of long straight roads. We're heading to Bi-Tamir for lunch, and as we drop a winding hill it's clear why. In the middle of a large field there's an enormous monolithic rock called Taihar Chuilun, without a single other rock for miles in any direction. No one is quite sure how it got here, but local legend implicates a benevolent giant who placed it there to trap a vast serpent beneath the ground. It's a bit of a tourist destination so we grab a quick lunch of fresh meat pasties and I even get to ride a highly decorated, if slightly bad-tempered Yak.

The afternoon brings more road work to take us up towards Terkiikhi Tsagaan Lake. After a small village,

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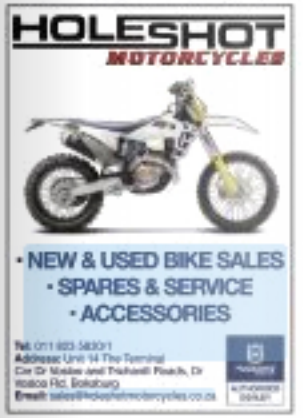

our route leaves the road and turns into a rock trail leading west towards our overnight destination. Before we reach there, we stop off to climb up the crater of the extinct Khorgo volcano, and the view from the top is jaw dropping, allowing us to see hundreds of miles in every direction and of course down into the vast crater below.

Back on the bikes we continue on the trail, which according to the signs is frequented by wild bears so we up the pace a bit and in an hour, we finally reach the enormous lake, the perfectly still surface mirroring the azure skies above.

Our camp is a little further up the lake, and as we follow the shore, we pass a flock of jet-black cormorants diving for fish and then a small herd of Yak standing in the shallows cooling off from the late afternoon sun. When we reach camp, our yurt is right on the shores of the lake and there's a cold beer waiting. It doesn't get better than this.

The following day we have to retrace our steps back to the town and on the trail leading past the volcano we catch up with a pair of bikers on a heavily loaded Suzuki DR650 and a BMW 1200 GS Adventure. In terrain like this we're happy to be on the lightweight Yamahas, but then again, we've got a support truck following us, Ewan and Charley style!

The day passes quickly on the roads, interrupted briefly by lunch in a strangely Russian looking hotel in the town where the menu is vast, but the service lamentably slow. 30 miles later we leave the tarmac to catch a 68-mile long sandy trail that will lead to our last overnight stop of the trip.

A huge storm is brewing to our left and for two hours we are chased by massive black clouds, blasting as fast as we can to avoid getting drenched. Briefly safe from the rain, we break off for a few minutes to do a bit more camel herding and thankfully, Ian manages to hit the record button as we circumnavigate the herd.

As the sun sets, we reach the camp at Ugii Lake just as the storm catches up, and we dive into the central restaurant building as the heavens open. After the deluge abates, we ditch our riding kit and return for dinner, joined by a party of Italians who are touring the country in 4 x 4s. The evening takes a bizarre turn when two of the Italian men disappear and return dressed as a traditional Mongolian couple.

When the women break out the samba music and we discover Tolga is also a dance teacher, the evening is so far into the twilight zone I begin to wonder if I'm still hallucinating from the fermented horse milk!

Our final day beckons and while the full Mongolian tour won't return this way, we head back to Ulaanbaatar on the highway, a long if enjoyable blast east flanked by the vast open plains either side of the road. There are more flocks of goats, more eagles, more horses and more sights than we can ever hope to see in one trip – we don't say anything to each other, but you can see that we've all been overwhelmed by the experience.

This will be our final day on the bikes, and although we are due to visit the enormous Genghis Khan statue in the morning, even a 40m high metal sculpture can't compete with the beauty and scale of this incredible country. It's been a fantastic trip and if you ever have the chance to visit this vast and friendly place, seize it with both hands. Mongolia is epic.

Want to ride this?

So if you fancy a slice of Mongolian trail riding heaven, Ride Expeditions will be running full tours from 2019. Pretty much everything except flights is included, from bike hire and airport transfers to a great range of accommodation that will include everything from cosy yurts to top notch hotels. In terms of riding you need to be a reasonably confident trail rider as there will be long days in the saddle and some testing terrain, but don't worry it's not the Dakar! Go on your own and make friends for life or get a group of mates together and you've got one hell of an adventure. Go to www.rideexpeditions.com for more details...