



STEPPE UP

LOZ BLAIN TAKES AN EXTREME BIKE TOUR OF WESTERN MONGOLIA

There's about 10 of us in the mess tent, shouting to be heard over the howling wind. The stove and the lights went out ages ago, so we're seeing in flashes of lightning and erratic head-torch beams. We're each fighting to hold one of the main tent beams to the ground. There's a feeble squeak from the chef and a flapping of canvas as the cooking tent 10 metres away is ripped up by the wind and flung into the distance ...

By morning, we're back in paradise again. There's no sign of last night's drama except a rogue roll of toilet paper draped across the otherwise perfect scenery. There's no sign of the cooking tent, either, even though we can see to the horizon. So we pack up and kickstart our motorcycles.

We're in Western Mongolia, by the side of the Ulaagchin Khar Lake, with the Extreme Bike Tours team. Typically, these guys run luxury motorcycle getaways through India, Nepal and the Himalayas; this is one of the first trips they've run in Mongolia, and it's really living up to the extreme tag.

This place redefines remoteness and isolation. Statistically it's the most sparsely populated country in the world, with just three million people spread out over a wild, mountainous, fenceless expanse half the size of India. Half of those people live in

the capital, Ulaanbaatar, so the vast steppe feels absolutely barren, prehistoric, pulled from the cover of a *The Clan of the Cave Bear* book. Mountain after mountain, rising out of grassy valleys that stretch so wide they dwarf our 15-strong convoy of bikes and vans. It warps your sense of distance. I've never felt so alone.

And yet we're not alone – life and death swirls around us. I've never seen so many herd animals from camels, cows, goats, yaks, ibex and sheep to all manner of scurrying critters, swooping hawks and eagles. Clusters of galloping horses thunder across our paths. You can't take 20 steps without crushing some chalky scapula or putting your boot in a marmot hole. And you soon realise that even in the most godforsaken places, you're always being watched.

You can't see them, but they can see you. Sitting quietly on the tops of mountains, sometimes kilometres away, with a horse or a motorcycle standing by, nomadic herders take



LOCAL HERDER

LOZ BLAIN \ GIZMAG

RIDERS OVERLOOK LAKE TOLBO, WESTERN MONGOLIA

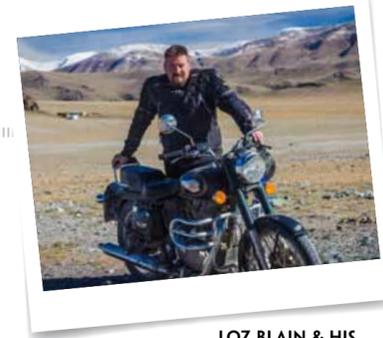


"I'VE NEVER FELT SO ALONE ... YET WE'RE NOT ALONE, LIFE & DEATH SWIRLS AROUND US"

their lonely shifts watching over anywhere between 300 and 1000 head of herd animals. Stop for a bite and you'll soon have company – and the law of the steppe states that if somebody comes to your camp, you welcome them and share your food. They're not shy getting into the vodka, either.

For a bunch of road-riding city boys, the motorcycle action is a trial by fire. There's hardly a road to be seen, and the trails quickly disintegrate into boggy horrors after it rains. Everyone ends up wearing their bike at least three times – for some, it's more like three times a day. We're forever fighting sand dunes, sliding sideways in muddy ruts, bouncing over rocks and crossing rivers. The tracks often split into 10 or 15 options – you choose your poison and hang on.

The bikes hold up surprisingly well – the EBT team has chosen Royal Enfield Bullet 500s for good reason. Their flaccid brakes won't lock up the front wheel in the loose steep stuff, and their soggy power delivery keeps the back end more or less in line. They're comfy enough to spend two weeks on, and at about 90km/h flat out they're slow enough to stop us from really mauling ourselves. In maybe 40 crashes all up, the Enfields prove they bounce much better than we do; our team mechanic whacks them back into shape with hammers and rocks and they



LOZ BLAIN & HIS ROYAL ENFIELD BULLET 500

(EMILY HEWITT \ EXTREME BIKE TOURS)

barely miss a beat. I find myself growing quite fond of the old gals.

This is a challenging trip – but the rewards are just otherworldly. Once we leave the magnificent Altai mountains and fly back to Ulaanbaatar, it starts feeling like a fantastical dream. This is a frontier land for travellers and, while it's indescribably beautiful, it's also extremely inhospitable to the unprepared. I was very grateful to be riding it with a capable and friendly team of guides.

An Extreme Bike Tour of Western Mongolia will cost you about \$10,000 with flights, booze, souvenirs and a few crazy nights in Ulaanbaatar. Everything else is taken care of. It's not a cheap holiday but for me it was the experience of a lifetime. ●

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Loz was a guest of extremebiketours.com

FIVE TIPS FOR ADVENTURE TRAVEL ON MOTORCYCLES

- 1 Choose your machine wisely. Big, heavy bikes are great for the transport sections but you'll feel differently about them when you have to pick them up the third time on a tight trail.
- 2 Play it safe. If you're heading into remote areas, make sure you've got a back-up plan like an EPIRB (tracking transmitter) that can summon help in an emergency.
- 3 Know your spanners. When things go pear-shaped, you need to be able to fix the bike or jury-rig a solution that can get you home.
- 4 Don't forget the water. Off-road riding can be hard, physical work; you can get dehydrated faster than you think.
- 5 If in doubt, gas it out. Mud, sand, rivers, ruts – a motorcycle will handle them all much more happily if you're on the throttle, taking the weight off that front wheel. Plus, your mates will give you extra style points for more spectacular stacks. Everyone wins! ●

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