

Mongol Road Warriors Part 1:

London to Istanbul

In the summer of 2007, 37-year-old insurance broker Jason Minvielle and 36-year-old waste management sales manager Michael Vaughan, two Regina neighbours, represented Canada in the 2007 Mongol Rally — a “crap-car rally” for charity. As Team Saskatchewan, the pair — along with almost 200 other teams from around the world — would attempt to traverse a quarter of the world’s surface from London, England, to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Rally rules dictate that each team’s “crap car” must have an engine no bigger than one litre and have been purchased for less than Cdn.\$800. Jason and Mike’s mode of transportation? A rusting 1993 Geo Metro purchased for a loonie and affectionately dubbed the “Hosermobile.”

by Jason Minvielle

Maybe we could blame it on the beer we’d had one chilly night almost nine months earlier when I courted my Regina friend Mike Vaughan on the idea of entering the Mongol Rally. Somehow, between all the Pilsners and the wings, we decided a 16,000-kilometre dash across three deserts and five mountain ranges — generally on roads not only bad but often non-existent — was a good idea. Most fantasies spawned while wearing beer goggles in Canadian pubs are relegated to the floor along with the peanut shells or, at the very least, subject to sober second thought. But the following morning, this notion seemed to have stuck.

It had been my dream to participate in a rally ever since I’d learned about the crap-car craze sweeping England over the last few years. (Also known as “banger rallies,” most crap-car events commence in England and travel to various European destinations in support of charitable organizations.) After researching the various rallies online that were seeking adventure-starved entrants, I learned that options ranged from Staples2Naples (Calais to Naples), Plymouth to Banjul (West Africa), the Ramshackle Rally (Calais to Valencia or Calais

to Krakow) and many others. Finally I came across the Mongol Rally website (mongolrally.theadventurists.com), the biggest and baddest of all the banger rallies — a ridiculous undertaking commencing in London, England, on July 21, 2007, and concluding in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, some four to five weeks later.

The rally site enticed me

“The world is just a little bit too safe. Gone are the days where the edge of the map called you forth to discover what lay beyond — satellite maps and GPS have it laid out before you leave the armchair. What if you want things to go wrong? What if you want a bit of unknown in a world full of health and safety measures? What if the words ‘adventure travel’ conjure images of old ladies on a guided tour to Everest base camp with all the danger and real adventure neatly removed? What you need is the Mongol Rally.

Imagine yourself in the middle of the gargantuan Kazakh desert, your car slowly being shredded by the dirt track your map says is a motorway, completely lost hundreds of miles from civilization with no backup crew to rescue you. Just you, your wits, your increasingly brown pants, a car that the laws of physics say shouldn’t have got you past Peckham Rye and a slightly angry-looking man with a gun.

If this all conspires to make you think, ‘My goodness that’s a terribly silly idea,’ the Mongol Rally is probably not your cup of salted Mongolian tea. If, on the other hand, you think, ‘Hang on by gad, that’s exactly what I need,’ you’ve found your calling.”

Twenty-one countries in 33 days — I had indeed found my calling. But the rally was calling for teams of two. Enter Mike

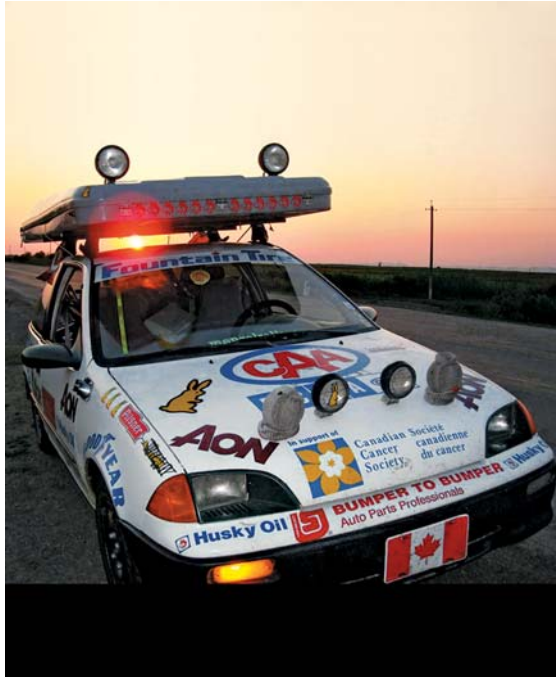
Mike listened considerably to my pitch that night in the pub. He asked a few questions, some of which I had answers to, others not.

“I want to go,” I heard him say faintly.

“Pardon?”

Yes, he wanted to go . . . or so he said. Surely reason (his wife) would convince him his decision was both foolish and foolhardy.

Only two days later, Mike called to inform me he had purchased his mother's 1993 Geo Metro for a dollar.



Months later, after countless media interviews, a dozen immunizations for diseases long since eradicated in the western world and nine travel visas wrangled from former Soviet republics, it was official. Mike and I were not only jetting off the North American continent for the first time in our lives, we were heading off on the greatest adventure we would probably ever have. We'd be doing good in the process, too. The Mongol Rally supports a number of charities, most of which benefit Mongolia in one way, shape or form, and Mike and I would also raise money for the Canadian Cancer Society here at home. Our plans — and fundraising — fell quickly into place.

But we were taken completely off-guard by the personal toll the venture would have on us. Preparations for the rally happened to coincide with the end of my marriage and Mike suffered tremendously when, six weeks before departure, he contracted a freak infection that caused his

heart to swell and was hospitalized with myocarditis. Visiting Mike in the hospital was difficult; I knew he was determined to compete in the rally, but responsibilities to family come first. We discussed the possibility of postponing our entry until 2008, or perhaps, he suggested, I should go on my own. We agreed to defer to his doctor. Finally, after weeks of resting and testing, Mike was declared fit enough to go.

On June 6, 2007, the Hosermobile left Regina by rail to Montreal and then by container ship to England, departing almost two months ahead of its Hoser pilots. Yet, despite its head start, the vessel — initially scheduled to arrive in Liverpool — was rerouted to the Port of Southampton, leaving us in the north and the Hosermobile in the south — where it spent three weeks in storage at a Land Rover specialist's yard in Alton, Hampshire. Our reunion with our beloved vehicle was all the more heartening. The Hosermobile would, after all, be our home and sanctuary for five full weeks, protection from everything Central Asia could throw at us, from revolutionaries to herds of yaks. Our chests swelled with pride at the sight of our little Geo Metro tucked next to professional rally and military vehicles worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, but with nowhere near as much personality.

The old girl fired up with no problems despite her long sabbatical. Though the torrential downpours drenching us that day would soon plague southern England with record flooding. Adapting to driving on the left in a left-hand-drive vehicle was difficult enough. The barrage of water made it a proverbial baptism by fire and flood.

Itching to start our adventure, we are one of the first teams to arrive at the Hyde Park starting gate, as the weather takes a turn for the better. We complete the necessary paperwork and registration easily. The crowds swell by the hour, and a carnival atmosphere takes hold as loudspeakers bellow traditional Mongolian throat singing and one silly vehicle after another pulls into the park. Ice cream trucks, Austin Minis, Skodas, Fiats. Think of any car with a less than respectful history, and it's been

entered. By midday more than 180 crap cars are idling at the starting line. Some hoods are already up. Makeshift repairs are feverishly made to avoid the embarrassment of failing to make it out of Hyde Park, let alone all the way to Mongolia.

Our original vision of the rally starting line involved a gun shot and the roar of hundreds of crappy little engines attempting, albeit laughingly, to burn rubber into the big wide open. Reality has rally staff organizing us in neat little rows that file past the starting line at a strictly enforced top speed of 10 miles per hour. Mike and I are practically jumping out of our seats when at last we get the go signal. Nine sleepless months of steadfast planning and sacrifice reduced to this one glorious moment: *We are in the Mongol Rally.*

Despite all that planning, it seems we have no clear idea as to the exact route we'll take to Mongolia. Even more embarrassing is the fact we don't know the way to the Dover ferry terminal. Fortunately, directional help is on hand: Cory Strischek and "Lady" Sara Cederberg of Team Shadowboat, a boyfriend-girlfriend team from Baltimore, Maryland, claim to know the way and are booked on the same ferry as us.

We tuck in behind the underpowered little Daihatsu Hijet van the pair purchased on eBay. The two will become our closest rally partners and our paths will cross many times over the course of the next five weeks.

After a fast and largely uneventful ferry crossing to Calais, mainland Europe is our next conquest. We have grand plans to drive through the night all the way to Prague, where a huge rally party is planned for tomorrow evening; we don't want to miss the chance to meet our fellow lunatics.

Our Prague hopes are dashed, however, when we encounter the first of the money problems that will plague us throughout the rally. Our fuel gauge dangerously past redline, we attempt to gas up at Verne, Belgium. But as we swipe card after card through the automated fuel pumps, we get the same message: "*Carte refusée.*"

Apparently the more technologically advanced European and American credit cards have an embedded microchip for worldwide deployment, a feature not present in our Canadian versions. We finally sputter into a manned service station and, in broken French, convince the attendant to accept payment with our remaining British pounds.

Full of gas, we tear across the breadth of Belgium faster than we can get between some towns in Saskatchewan. Four hours later, we rattle over the border into German countryside. Already we are passing rally cars at the side of the road, hoods up; one sits on the back of a flatbed truck heading the opposite way.

Important: I do not recommend taking an overloaded 1993 Geo Metro on a German autobahn. The Hosermobile's 90-km-per-hour top speed, downhill, seems to raise the ire of impatient Mercedes and BMW owners who, one by one, roar up behind us to lay on their horns and flash their lights even as we travel in the slow lane. We ignore their attempts to communicate using the international symbol of displeasure by looking the other way while they pass and whistling and pointing to the nearest tree, seemingly without a care in the world.

Dirty Cops, Cold Beer

July 22: Prague, Czech Republic

Prague is a beautiful city with a mix of old and new architecture, including a skyline scarred by Soviet-era apartments. Another remnant of the Russian influence is the constant harassment by police of the locals, and, we later learn, of tourists bearing Saskatchewan plates.

We are in Prague barely an hour and a half and are pulled over three times for supposed contraventions of local driving laws. Our second police stop results in a 500 koruny fine (about Cdn.\$26). The sexy blonde policewoman wants to release us with a warning, but her male partner, unshaven with shirt unbuttoned to the top of his stomach, is determined to ding us in the wallet. He leans in and breathes so close I am convinced he has eaten a poo sandwich for lunch. After a short debate we acquiesce and pay the ticket. At the third stop, a quartet of officers demand we pay a 2,000 koruny fine. Fortunately

we are able to produce the receipt for our previous offense. Having gotten their pound of flesh already, the four seem satisfied. They return to their squad car and the football game on its miniature television.

We've done it. The rally party is an absolute blast, with the beer flowing freely from behind a massive bar. The words "last call" will not be uttered this night. As team after team files in, we search for those determined to complete the rally along the same southern route we have chosen. One rallier is in tears due to still-missing visas. More teams arrive, and with the heat in the bar intense, the party spills onto one of Prague's downtown streets, much to the amusement of locals. The police keep a watchful eye. Despite the odd young Brit passed out in the lane, the event is a complete success and no arrests are made.

It's 3 a.m. when we slip into a nearby underground parkade where, alongside some 50 other rally vehicles, the Hosermobile is parked – fortunately with enough clearance to pop the Impi rooftop tent. While our fellow ralliers snore away in the restricted confines of their roadsters or lie passed out on the oil-stained concrete floor, Mike and I slumber in luxury atop a foam mattress with towels for pillows. Early next morning, after a quick coffee and a sampling of the local Wiener schnitzel, we dart toward Bratislava, Slovakia.

All Wrong Turns Lead to Serbia July 24: Bratislava, Slovakia, to Romania.... oops! Serbia!

Straddling the Danube River, the capital of Slovakia is an absolute gem of a city with soaring 14th- and 15th-century architecture and even-more-beautiful 21st-century women. We note that it's here, in Bratislava, where we'll enjoy one of the few nights of the trip in a hotel. Twenty-four deflating hours later, we concede that the hotel was comfortable enough, the breakfast an interesting mixture of sausages and vegetables, but we could do without the surprise 50 per cent room tax they hadn't bothered telling us about until checkout.

Already falling behind our self-imposed

schedule to make it to Istanbul for my 38th birthday the following day, Mike and I make a non-stop mad dash for the Turkish port via Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. We manage to find Hungary without a problem, but Budapest does not materialize at the appropriate time. Certain we've followed the road signs correctly, we are, in fact, fast closing in on the Serbian border. Though only an hour or two off track, the thought of retracing our steps is too much to bear. And after a quick huddle with the map, we decide to skip Romania and travel direct to Bulgaria via the heart of Serbia. A more important discussion about Balkan politics follows, and the safety of travelling through Serbia is vigorously debated. Unwilling to surrender all of the ground gained today, we opt to proceed.

The Serbian border is a slothful experience. Temperatures soar to 47°C, the country's hottest day in more than 100 years, and the border guards look grumpy. "At least there isn't a large army presence," I say to Mike. Moments later, a row of fresh-faced and well-armed troops file up to the border station two-by-two. Maybe Serbia isn't such a good idea after all. We wait and wait in the searing heat. There is some wind but, like a hair dryer pressed directly against our skin, it provides absolutely no relief. The border guards prove friendlier than they look, however, and we eventually make it across with no fees charged or visas required. (Many of the teams trailing us will be subjected to a U.S.\$170 vehicle import duty.)

Just across the border, we stop at an ATM for much-needed euros, but as Mike gets out of the car he is swarmed by local teens demanding money. He jumps back in and we tear out of there. Little do we know this is the last ATM we'll come across until the Turkish border, more than 1,000 km and two countries away.

The heat continues to haunt us in northern Serbia, and we seek out cold, bottled water. Mike and I want plain old drinking water and store after store tells us "nyet gaz" (no gas), but when we open the bottles the telltale pfffft evidencing carbonation gives their lie away. The bubbles, while delightful to look at, leave a

bitter taste; warmed in the daytime heat, the fizzy beverage tastes like backed-up toilet water . . . with bubbles. When we finally arrive in Belgrade and find squeegee kids looking for water to slake their thirst, Mike and I are more than happy to oblige – a selfless and generous gesture from the kids’ point of view. We give them our entire supply.

World’s Worst Truck-Stop Sandwiches

July 24: Bulgaria

We blaze through the gloom of Bulgaria under cover of darkness, narrowly missing the livestock freely roaming the backroads. Mike and I muse about why urbanites back home don’t abandon their domestic pets in exchange for more productive animals such as pigs, cows and goats. Soon we are debating the merits of the local cuisine and concluding that Bulgaria is home of the world’s worst truck-stop sandwiches: giant hunks of incredibly dense bread hiding meagre and tasteless fillings. We force them down by dipping and soaking the bread in water or soda pop. Bulgaria also seems to be the country most diametrically opposed to providing directional signage to its cities and towns. Our driving decisions are soon based solely on traffic volumes as we instinctively follow the bulk of traffic. Two hours in-country and seemingly lost in Bulgaria, we resort to following an ancient tractor trailer with a Turkish flag on its back door, optimistic it will eventually lead us to the Turkish border.

“I Have a Feeling We Aren’t in Regina Anymore...”

July 25: Bulgaria–Turkey Border

The tractor trailer does indeed bring us to the Turkish border. And when we pull up at 3 a.m., we are hopeful we will soon be enjoying breakfast in Istanbul. The process to exit Bulgaria, however, is a slow albeit friendly experience involving multiple checks of our documents. The guards, seemingly impressed with our efforts to bring such a worthless vehicle halfway across the world, cruise the Hosermobile around for all to see.

Silly grins on our faces after such a positive experience on the Bulgarian checkpoint, we approach the Turks’ side. Unfortunately its

border guards seem not to appreciate the comedic value of our trip and are all business. We set about trying to purchase our visas, and are informed of the bank machine – issuing U.S. dollars – just past the duty-free shops. We search rows of dilapidated buildings and finally discover the ATM at the edge of a litter-strewn forest. It is out of order. After a few hours unsuccessfully trying to use our credit cards to pay the visa costs, we try selling our camping gear. Precious time gained wastes away as we find no takers despite fire-sale pricing.

Back and forth we race through the various checkpoints, desperately trying to negotiate our way out of no-man’s land. Around 4 a.m. the nearby mosque begins blaring the morning prayers. The sun rises. Here we are, Day 4, feeling farther away from home than ever before – penniless, hungry, dirty, hot and tired. I turn to Mike.

“I have a feeling we aren’t in Regina anymore.”

Mike looks at me, and grins. “Happy Birthday, Jason.”

Read on . . .

In order to continue this longer-than-usual travel story, we are running Parts II & III in Westworld online at www.caask.ca/wwonline.html:

- “Mongol Road Warriors, Part II: Turkey to Turkmenbashi, Turkmenistan” — across the Caspian Sea on a rusty old Soviet ferry.
- “Mongol Road Warriors, Part III: Turkmenbashi to Ulaanbaatar” — dodging the Uzbekistan police, the aggressive Kazakh hitchhikers and Mongolia’s tire-shredding roads.

The 2007 Mongol Rally raised £200,000 (around Cdn.\$400,000) for charity, and organizers hope the 2008 event will top £300,000 (around Cdn.\$600,000).

Learn more about the rally and how you can donate at mongolrally.theadventurists.com; www.willwemakeit.com/challenge/mongolrally2008.