

Perth To Yurt

Three Aussie blokes.

A tiny, three-cylinder car.

Ten thousand miles from England to Ulaanbaatar.

She'll be right, mate.



Perth To Yurt

Patrick Coleman

Cameron Patrick

Adon Metcalfe



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Most words by Cameron, most pictures by Patrick,
crazy adventures enjoyed by all three.

w: <http://www.perthtoyurt.com/>

e: perthtoyurt@largestprime.net

We would like to thank the many sponsors who helped
us raise money for to the Christina Noble Children's
Foundation, especially those who donated over \$500 to our
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Robert Atkins



Our Skoda, Bromley, Kent. Three cylinders of Gobi-crossing power.

How It All Began

TUESDAY 19.04.2011

Cameron: This is the beginning of our story, but by no means the beginning of the train of events which – we hope – will eventually result in us cruising into Ulaanbaatar this August in triumph.

Early 2010: Cameron reads about the Mongol Rally on the internet and thinks it's so crazy he has to do it. His housemate Patrick is almost as crazy, and wants to join in.

September 2010: Mongol Rally team registrations open and we look around us for more crazy people. There were many, but only three of us willing to commit to this particular scheme.

October 2010: Cameron is in the UK for business, and purchases our trusty steed – a 2003 Skoda Fabia with a mighty 1.2 litre, 64 bhp engine. After being driven around the wilds of Kent for a few days, it's now staying with a friend in Cambridge.

February 2011: We decide on our route and an ambitious “if nothing goes wrong we can totally do this” driving schedule. Time to book our flights!

Since then we've had to worry about getting visas in our passports and immunisations for the many strange and exciting diseases you can catch when you go to places that aren't Australia.

But the real adventure begins in just over three months' time. Patrick and Adon arrive in England on 16th July. The rally sets off on 23rd July, beginning with a lap around Goodwood Motor Circuit. After that, we make our way to Mongolia. But that can't be too hard, right?

Cameron was a 26 year old with a degree in mathematics, a job that had something to do with computers and a strange compulsion to go on ridiculous road trips. Having driven around the north-west of Australia by himself, then later all the way around Australia with a friend, the Mongol Rally seemed like the obvious next step.

Patrick was a 23 year old without a degree in mathematics, a job that had something to do with computers and a strange compulsion to go on ridiculous road trips. He drives to work every day by himself, and the Mongol Rally seemed like the obvious next step.

Adon was a 24 year old balancing uni and work, who abandoned his fiancée temporarily for a trip across the unknown lands of the North - he'd never been further than Egypt before. He likes strawberry milk.

Together we entered the Mongol Rally, driving from England to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia in an inappropriate car to raise money for the Christina Noble Children's Foundation, helping orphans in Mongolia and other countries. The text in this book is adapted from the blog we wrote along the way. As such, it takes the form of a journal, with each entry describing recent events from the point of view of when it was written.

Paddling pool, Harlow, Essex. *Left: Adon. Centre: Cameron. Right: Patrick.*

As a condition of receiving the charity money gathered by Patrick's workmates, we agreed to take a photo of ourselves in an inflatable paddling pool in every country we passed through, including the cross-channel ferry. This is the first of that series, taken outside the Greyhound Hotel in Harlow. It is the only one where we bothered to strip down to board shorts.



Soho, London. With just a few days before the rally started, we were all in pretty high spirits, adrenalin overcoming fear. Not that you'd guess from these photos.



Our route. GPS coordinates updated a few times a day from our SPOT tracker, plotted on Google Maps.



Running Around Like Headless Chickens

WEDNESDAY 13.07.2011

Cameron: Time has flown – Patrick and Adon will arrive in England this Saturday afternoon, and then we spend a day in Ireland, and then the remainder of the week making sure that all the last-minute things don't get forgotten. Then on Saturday 23rd July, we do a slow lap around Goodwood Racetrack as part of the Festival of Slow, and begin the actual driving part of our journey to Mongolia.

Since our last update, we've been madly running around trying to get everything organised for the rally.

Patrick and Adon have had to get concurrent Australian passports because our Iranian visas have taken much longer than expected. We were informed today that the Iranian visas have been approved, so we're now fully visa-d up for the road ahead.

The car has been serviced and we've stocked up on most of the essential tools and spare parts. We've had roof racks fitted to carry all of our stuff. The mechanic who serviced the car is going to give it a thorough look-over for free on Friday and is getting us two spare wheels (with tyres) on for cheap "from a mate" – giving us a total of three spares.

Patrick and Adon purchased swags for themselves and for Cameron – since apparently a swag is not a common camping implement in England.

M25 Dartford Crossing, London.

We've got ourselves a Carnet de Passage, the legal document required to temporarily import a car into a country and then take it out again. Iran requires one of these. Thanks Iran. Thiran.

We've procured a wad of US dollars, since from Iran onwards our credit and debit cards are unlikely to be much use. Thanks Iran. Thiran.

Cameron bought a bunch of maps, guidebooks and phrasebooks, and ordered a whole lot more from The Internet. Thank you, The Internet.

Patrick and Adon are going to borrow some satphones for emergency use from their work.

We've all committed to mildly outrageous adjustments to our personal appearance which you'll be able to see in our photos.

For most of next week, we're booked into a B&B on the Isle of Wight. When Patrick booked this, he was unaware that the Isle of Wight was actually an island separate from mainland Britain. We may or may not end up changing this booking to somewhere more convenient for rally prep!

So, everything seems to be about as under control as it can possibly be for an adventure as mad as this one. Bring on Saturday 23rd!

On the Road Soon

FRIDAY 22.07.2011

Patrick: We've been busy getting things packed, buying last-minute camping gear, drinking, standing in the rain, getting the car prepped (e.g. changing an air filter for the first time in my life), seeing London, drinking and getting haircuts (hai mum!).

I've decided that the UK is, however, a third world country, based on the following criteria:

They can't afford to buy refrigerators for their beer, so they make you drink it warm.

It rains continuously, in summer. Except for about 3 months of the year when it sleet.

Sunscreen is kept in the "travel accessories" section of the supermarket.

Doctors are a rare, foreign species here. After asking at the pharmacy, the local hospital emergency department, a medical clinic and a travel clinic we finally found someone capable of writing a prescription - at the local Tesco's.

They have strange paper money that doesn't fit in my wallet, and 1- and 2-pence coins which as far as I can tell are utterly useless.

The beer is warm.

On the plus side? They have Krispy Kreme donuts (despite Adon's best efforts to eat them all), so there's evidently some hope for a recovery.

We've also got some shiny new rally tyres on the car. They're BF Goodrich M51's, look totally awesome, and appear significantly less likely to fall off the car than the last lot.

So we're pretty much ready to go. We'll be heading down to Portsmouth today for the rally start.



Harlow, Essex (above). Ready to go on an international adventure!
B&Q Car Park, Wrexham, Wales (below). Adon drills holes in our car, in preparation for attaching our 260W spotlights.

Opposite –

Harlow International Hostel, Harlow, Essex (top left). Our home base for a week.
Skoda and lock-up garages, Swanley, Kent (top right).

Near Buckingham Palace, London (bottom left). Adon is jumping, because he can.
Trafalgar Square, London (bottom right). Patrick and Adon, apparently unimpressed by Nelson's Column and too hip to acknowledge each other's presence.



**INTERNATIONAL
HOSTEL.
ENTRANCE**



Goodwood Festival of Slow

GOODWOOD MOTOR CIRCUIT, CHICHESTER, SUSSEX



Encounter with the “Russian police”. They found no drugs in our drugbox, but had concerns about Cameron’s unlicensed bow tie.



Applying stickers and last-minute car decoration.



Eating crisps, hanging with other teams, waiting for what seemed like forever for the rally to start.



Reliant Robin team begin their journey to Mongolia. Against all odds, they made it all the way to Ulaanbaatar with vehicle intact.

Western Europe

SATURDAY 23.07.2011 – WEDNESDAY 27.07.2011

Patrick: Currently fanging it down the M1 in Hungary, on our way to Budapest. We are now officially out of the Euro zone, our satnav's coverage (we forgot to load the extra maps in, whoops), and the special part of Europe where saying English words in a German accent will get pitying Germans to respond in flawless English. We're not quite at the point where we'll need our passports and visas, but we should be hitting Turkey tomorrow.

The official rally start was Saturday, called the Festival of Slow at the Goodwood Speedway. We decided the day before to pop over to Wales – a 5-hour drive away – to visit the only shop in the UK that sold spotlights. They cheerfully sold us two spotties and about 10km of cabling and switches and absolutely no instructions. Cue the local B&Q (Bunnings), a cheap cordless drill (which Adon jiggered to run off the car battery), some experimental cabling and some judicious use of The Big Hammer, and the spotlights were both mounted on the bonnet and functional. Though the switches are in the glovebox – being the easiest place to run cables – which is apparently inconvenient for the driver to operate. Personally, I think they're mounted particularly snazzily, if I do say so myself.

Installing spotlights meant that we got to the pre-launch camping at about 4am, so we got a few hours sleep and headed to the Goodwood Speedway for the rally launch. It was a huge event – hundreds of cars. Mongolian wrestling. Almost everyone had decorated their car more than us – one team had an enormous bull strapped to their roof. We lapped Goodwood, then headed to Dover to get to France. Arrived in France about midnight, and I practiced my rudimentary French to get us into the hostel we had book. Conveniently, we met a Norwegian rallier called Kit on the ferry, who spoke excellent French and was able to translate. We've then spent the last few days cruising across Europe with Kit, stumbling our way through four different languages and slowly destroying the clutch and suspension in our poor overloaded Fabia.

We stopped in Klatovy in the Czech Republic for the Mongol Rally Czechout party, which is run by the rally organisers. It was a huge event, held in a castle high up in the hills; the view was absolutely amazing, and food and alcohol super cheap. We left Kit (who had to fly back to Brussels to sort out his visas) and headed on to Austria somewhat hungover.

Last night we met up with three other teams – *Hit the road, Yak, Ghengis Carnage* and another team in a Toyota Yaris – who saw us stopped at a servo and linked up with us. We passed on the official campsite at 50 euros a night, found a patch of grass in a national park near a lake and camped (apparently somewhat illegally). Unfortunately, while we'd purchased some pasta for dinner, it had occurred to anyone to get anything to put on it. Fortunately, being Australian we had some vegemite, so dinner was vegemite, pasta and beer, woo.

We were awoken at about 7am by a park ranger very politely shouting GOOD MORNING, TIME TO WAKE UP, GET OUT OF YOUR TENT, GOOD MORNING and explaining that camping in national parks was verboten, and we had to move on immediately, so we packed up our stuff and headed on the motorway towards Hungary. We plan to hit Romania this evening, and then Turkey tomorrow with luck. Looking forward to Istanbul!



Buddy, Master of Ceremonies at the Festival of Slow.

Leaving England & Czech-Out Party



Dover Ferry Terminal. Note the famous white cliffs in the background.



Planning our route, somewhere between Dover and Calais. We got chatting to a retired couple on the ferry who were horrified at our level of disorganisation.



Fire poi, Czech-Out Party. Adon says he knows people who do it better.



Czech-Out Party.



Team photo, Czech-Out Party.



Dance floor, Czech-Out Party.



Fanging around the field, morning after Czech-Out Party. These guys decided to take their car for a spin but got bogged and needed to be towed out.



Improving the car. Adon thought he'd spray on an Australian flag, but never ended up finishing it. It remained a blue rectangle until we got to Iran.

Last Days in Western Europe



Skoda dealership, Czech Republic. Our car has returned to the country where it was born.



Kicking a footy around, Austria. We convoyed briefly with *Hit the Road*, *Yak*, *Ghegis Carnage* and another Aussie team in a Yaris.



Camping, Austria.



Camping, Austria. We spent a while checking out other people's cars, and felt slightly smug when one guy admitted he didn't know what a radiator was.

Hungary

WEDNESDAY 27.07.2011

Cameron: It's Saturday 30th as I write this and we've made it alive to our first designated rest day of our journey, in Istanbul (not Constantinople). So we're now in the first country outside of the European Union, first country where we had to get a visa (of the "fifteen Euros, buy at the border" variety), first country where we had to buy car insurance at the border and yet actually feels more developed than the last couple of countries we've been through.

To recap, our last update left you on Wednesday as we were autobahn-storming along the M1 in Hungary towards Budapest, foot to the floor at our maximum speed of about 115 km/h. We stopped for lunch in Budapest and I (Cameron) faced the first time where vegetarianism appeared to not be an option. That's going to be a bit of a theme from now on. Budapest was pretty run down and we got our first parking ticket of the rally, deciding that it's probably going to be too hard for them to actually track down and fine international tourists – another sentiment that we expect to be a bit of recurring theme.

Hungary was a bit of a drive-through country for us. After our lunch stop (because we were hungry in Hungary), we set off again on the highway to Oradea on the Romanian border. This was mostly a one lane-each-way affair with a speed limit of 110 km/h but trucks dawdling along at 70. Hungarians solved this source of irritation by overtaking at literally any possible occasion, including blind summits and corners, and long straights where there was clearly visible oncoming traffic. We've taken to referring to dangerous overtaking maneuvers as "Hungarian overtakes" from then on.



After the paddling pool photo, Austria. The car heading towards us while the paddling pool was sitting on the road didn't seem inclined to stop, so we sprinted back to our car after the shot was done.

As soon as we crossed the border into Romania, we immediately felt a change in "feel". Nobody was in a hurry here. We left the main highway (truck route) for a smaller road which passed through a mountain range, dotted with small towns where pedestrians wandered the streets with abandon and cars were completely okay with just giving way to them whenever necessary. The on-road population seemed to be about 90% cars, 10% horses. As we drove through the villages in the late evening as the sun was setting, locals were sitting on their porches just watching the world pass them by.

Unfortunately, all of this meant that our progress was a bit less swift than originally hoped, so after a stop for dinner at what seemed to be a Romanian roadhouse – petrol station plus restaurant plus hotel – we ended up driving twisty mountain roads until we reached the largish town of Deva at 1am and collapsed into the nearest hotel bed.



Lunch, Budapest, Hungary (*above*). Adon was hungry. Hur hur hur.
"1UP!", Budapest, Hungary (*upper right*).
Couple, Budapest, Hungary (*lower right*).

Melons, Romania (*below*).

Patrick: From about Hungary through Bulgaria there were hundreds of people selling watermelons by the side of the road. I'm not exactly up to date on the current watermelon supply situation vis a vis eastern Europe, but there seems to be a surplus of watermelons and a shortage of people purchasing them.





Dinner stop, Romania (*top left*).

Hotel, Deva, Romania (*centre left*). Inside, it was Dracula themed!

Traffic jam, Sibiu, Romania (*bottom left*).

Lunch stop, Cislădie, Romania (*above*). Adon demonstrates his manliness.

Horse and cart, Romania (*below*). With number plates!



Transfagarasan Highway, Romania



Stalls selling souvenirs, cheese, salami, honey, syrup and trinkets. Patrick took advantage of the opportunity to practice his bargaining skills, saving us about a dollar.



Team photo time.



Roadside sheep.



Self-portrait.



Roadside donkey.



Huge dam near the end.



Horse and cart waiting to merge.



Not conspicuous at all. Either the mafia or a dentist.

Romania

THURSDAY 28.07.2011

Twisty mountain roads were the general flavour of Romania. Leaving Deva we presesed on towards the city Sibiu, near where the Transfagarasan Highway begins. For those who haven't heard of it, the Transfagarasan is a 90km long mountain pass that climbs two kilometres up into the air and then down again. Originally built for strategic Communist reasons, it's now known for its fantastic views. Words completely fail to describe how awesome this drive was, though we'll have pictures up soon which will no doubt also fail to capture the full awesomeness.

The Transfagarasan took a few hours to complete in our overloaded Skoda, almost entirely in second gear. Afterwards, we took the main roads and freeways into Bucharest, then immediately out again to Bulgaria. In this time we were pulled over a few times by friendly police officers who sensed we were lost and offered us directions. At long last we reached the Bulgarian border, which apparently required crossing a toll bridge. The bridge trolls required six Euros. Unfortunately, we didn't have any Euros because none of the last few countries we'd been to used them. We'd also used up the last of our Romanian lei. There were no credit card facilities and the nearest ATM was several kilometres away and we couldn't drive to it because we were half-way across the national border. Eventually we found some left over Euro small change and gave it to the bridge troll who seemed surprised we didn't just drive off without playing.

While we were parked there and Patrick and Adon were trying to locate money-obtaining facilities, I (Cameron) attempted to sleep in the back seat. Unfortunately the parking spot we'd found blocked trucks trying to leave the toll gate. One of the border officials came out and gabbled something to me in Romanian. Giving her a blank look and pointing to myself saying "English!", she gestured a truck hitting me and said "Camion! Boooooof!" After moving the car, and returning to my back seat pillow, the official said something like "Schleppe! Si grande, eh?" So I attempted to sleep.



Above: Adon's experience of the Transfagarasan.

Right: we saw several completely mad cyclists doing the Transfagarasan!

Below: mountain scenery.





Above left: Cameron and vodka.
 Above right: Cyrillic menu.
 Right: chocolate. Patrick explains:
 "So the menu clearly had a section
 for dessert. I ordered the Шоколад
 (shau-kau-lad) which I figured
 would be some awesome choco-
 late-related dessert. Turns out it
 was exactly as advertised: a slab
 of chocolate. They broke it up for
 you, which was nice of them."

Below: derelict building.



Bulgaria

FRIDAY 29.07.2011

Bulgaria, like Hungary, was a bit of a drive-through country. It was the first country we've been through that used the Cyrillic alphabet; luckily, Patrick had been boning up on it before we got there and could attempt to pronounce or transliterate a few of the place names.

We stopped for lunch in a country town somewhere and attempted to order food from the bartender who didn't speak English. Adon ended up with something yellow and greasy containing probably chicken, I ended up with roast beef completely covered in cheese, gravy and broccoli and Patrick ended up with a T-bone steak with gravy and mushrooms. I also ordered a vodka; for about 75 Australian cents I got 50 mL of something very drinkable and highly alcoholic. Just what I was after when it was my turn to drive next! After some more gesturing and attempting to speak Bulgarian we managed to get some water, too.

After that, it was more driving along some mostly fairly rubbish roads to the Turkish border. The Bulgarian passport control dude found it difficult to believe that Patrick was actually the same person as the one in the passport photo, thanks to the blonde hair and mohawk. The Turkish passport control officer complimented me on my bow tie. Unfortunately, he wasn't so keen on our car's insurance situation – I thrust our UK motor insurance certificate at him (which covers all of the EU, i.e. not Turkey), and he decided it was inadequate. Fortunately for 74 American dollars we could purchase a piece of paper written in Turkish which supposedly covered us.

With the formalities completed, we were out of the European Union and straight onto the Turkish motorway blasting our way towards Istanbul, the city that straddles two continents and thus our last stop in Europe. After a short distance along the motorway, it became clear that the direct route to Istanbul was a toll road. Unfortunately, the toll required some kind of radio transponder to pay for it. Not that we had any Turkish lira cash on us to pay for any kind of toll yet, anyway. We drove straight through the gates, completely ignoring the alarms going off at the toll booths, and continued to Istanbul.



Tasty Turkish sweets, Istanbul.



Blue Mosque, Istanbul. We were wearing shorts so couldn't enter.



Grand Bazaar, Istanbul.



Grand Bazaar, Istanbul.



Grand Bazaar, Istanbul.



Dinner, a small town a couple of hours out of Istanbul.

Turkey

SATURDAY 30.07.2011

Cameron: Istanbul has been a pretty amazing city. In a car, it's absolute chaos with no semblance of order or road rules, and yet somehow we managed to find our way to Sultanahmet where we found a hotel to stay the night. Today, as a pedestrian, it's been fantastic wandering around the city, bartering with vendors at the Grand Bazaar, looking at the Blue Mosque (which we couldn't enter because we were wearing shorts), eating Turkish food and Turkish coffee, and generally playing tourist. On our way out, other cars stopped beside us at traffic lights kept trying to talk to us or giving us vague encouraging gestures, although a few noticed Iran on our list of countries and gave us disapproving looks.

So once again we found ourselves on the motorway – this time heading out of Istanbul and with the aim of reaching the Iranian border as fast as we possibly could. After we left Istanbul, we high-tailed it towards the city of Samsun on the coast of the Black Sea. At a petrol station along the way, we ended up explaining to the people there that we were Australians on a long drive. This got a response along the lines of "Australia? Ahhh, Gallipoli!" We all looked very embarrassed and apologetic about this, but the Turkish dude said "no no, it's fine, we win!"

SUNDAY 31.07.2011

Eventually we got to Samsun, found a parking spot by the rocky "beach" and were ready to go for a swim. Just before we found somewhere secluded to change, a couple of employees of the nearby restaurant were curious about the odd foreigners who'd parked in their carpark and came out to chat. Soon there were maybe half a dozen people from the restaurant talking to us – us speaking English, them speaking Turkish (which we didn't understand) and fractured English – and bringing us tea, water and delicious pide. Unfortunately, the restaurant manager wasn't so keen on this. As he put it, "you cause problem!" He was pretty intent on us leaving the area, or at least putting the rest of our clothes back on.

After the people from the restaurant left, a few locals also wanted to chat with us and invited us to swim with them and their dogs. They spoke almost no English, we spoke no Turkish, but we all laughed and splashed around and threw an AFL ball together. Adon taught the Turks the words "wanking" and "wanker", which they found most amusing.

But after the fun times were had, it was time to press on once again. Destination: Iranian border. We drove and drove and stopped for dinner of delicious pide in a small town around the Black Sea coast and drove and drove some more. Found a town with a hotel, slept, woke up and kept on driving. Eventually we arrived at the Iranian border on Monday afternoon.



Dash-mounted Turkish delight, leaving Istanbul, Turkey (above).
Friendly motorist, leaving Istanbul, Turkey (right).

Eastern Turkey



Samsun. Us and the restaurant dudes.



Samsun. Posing in front of the car with a couple of dudes from the restaurant.



Samsun. Group photo after swimming in the Black Sea.



Leaving Samsun. Adon experiments with evaporative cooling.



Black Sea coast.



Sleeping in, hotel room somewhere. This photo could have been taken pretty much anywhere we stayed.



Driving towards Iran.



Near the Iranian border. This guy was checking out our car while we were stopped.

Iran

MONDAY 01.08.2011

Cameron: The Iranian border crossing was, er, interesting. I got ripped off by roadside money changers because I failed at maths. Some dodgy people wanted bribes, and after Patrick had acquired all the requisite stamps on our papers without bribing anyone, Adon drove straight through the closed boom gate, bending it almost ninety degrees from where it should be. Suddenly, leaving the border without bribing anybody was no longer on the cards.

After some wrangling, we made it through, drove a few hundred kilometres to the nearest city – Tabriz – and went looking for a hotel. Iranian cities seem to be incredibly low density and a little bit tricky to find the “centre” of if it’s 2am and you don’t read Farsi. Eventually we stopped at a service station and asked/gestured at a couple of guys filling up their motorcycle. They gestured for us to follow them and we did. The bikers were wearing no leathers or helmets, riding at insane speeds along city streets, and had their lights switched off. The bike was billowing smoke from the exhaust. But sure enough, they took us to a hotel a few minutes drive away. Relying on the kindness of random strangers seems to work pretty well here.

TUESDAY 02.08.2011

Exhausted, we collapsed into our hotel beds and slept until about 1pm. Today (Tuesday) has been pretty much all driving to reach Tehran. Driving in Iran has been interesting. The main highway to Tehran has toll booths along it, where we were charged random amounts from zero (“From Australia? No problem, go on through!”), 5000 reals (about 50 cents) through to 15000 reals (about \$1.50). There are also service stations along the highway. Some of them feel a lot like Australian roadhouses. But one which we stopped at just had a fuel tanker parked by the side of the road and a guy filling up people’s tanks and taking cash off them. Next to the tanker was a shack selling refreshments, where we purchased 18x 1.5L bottles of water, 3x delicious pineapple juice and cans of Coke for about six Aussie dollars.

Driving through Iranian cities has also been interesting. The road rules in practice appear to be: 1. Drive approximately on the right, where possible. 2. The road is just a large expanse of tarmac which you can drive on. Markings (e.g. lanes and often traffic lights) are completely irrelevant. The only rule is to make forwards progress as rapidly as possible, while avoiding being cut off by other people attempting to achieve the same.

We encountered a minor traffic jam in the way into Tehran as we drove past Azadi Stadium, where we assume there was a football (soccer) game on. As we were stopped, the cars on either side of us attempted to engage us in conversation, while we wildly gestured and yelled things like “Salaam! Australian!” back at them.

The hotel we’re staying at right now we found by accident after following a taxi doing a left turn ... the wrong way down a one-way street. Um, whoops. But it’s worked out well in the end, we have internet and a place to sleep. (Later we discovered that driving the wrong way down a one-way street is common in Iran, referred to as “contraflow” traffic.)

WEDNESDAY 03.08.2011

We slept for a long while but eventually woke up late Wednesday morning, ready to explore Tehran. Our plan was to spend the morning exploring the city, but after sleeping in, a late brunch in the hotel, cursing the heat and generally spending too long getting our act together, the only sightseeing we ended up doing was wandering through Tehran Bazaar. Nowhere near as impressive as the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul. Tehran as a city seemed interesting through – very sprawly and a bit pedestrian-unfriendly but also a fascinating mix of old and new, and some very impressive “squares” and amazingly colourful lights at night.

But we were keen to press on, so after posting some postcards and changing some US dollars into local Iranian rials, we once again pointed the car east. The route out of Tehran took us up and down a mountain range – absolutely spectacular but making for slow progress. As we heading further north-east into the Iranian desert, the rich-poor divide in Iran began to make itself clear: outside of the big cities, Iran felt a lot like it was stuck in a time warp. Dinner was at a kebab joint in a large town in north-east Iran. But what we got wasn't just any old shishkebab: we were invited to select some cuts of meat – we got a mix of kidney and heart as the dude seemed to be recommending – and it was cooked as we waited, then chopped up and served on skewers. Tasty but very much not vegetarian.

As we got further out, we got pulled over by police a few times. Every time, all they seemed to want was to satisfy their curiosity – who are these crazy-looking foreigners, why are they driving through Iran, how did they get here and where are they going. In one case we got done for speeding, but there was no attempt to fine us or extort money, just a polite “slow down a bit please”.

We were originally hoping to get close to the Turkmen border – about 900 km from Tehran – that evening, but between the late start and slow progress through mountains, we didn't get anywhere near it. We set up camp around midnight in Golestan National Park.

THURSDAY 04.08.2011

Just as we were about to leave on Thursday morning, a couple of carloads of curious Iranians stopped by our campsite to have to chat. As usual we tried to explain with a mix of gesturing, speaking words in a language that the other party didn't speak and pointing at the list of countries on the car.

We finally reached the border crossing at Bajgiran around 3pm. We were informed when we got there that the border closed by 5pm so we'd better get a wriggle on. The process of crossing into Turkmenistan was fairly long and bureaucratic but fortunately quite straightforward – nobody wanted a bribe and nobody tried to stop us crossing, but a lot of forms had to be filled in, signed, stamped, signed and stamped by somebody else, carried around to another building, etc. As Patrick described it, it's “Legend of Zelda, Customs Edition”: to pass through the gate you must collect a set of stamps, each of which seemed to require a minor sub-quest to obtain.

We were a bit nervous about this crossing because we didn't actually have Turkmen visas. The rally organisers were trying to get us Letters of Invitation which allow us to purchase transit visas at the border, but this process wasn't completed until the day we reached Iran. We had no physical documentation saying that we had any right to enter Turkmenistan, just an email saying that all Turkmen border crossings had been issued with a list of Ralliers and that no physical invites or visas would be required, and a reference number to give to the officials. The general tone of the letter was quite pessimistic and contained phrases like “if there is a problem with your invitation, which there probably will be”. However, after we said “Mongol Rally” and “invitation” to enough people, eventually one of them found the list, ascertained that we were on the list, and told us that we could buy our three visas for 150 US dollars.

Iran



First town over the border.



Street lights in Tabriz, the colours of the Iranian flag. All of Iran had beautiful lighting at night.



Windscreen repair – taping over the crack.



Mountains between Tabriz and Tehran.



Adon driving: note tachometer! Totally not redlining it.



Tehran Bazaar. Not quite as impressive as the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul.

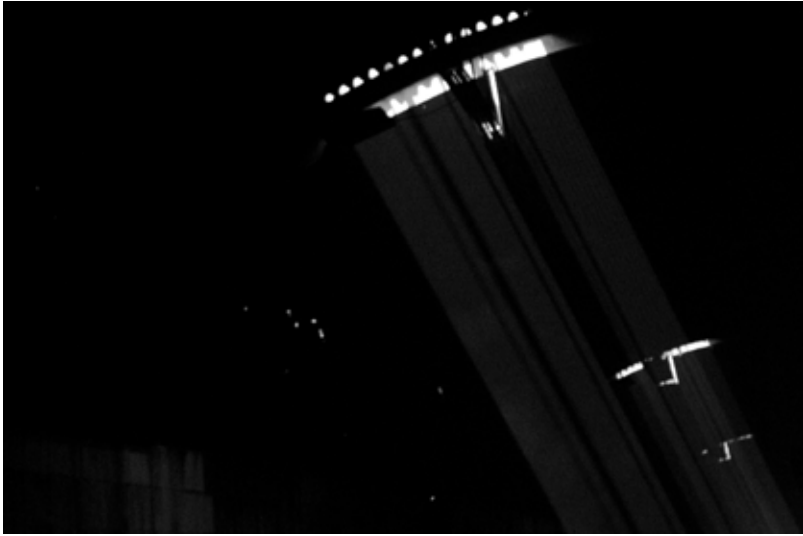


Streets of Tehran. This was just outside the hotel we stayed in.



Motorbikes were everywhere. Helmets were optional.

Iran



Driving through mountain tunnels on the way out of Tehran.



One of the ubiquitous blue Iranian-built pick-up trucks. These were most often seen filled several metres high with whatever stuff they happened to be carrying.



Roadside stalls.



More mountain scenery from the car window.



Motorbikes again!



Stall selling nuts and fruit.



Dinner: tasty shishkebabs made from kidney and heart.



Australian flag. Adon finished this off one morning while Cameron and Patrick were sleeping in.

Turkmenistan

THURSDAY 04.08.2011

Cameron: The border crossing was finally completed by about 6pm. Upon arrival into Turkmenistan, the scenery was absolutely stunning – the crossing is high up in the mountains, which we ascended in Iran and began to descend upon entry to Turkmenistan. It was also amazingly quiet and the air was clean, for the first time since before Romania. We stopped by the side of the road to make some dinner and attempt to fix the front passenger power window, which had decided to become permanently stuck in the “down” position shortly after the border crossing.

In the midst of this, a car carrying a couple of border guards gestured at us, told us we couldn't stop here and that we had to leave within five minutes. We assured them that we would, and then proceeded to ignore them and continue making dinner. Five minutes later, a minibus full of border guards turned up and told us we had to leave right now, stopping was not allowed until a bit closer to Ashgabat. So we packed up hastily, with me carrying a boiling hot pot of pasta wrapped in a towel on my lap and Adon holding the door trim and winding/locking mechanism together with his hands as Patrick drove.

A few kilometres down the road, we came to the Turkmenistan passport control office. Whoops. Now it became a bit more clear to us why the guards hadn't been keen on us parking by the side of the road, and why it had been so quiet where we'd stopped before. We went through the final border formalities and stopped at a petrol station on the outskirts of Ashgabat to complete the repairs (i.e. bodging the window so it was permanently closed instead of permanently open) and consumption of dinner and cups of tea and Scotch whisky.

This incident also brings our count of car breakage to two: the first being a crack in the window that happened on our way out of Istanbul.

Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan and nicknamed by us “Aztkaban” (thank you Harry Potter) was a bit like Iranian cities – lots of very modern and very impressive buildings, modern-seeming infrastructure and people everywhere. Unlike Iran, the dress code was a bit more relaxed, and the driving a bit less crazy. It also seemed a little bit less sprawled, with a clearly observable centre and skyscrapers. Once again, people seemed crazily enthusiastic to see us weird foreigners on their roads. We received waves, honks, lights flashed. There was one car carrying a family that we kept overtaking and they kept overtaking us, where every time they passed us waving crazily and the probably-teenaged daughter blowing us kisses.

In short, we've become quite accustomed to the looks from everybody around us that mean: “look at those crazy foreigners! they're being crazy! and foreign!”

We followed the signs out of Ashgabat and towards Turkmenbasy. But after following this road for a while, we were a bit confused: we wanted to be heading east or north-east, but the compass showed we'd been heading west for quite a while, and we passed through a town which our map showed being on a very different road from what we were hoping to be on. So we did a U-turn, returned to the outskirts of Ashgabat and confirmed that the sign pointing on the road we'd gone out on did indeed lead to Turkmenbasy. Unfortunately, a closer inspection of our map showed that the city we were aiming for was Turkmenabat, and Turkmenbasy was far from an alternative spelling for the same place, it was a completely different city on the opposite side of the country. Whoops!

We drove east for a bit and found signs pointing to Turkmenabat. Problem solved! But just a few kilometres out of Ashgabat the road turned to poo. It was still bitumen, but heavily pot-holed and corrugated. Our maximum speed was about 50-70 km/h: slow going when we had 600km to cross and had originally been expecting to do it in a single day. Around midnight our driving willpower turned into a pumpkin once again and we camped on a track a short way off the main road.

FRIDAY 05.08.2011

In the morning we set off again after chowing down some muesli and Tesco-brand UHT milk. We were on the road a bit before 9am which is something of a record for us on this trip.

By the light of day we were able to observe that, perhaps even more so than Iran, Turkmenistan was amazingly poor and desolate outside the capital city. This morning also got us the first speeding fine of the trip: Adon was doing 70 km/h on the highway which we had no idea what the speed limit was. Apparently the limit was 50 km/h. After some hesitation we handed the policeman a mixed wad of Turkmen Menat and American Dollars which he didn't even bother counting. We're reasonably certain that this was an "unofficial" speeding fine that didn't go anywhere beyond the cop's own wallet.

No more than five minutes after paying the speeding fine, adventure struck again, this time in the form of a flat tyre. Fortunately we have lots of spares, and at the next town we arrived at we replaced the broken tyre and also got the dude to repair a puncture in one of the spare tyres we had in the roof that had been there since we bought it (second-hand). We also stopped for lunch, some tasty spiced chicken and what we think was a tonic water spider.

After passing the town of Mary, about half-way to Turkmenabat, the road improved dramatically and we were finally able to travel at 100 km/h most of the way to Turkmenabat, give or take the odd pot-holed section. On this nice smooth road we had our second tyre blow-out – another back tyre gone. It was changed as quickly as we could manage as the gritty, blinding dust of the Turkmen desert is not a pleasant place to be.

The heat and dust of the desert, combined with consecutive nights of camping with no shower, has been turning us slowly mad. Er, rapidly madder. We've been trying to come up with ways to keep ourselves cool in the un-airconditioned car. The temperature of the air coming out of the vents has been consistently warmer than outside, something which was never an issue in Europe but is quite unwelcome when the ambient temperature is 40+ degrees Celsius.

Even late at night the outside air must be close to 30C. Our water bottles left in the hot car rapidly get warm enough to brew coffee with. Patrick has had his window down as much as possible despite the dust. I've taken the reverse approach, blocking up the windows with towels and pillows to reflect the sun. Adon has been experimenting with evaporative cooling. None of these strategies have been particularly successful.

The other thing that we've been unable to get since Turkey is coffee! Right now, I am seriously craving a nice cool Coffee Chill. There seems to be nobody in Turkmenistan selling bags of ice like every service station in Australia does, and in fact the petrol stations here sell nothing but petrol (in your choice of 80, 92 or 95 octane) and diesel.

We found a hotel to stay in Turkmenabat that night – what seemed like the biggest and presumably most expensive hotel in the city, and we got the fanciest room they had for \$120 per night. It was perhaps quite typical of Turkmenistan: overblown and grandiose, with neon everywhere on the outside, pictures of the Turkmen President in the entrance, and yet understaffed and falling apart.

Turkmenistan, for whatever reason, seemed to be pretty much the country of massive buildings and neon lights (everywhere! even on the university!), obstructionate officials, creepy photographs of the President everywhere and amazingly poor conditions for ordinary people. Driving through residential areas was a huge contrast to the money poured into the grandiose public buildings in infrastructure: just densely packed slums.

There were obviously some who had money though – there were a fair few big BMWs and Mercedeses on the roads which I suspect would cost well over \$100,000 in Australia. Adon also picked out a few Japanese sports sedans which were apparently twin-turbo V6s that he'd wished he could have got his hands on in Australia. But there were also plenty of people driving Soviet-era Ladas and older Toyotas in varying states of serious disrepair.

Turkmenistan



Ashgabat, capital of Turkmenistan and home to many impressively grandiose buildings.



First flat tyre. Tyres larger than spec for the car plus overloaded rear suspension meant that the back tyres hit the wheel arches on bumpy roads, destroying them.



Explaining to a mechanic that we wanted our suspension lifted – communicating using gestures, drawing pictures and pointing at the Haynes manual.



Turkmen desert.



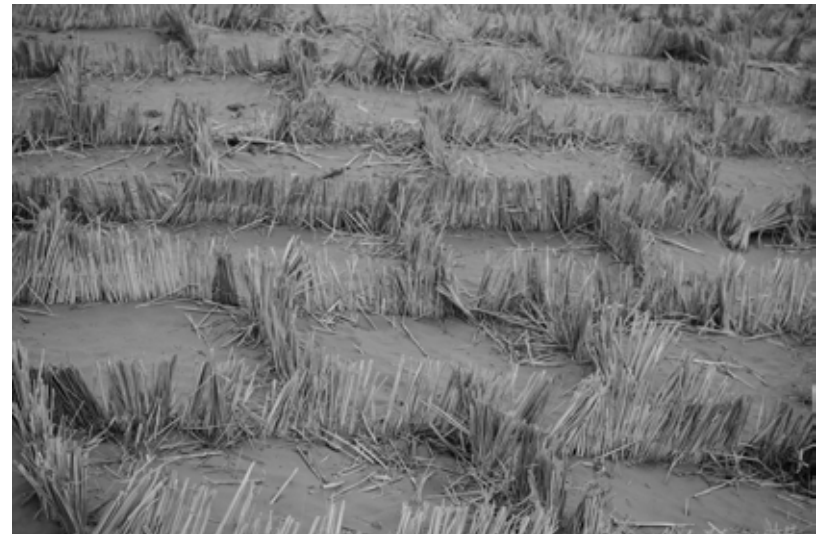
Second flat tyre.



Team photo in the desert. It was fiercely hot, dusty and generally unpleasant.



Stall selling cold drinks.



Roadside agriculture. We came across a lot of wheat planted in the middle of the desert, growing in geometric patterns and held together by bits of string.

