

Backtracks

RELIVE THE EARLY DAYS OF OVERLANDING BY LAND ROVER

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Yes, it's a rally, but a rally like no other. And largely fuelled by endless supplies of energy drinks ...

Alex and Adam's ambition...

Red goes to China!

In 2007, Alex Collard and Adam Ataar entered a Suzuki SJ140 in a pay-to-play rally under the team name, Rusty Rhinos. In 2009, with Red – a 50-year-old Series IIA – now on the scene, they organised their own Saharan rally against Team Desert Bunnies

(Adam's mum and stepdad). The Bunnies bailed out, but Alex and Adam continued on into the desert in their own one-car rally. Then, in 2014 the pair thought: 'Why not Beijing?' Why not indeed? Backtracks usually brings you tales of past-times Land Rover trips, but

this is more of a retro-style, modern-day epic adventure. Despite being a 21st Century tale, Alex and Adam employed a very traditional approach to their mammoth expedition: minimal vehicle preparation, maximum enjoyment. Read on and be truly inspired.



London to Novozybkov, Russia

'We were debating – sleep or Poland? Poland'

DAYS 1 TO 3

Red hammers (well, all things are relative...) down the A20 towards Dover. Today's destination is Eindhoven in Holland – a modest 180 miles from Calais. But after several cans of energy drinks, the guys find themselves just 150 miles from Berlin by evening. Adam's journal says: 'Driven 620 miles. We were debating – sleep, or Poland? We thought, yep, just go for Poland.' So they did, driving all night and all the next day, then three hours' sleep in the Land Rover and onwards. Two days later, now in Belarus, the headlights fail. In the gathering gloom, Alex fits a new

switch, and they set off once again for another long night-time drive.

DAY 4

Alex's log: 'We turned up at a petrol station, but they wouldn't accept Belarus roubles. We were in Russia – turns out there's no real border.' After some backtracking to change cash, the boys head east again. Adam: 'There's about 1400 miles in total across Russia. Red is running well.' But three hours later, a tyre blows out, sending the Land Rover skidding across both carriageways. A quick wheel change, then onwards. Does nothing faze these guys?



'No time for sleep? Okay, then pass me another energy drink'



Night-time in Belarus, fixing the lights' wiring

Novozybkov, Russia to Embi, Kazakhstan

'Just realised that we've been driving for 33 hours, with the exception of an hour's break'

DAYS 5 TO 7

Russia is the world's largest country – and from the nerve centre of a Series IIA it certainly feels like it. The guys have been driving all day (I know – you don't say), but they've taken full advantage of the decent roads and have made some seriously good time.

Alex has just taken over for the nightshift and gathers together a selection of snacks and energy drinks to see him through the wee small hours. Far from a balanced diet, certainly – but the chocolate bars, crisps and caffeinated fizz do seem to be the recipe for long-distance success for these two.

Next morning, Adam records: 'We've been trying to find the road to Volgograd. Just stopped and asked a police officer. Alex has been driving for quite some time now – right through the night.'

They get pointed in the right direction, but when they do eventually reach Volgograd, they're stopped in their tracks by what

must qualify as one of the world's most confusing road signs.

Later, heading resolutely south-east towards the Kazakhstan border, Adam notes: 'Just realised we've been driving for 33 hours, with the exception of an hour's break. We're about 250 miles away from Astrakhan.'

The boys get to the city about midnight, but can't find the road to the border, which lies just a few miles away. 'We stopped at a taxi rank for help,' recalls Adam. 'Luckily, they were really friendly. One of the drivers offered to drive ahead so that we could follow him.'

Next day, they're in Kazakhstan, still pushing on. The tarmac road is so bad, with huge potholes, that they decide to drive alongside it. They stop to help a motorist in trouble and end up towing the car to the next town, Atyrau, where they stop for lunch – no crisps or energy drink to be seen.

That evening, they stop to set up camp. This is luxury – until now



The top left-hand corner is the only bit that makes any sense

they've been driving continuously or sleeping in their seats.

It could have turned out to be anything but luxurious, mind. Adam says: 'We woke to find that a scorpion had spent the night with us. It's only 8.40am but it's 33°C already. Road is unusable – there's a regular off-road route alongside.

These are what we call Kazakhstan corrugations, which we cross at about 45mph. It works fine – until we hit a pothole.'

It's a long, wearing slog. After six hours and 130 miles of continuous shake, rattle and roll, Adam and Alex have had enough – they pitch camp and cook in darkness.

Still Kazakhstan: Embi to Pavlodar



Red is sunk. And Alex is hoping for a tractor



Engine problems – Alex changes a spark plug lead

'Red part-sinks in a mud-hole. "All part of the fun," notes Adam'

DAYS 8 TO 12

Adam: 'Day 8. The most gruelling day to date. Thirteen hours limping along – stalling, stopping, no power. We spent hours trying to repair the car and eventually decided to turn back to Embi.'

'When we got there about 9pm, the garage was still open. The mechanic got stuck in and fixed our Land Rover – really nice guy, refused any money. We decided to catch up the miles we lost today.'

So, of course, that means one thing – another long drive through the night.

Next day, a wrong turn sees them end up in Nura, which Adam describes as 'basically a dead-end village surrounded by water'. Red part-sinks in a mud-hole, a situation soon remedied by a friendly farmer's tractor. Enthusiasm is undimmed. 'All part of the fun,' notes Adam. 'It's been a good

day. We drove through cricket-like insects – there were thousands of them.' Arkalyk is reached on day 10. The guys are drained, but the weather is so awful that setting up camp is simply out of the question – so the driving carries on. 'A lot of rain is getting in the Land Rover,' notes Alex. 'I've got a round patch to see out of the fogged-up windscreen.'

The wind is a big problem too, and has little difficulty infiltrating the IIA. Adam attaches a high-viz jacket to the edge of the door to try to keep it at bay.

Astana, the capital, is an enforced stop – the battery has packed up, and a puncture needs mending.

Next day they get to Pavlodar, the last big town in Kazakhstan before crossing back into Russia for the push eastwards towards Mongolia. Red's leaf springs have taken a pounding and look tired.



Motor factor in Astana supplied a fresh battery



Pavlodar, Kazakhstan to Bayan-Ulgii, Mongolia

'They put cement in the weld so oil wouldn't leak'

DAYS 13 TO 17

Two days more of bumpy Kazakhstan, then across the border into Russia. They're making good time. But next day, Adam records bad news. 'Last night we arrived at Tashanta, just a few miles from the Mongolian border – only to find that the border is closed for two days due to a Mongolian holiday.' All that night driving, only to spend two days doing nothing. It did at least give them the chance to catch up on maintenance. Alex: 'Red wasn't selecting gears properly. Got it to the local garage, took off the overdrive and found one of the gears so worn down it's not engaging. Luckily, we had a spare gear in the car, and that seems to have solved the problem.' The boys find someone to weld Red's disintegrating rear axle case, then camp in the hills overlooking the border.

Adam: 'An hour and a half to exit Russia. Full check on our car – sniffer dogs, the lot. No more tarmac – we're in Mongolia.' Later: 'We made it to Olgy. The rear axle was welded yesterday but we need to finish it here. They added cement to the weld, to make sure oil couldn't leak out! They decide to night-drive, to make up time. Result – lost in a black Mongolian night, trying to read a satphone map and looking for lights in the distance ...



Over and out for overdrive



'Tent? Where...? Oh yes, got it! I can see it now'



Bayan-Ugii, Mongolia to Beijing, China

'All next day is dirt roads and herds of goats. But the scenery is absolutely breathtaking'

DAYS 18 TO 25

The route is a dirt track through gravel, mud and water, across an empty plain. After a long day's drive, another twilight camp. Next day, they stop at Khyargas Lake for a swim. Adam: 'We found a car that was stuck, so we spent an hour or so pulling it in low box – eventually got it out. The owner's family invited us to lunch.' Then forward, on surprisingly good tarmac, though it doesn't last too long – all next day is dirt roads and herds of goats. But the scenery is absolutely breathtaking.

Day 20, and the guys have a ritual to perform. Adam: 'There comes a point on every rally where we have to stop by the side of the road and eat custard, straight out of the carton. We've been driving for seven and a half hours, averaging 15mph at best – very rocky, lots of dips and potholes.' They sure deserve that custard. Later: 'We snapped one of our U-bolts on a leaf spring and had to fit a replacement we had with us. Everywhere was closed, but a local helped us out with his hydraulic jack so we could push the spring

leaves back into place. We're going to have to do a night drive to Ulaan Baatar, because we have to arrive tomorrow.' After Ulaan Baatar, they're on schedule for the Chinese border. But in Mongolia, schedules seem to mean nothing. **DAYS 26 AND 27** While researching the route, Alex and Adam knew the border between Mongolia and China would be closed for a few days, so they timed their arrival accordingly – only to find the authorities had extended the closure by two more days. Yet another frustrating 'closed-border' halt to proceedings. And then, Alex notes, 'the Mongolian exit process was chaotic, and it's taken all day to sort the red tape. It's now 6.30pm and we've just left border control. We've only got a couple of days to make it to the Great Wall of China.' A team from Mercy Corps have planned a special welcome at the finish line, so there's no margin for error! Luckily, Red plays a blinder, running sweetly all the way to the Great Wall. There, bang on schedule, the exhilarated crew are met by the welcoming party from Mercy Corps. Eight thousand one hundred miles – that's one heck of a drive. Even for a 50-year-old Series IIA. **LRO**



Journey's end, and sponsorship for Mercy Corps



Over to you!
Do you have a story to tell about a past trip by Series Land Rover or Range Rover Classic? Got the photos to go with it? Send us two sample photos and 100 words to give us the flavour – it may then be published in LRO. Contact Mark Saville by email (mark@LRO.com).

Coming soon, to a smartphone near you...
Go to rustyrhinos.com/beijingrally2014 to see a video of the big trip – it's a real treat! As well as being a lot of fun for Alex and Adam, Red's trips provide sponsorship – Google 'Mercy Corps' to donate.