

# Team "I Meant To Do That" Journal

## Mongolia Charity Rally 2010



## Holy Macaroni!

by Chris Chun on 24 May 2010 at 20:55

I've known about the Mongol Rally for years but no one ever wanted to do it with me. When it came up in IRC again, it looked like people were interested! This is what I cancelled to be able to do the trip this year:

- ATDP summer teaching (unfortunately, this is a large chunk of my yearly income)
- Summer teaching for my middle school (small chunk of yearly income)
- National Coalition Building Institute's Leadership for Diversity teacher training workshop (full refund)
- Hotel for aforementioned workshop (no cost to cancel reservation)
- Cancel flight to Maryland, out of NYC (minus \$100 to put frequent flyer miles back)
- Time with my family in Maryland (perhaps the most painful of the list)

I need to do it this year because I won't be able to do it next year. Aneel, always game, is definitely going with me. Jarek might be able to go but we're not sure yet. We went with Mongolia Rally instead of Mongol Rally because they're non-profit and more of the money goes to charity. The CEO of the organization actually lives in Alameda so we'll be meeting with him tomorrow night for advice! How lucky! Okay, off to contortion class.

## Registered!

by Aneel Nazareth on 24 May 2010 at 21:06

We bit the bullet and registered! We've been waffling for the past few days, trying to figure out if this is even possible, since the rally is scant weeks away, but it looks like it is... I guess we'll find out!

We have a lead on a car, and a friend in London who's willing to kick some tires for us. We're talking to some Russian travel specialists about getting the necessary visas in time (it'll be a close thing...). We're trying to scope out routes and skim guidebooks to find the pitfalls (FSB authorization to enter the Altai Border Region? Uh-oh), and to come up with a budget for our expenses.

# More Preparation (w/more Fel this time)

by Chris Chun on 26 May 2010 at 13:29

It looks like Aneel already posted about this, but I will put mine up anyway.



Fel

How lucky that we live near Fel! We met with him last night, bribed him with beer and pizza, and extricated information and stories from him. I liked hearing about the team whose car fell into a pothole (the whole car) and the team who busted the transmission while trying to get out of a bog, so they had to drive in reverse. Fel was such a great story teller, a nice fellow, and an incredible help. We're refining our route based on what he said. Well, Aneel is. I'm sitting here being useless.

After talking to Fel, I feel like we made the right decision going with Charity Rallies. Charity Rallies has been much more responsive to our questions. In addition to being responsive, they feel more philanthropic, respectful, safe, and reasonable. We like those qualities!

I'm composing letters to sponsors but we can't really send anything out until I know what the charity situation is. Fel is going to get back to us about a US-based organization so people can make tax-deductible donations. Once he does that, I think we can start sharing this website so we can beg friends and family for donations.

Our friend in the UK is going to help us buy a car on Friday. After that is settled, we will buy plane tickets, travel insurance, and car insurance.

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## Setting wheels in motion

by Aneel Nazareth on 26 May 2010 at 16:40

We met up with Fel (one of the organizers of the rally) for dinner in Berkeley last night. He had lots of great stories and good advice. He pointed out that the MOT test in the UK is a decent overall inspection of the car, so we could have a little more confidence about buying it remotely.

This morning Chris put a deposit on the car and arranged for our friend in London (Moof) to give it a test drive.

Then I replanned our itinerary again and dropped our passports and visa applications off at Russian Connections, a travel agency specializing in travel to Russia where some of our friends work.

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## We have a car!

**by Aneel Nazareth on 28 May 2010 at 11:53**

Our friend Moof just went to the dealer we've been corresponding with and test drove the car. It seemed suitable, so we've now purchased it!



The Car

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## Planning

**by Chris Chun on 04 Jun 2010 at 10:25**

Wow! We're more than halfway to our fundraising target. I'm amazed at the generosity of our friends, especially since I know how tight finances are right now. With this much support, there's no way I can wriggle out of this crazy trip. Thank you! Even friends of friends are helping out with items on the wish list. I'm waiting on buying more supplies on the list until I squeeze every last drop of magnanimity out of everyone I know.

In the meantime, I'm felting and subbing for arials classes to make more money just in case I see some [kobyz](#) I just have to have so I can be the proud owner of a stringed instrument I cannot play. Speaking of stringed instruments I cannot play, I caved and bought a cheap ukulele so I wouldn't lose/break/give-as-a-bribe the ukulele my family gave me.

I am leaving for the East Coast on June 17th, which is the last day of school. I'm going to the 8th grade graduation and then straight to the airport. I'll be attending a Wilderness First Responder course in Virginia for a week (my school is paying so I can save lives in the Next Big One). At nights during that week, I hope to finish my semester grades. After that, I head to Maryland to spend time with my family. I have a few days in that week where I can go to New York City and visit my friend but I'm not sure if I have enough money. I'm also trying to lasso a Kyrgyzstan visa in D.C. at that time. Then, I go to Colorado to join forces with Chip and fulfill my lifelong dream of working a [bulldozer](#). I'll stay with Chip for a few days and then head back home. I'll be home for seventeen hours and then I fly out to join Aneel and Moof in London for the Mongolia Rally.

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## New Team Members (aka "Suckers")

**by Chris Chun on 11 Jun 2010 at 14:59**

Moof is going to be with us from London through Kiev. I'm so glad! He's been working in Japan and then the UK for a few years, so I don't get to see him as often as I'd like. He comes back to California to visit every so often but now he won't be able to escape when he's trapped in the car with me. Ha ha!

I've actually known Moof for longer than I've known Aneel. I like how he's not afraid to go on adventures that lots of other people wouldn't be willing to even think about. I guess it's fitting that he's joining us! Moof is brave in other non-geographic ways as well. I admire that. My students were thrilled with his name when I mentioned that Moof would be joining us for part of the trip.

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# New Team Members (aka "Suckers") Part 2

by Aneel Nazareth on 11 Jun 2010 at 18:00

You noticed that Chris used the plural in her last post title, and then only listed one new team member, right? Sneaky! The other new team member is her partner Jarek! He'll join us in Astrakhan, Russia, just before we cross into Kazakhstan for the first time.

Jarek's a laid back guy who's going to help us keep our impulsive tendencies from getting us into trouble. He's already contributed by making Chris sleep on the decision to rally, leading to her discovering the Mongolia Charity Rally and therefore to us signing up here instead of for the Other Rally.

Jarek's a good traveler, fun, patient, and able to adapt to things as they come up. He knows some Russian and has driving skills. He'll definitely be handy to have around.

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## Wow!

by Aneel Nazareth on 17 Jun 2010 at 05:00

I'm excited to say that we've reached our first fund-raising goal! We've now collected more than £1000 for Go Help! A huge "Thank You!" to all of our generous donors!

We're still happy to accept donations. We talked with Fel (the CEO of Go Help) last night over dinner, and the charity is excited about our planned donation of a Subaru Outback, a car well-suited to the driving conditions in Mongolia. He is confident that the car will be well received when we arrive.

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## Papers, Please!

by Aneel Nazareth on 23 Jun 2010 at 22:43

Thanks to our friends at [Russian Connections](#), we're the proud holders of three passports with visas for Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. It seems that the Kazakhs are psyched for Jarek and me to visit, since they gave us 2 month visas even though we only asked for about 20 days. Christine is a little less popular: only 30 days for her. That will hopefully be plenty in any case.

Russian Connections made the process painless for us, adapting to our shifting itineraries and providing us lots of useful advice about dealing with officials in the various countries we'll be visiting. I'd definitely recommend them to anyone planning a trip to that part of the world.

My passport is currently at the Chinese consulate in an attempt to enable a post-rally stop. Many of the flights from Ulaan Baatar to San Francisco pass through Beijing, and I thought it would be a shame to not get off the plane and do some looking around. I guess we'll see how tired I am at the end of ten thousand miles of driving!

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## Dissed by the Kazakhs!

by Chris Chun on 27 Jun 2010 at 23:12

Dang, Kazakhstan totally dissed me (see previous entry by Aneel).

I've had more than 2 decades of CPR/first aid training; this is mostly because I am a teacher but even as a kid, I took classes. Post-Katrina, I got certified in [NERT](#), the Neighborhood Emergency Response Team, with Jarek and Aneel. Recently, my school paid for an 8-day course to get me certified as a [Wilderness First Responder](#) through [Wilderness Medical Associates](#) at [Sheridan Mountain Campus](#) in Virginia. My school is urban, but a natural disaster might change us into what would be considered a wilderness context, which is a situation 2 or more hours away from definitive

care. I learned how to deal with anaphylaxis, asthma, altitude illness, heat illness, cold injury, lightning, submersion, toxins, dislocations, wounds, fractures, lacerations, burns, blisters, splinting, bandaging, litter packaging, spine injury assessment, etc. It was like Honors First Aid.

The class had 25 students and I was one of the oldest! I'm not used to being the oldest in the room--outside of my classroom--so that was different, but not in a bad way. I was definitely the dirtiest hippie there. For example, I didn't use paper towels unless absolutely necessary and the plastic forks and cups made me nervous. I was the only mostly-vegan (I make exceptions for pastries). Also, I was definitely the only one who hated nature and camping.

Despite having very little in common with everyone, I liked everyone in my class! We had lots of opportunities to pretend to save each others' lives, so it was inevitable that we'd get along. I even snuck some acro lessons in!

Anyway, my hope is that I won't ever have to use this training for anything serious, but it the timing turned out to be great. I'm rounding out the first-aid kit now. I like to think my team feels a little safer going on this adventure. All rally teams should take this [course](#) before they head out!

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## Shirts, hoodies, mugs, etc.

**by Chris Chun on 28 Jun 2010 at 17:53**

We got shirts for ourselves but some people like the logo (which means "Why are you still here?") so I cobbled together a more expansive CafePress shop. Shirts and tanks start at \$14.99 before shipping, but you can also buy hoodies, mugs, Sigg bottles, stickers, and other stuff. Anyway, if you're interested, [click here!](#) Let us know if you want a picture with just the crest and the Latin or if you want some change. I might already have a picture uploaded that looks the way you'd prefer it. Don't feel obligated to buy anything! We didn't mark up any prices, so the only folks making money off of this will be CafePress.

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## Car collected

**by Aneel Nazareth on 02 Jul 2010 at 18:01**

It's been a long "day", or maybe two short days, depending on how you look at it. I flew out of SFO only an hour behind schedule, and had a mostly uneventful flight. I'd hoped to sleep the whole way, but the airplane was full of kids who managed to pitch their intermittent squalling at frequencies that went right through my earplugs. The one next to me was restless and would bump my arm hard enough to wake me every hour or so as he played his seatback console video game. So... less than the 8 hours of napping I'd hoped for. But still, a fairly good flight, all things considered.

I picked up an Oyster card (I wonder how many tube lines I'll hit on this visit...) at the airport and made my way to Moof's work (...Picadilly, District...) to drop off my luggage. He kindly supplied me with lunch and printouts of directions for the various routes I could expect to travel, and I was off to Chesham to pick up the car (...Victoria, Bakerloo, Metropolitan). After just a single wrong turn (and a nice woman who asked me if I was lost), I found the dealership and they brought the car around.

A bit of signing-on-the-dotted line, a brief warning about "Tax discs" (apparently the road tax has not yet been paid for this car, so it's illegal for me to park or drive it on the roads. Oops), an escort to the nearest gas station (easier to lead me there than to give directions, it seems), and I was off.

Or... almost. My GPS has been acting flaky since I installed the maps for Europe on it. Before I left it was intermittently shutting itself off, but sometimes it managed to come on and stay on, so I had some hopes that it would be okay. It turned on once more after I plugged it in to the car, and then turned itself off before it acquired the satellites. None of the things that had previously fixed it seemed to work. Oops.

Since I was not actually on the route on the printed fallback directions, I went in to the gas station to ask if the cashier could point me to the M25. He couldn't, but in short order a guy came in who the cashier assured me could help me. Sure enough, his directions (go back the way you came, turn right at the first roundabout, take the narrow windy road for five miles) had me on the M25 in short order.



Things went well (though very slowly, since the M25 was practically a parking lot) until I mistook a sign for the M4 going to THE WEST for a sign for the M4 to London West. I tried to get off the motorway and backtrack, but the signs pointed me in a circle. Luckily, there was a gas station near by, and while the cashier couldn't help me, in short order a guy came in who the cashier assured me could help me. He told me I could keep going the way I was going (on the A4), but that it would be slow. Since it was simpler than trying to get back to the M4, I opted to do that.

I got back to London only two hours later than scheduled (and to think we were worried that I might have to stall to avoid the 6pm cutoff for the congestion charge...). London is, as expected, a maze. It took about twenty minutes after I'd found my way back to Moof's work before I found a place near there where I could actually legally stop so we could load the luggage.

I ended up driving about 50 miles over three hours. I suspect that this will not be the worst ratio of miles per hour on this trip, but it would be amusing if it were. I hope the prevalence of people willing to give directions holds, though!

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## Servicing

**by Aneel Nazareth on 03 Jul 2010 at 13:57**

This morning I dropped the car off at a Subaru dealer on Edgware Road for service. It should be ready around Monday or so.

I'm getting better about the London navigation. Only one wrong turn bad enough that I had to stop and ask directions (got off of a roundabout too soon and ended up on the wrong side of the Northern Ring Road, with no idea how to get across it to go back the other way). Having an actual map with me is a big help! Printed Google Maps are great... up until the point you stray from the path. I'm eager to have a second person in the car so we can have a navigator separate from the driver because there aren't a lot of places here to pull over and read a map safely. Returned via the Northern Line.

In the afternoon, Moof and I took a bus over to Tottenham Court Road to visit the electronics shops there and see if we could find a replacement battery for my GPS. None of them stocked it (it was a longshot). One of the guys was willing to open a box of the same model and sell me the battery out of the unit, but the price he wanted was unreasonable for something that I'm not certain will fix the problem. I think I'm just going to pick up another GPS and send this one back to the US for service.

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## Paper Maps

**by Aneel Nazareth on 04 Jul 2010 at 15:58**

I visited [Stanfords](#) today. Definitely the best brick and mortar map shop I've ever visited. I picked up a road atlas for Europe and road maps for Romania/Moldova, Ukraine, Russia east of the Urals, Russia from the Urals to Lake Baikal, and Russia around Lake Baikal, and another map for Mongolia.

I also got a UK SIM card for my phone, as the international roaming one that I'd ordered seems nonfunctional, and I don't want to pay the outrageous rates that my US plan charges.

I spent the rest of the day sightseeing. Stanfords is pretty close to Trafalgar Square, so I stopped in to the National Gallery for a few hours. They have a very interesting exhibit right now on the techniques they use to determine whether paintings are forgeries or have been modified. I also discovered that I like Turner's unfinished pieces. Might be worth a trip to the Tate Britain to check out more of them.

After the museum closed, I took a walk down to Westminster and took the obligatory Big Ben picture and headed back on the Tube (no new lines).

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## Carpet, Brakes, Fluids

## by Aneel Nazareth on 05 Jul 2010 at 13:10

I dropped by a local carpet shop this morning, to see if they had any offcuts to use as sand ladders. They didn't, but they had a roll of sturdy stuff for fairly cheap. We now have much more carpet than we need. Maybe some other teams can use it?

The dealer got back to me and said that the brake pads on the car were good... for another 3000mi or so. So they're being replaced, along with most of the fluids in the car. Sounds like I'll be able to pick up the car tomorrow.

I went out and had some spare keys cut (Why is it so hard to find a locksmith shop in London? All of the hits on the web seem to be for services where they dispatch a locksmith to you), and discovered that the locksmith was just a few blocks from the British Museum, so I spent the afternoon looking at Chinese woodcut prints, Egyptian mummies, and the (surviving) pieces of the Parthenon I missed when I was in Greece last winter.

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## Fuel, Cars, Safety

### by Aneel Nazareth on 06 Jul 2010 at 19:45

This morning I walked over to a camping supply store that had the proper fuel for my camp stove. I was extremely proud of myself for not buying a single extra thing there. I really have to fight the urge to oversupply.

Since I had nothing better to do while waiting for the dealership to call me and tell me that the car was ready, I walked over to St. Paul's Cathedral and visited the crypt and the dome. Then I had a cup of tea and visited the Clockmakers' Museum in the Guildhall. Finally, I tubed over to Moof's work (Central, Circle) to grab the replacement GPS unit which had arrived in the morning, and then up to the dealer (Victoria, Northern again).

The pickup went a little less smoothly than I'd hoped. On the checklist was a warning that the rear tires were only good for 5000 miles or so. Unfortunately, I think we're going to have to get another set. Also, our spare is a space-saver, and I think we'd really prefer to have a full-size spare for this trip. So I'm going to have to take the car back to the dealer after they get some tires and a new wheel in for us. Apart from the tires, everything seems great.

Handily, as I walked to the dealership from the tube, I noticed a Halfords a couple blocks away. After getting the car, I dropped in and picked up most of the things on our tools/spares list. Then I headed back to the flat, aided by the GPS.

Driving with the GPS doesn't take *all* of the mystery out of London navigation. You still have to guess exactly which is the proper exit from a roundabout (*which* left? that one? or the other left?), but you get quick feedback when you've made a mistake ("Recalculating!"). It also pings when you drive into range of a known "safety camera". The prevalence of those isn't really clear until you have something pinging at you every couple blocks. London must be very, very safe.

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## Shot, Tired

### by Aneel Nazareth on 08 Jul 2010 at 18:35

Another productive day. I started off by visiting the [Fleet Street Travel Clinic](#) for the last of my rabies vaccinations. They were very friendly and had lots of information. I'd recommend them to any traveler needing a vaccination in London. I also picked up a couple pairs of tick-repellent bamboo-based socks, because you can't have too many pairs of socks on a trip, right?

The [oldest continuously operating shop in London](#) happens to be a few doors down, so after a quick lunch of Welsh Pasty, I checked off a couple of the last things on my shopping list: tea and hot chocolate mix. Comfort drinks should make camping out much more pleasant.

I took a stroll along Fleet Street, then made my way along the Thames to the Millennium Bridge and crossed over to the Tate Modern. I got to spend a little while in the museum before the call came to tell me that the new tires I ordered were at the dealership.

So it was back to the flat (Jubilee, Northern again) to pick up the car, and then off to the dealership. The trip meter rolled over 100 miles as I approached on Edgware Rd. The tires were quickly installed, and the two best of the old ones are currently taking up a huge amount of space in the car, in case we need spares.

Frustratingly, the roof box that I ordered has not yet arrived, though the company told me it would arrive by today. Hopefully it will come tomorrow.

Moof and I had dinner at Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese, a pub that was rebuilt in 1667, after the Great Fire destroyed it. We actually sat down in the basement, which is speculated to be from a 13th century monastery. They've had a while to get their recipes down.

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## **The Demons Dwell IN OUR CAR**

**by Chris Chun on 10 Jul 2010 at 02:14**

Sorry I haven't been posting! I've been busy post-WFR because I was visiting my family in Maryland; visiting friends in New York City (and sitting next to Alan Alda at dinner!); visiting friends in Washington, D.C.; visiting friends in Denver; and fulfilling my lifelong dream of bulldozing (with bonus excavator).

My flight on Virgin Atlantic was good. I got to stretch out on all four seats in the middle, so I pretty much ate, slept, ate, and slept the whole way. I landed in Heathrow and Aneel graciously picked me up. He warned me that since he'd broken his GPS, the new GPS (but fixed it), and his SIM card (but fixed it), I shouldn't let him touch anything electronic. Noted!

We went to Stonehenge (where the demons dwell)! It was smaller than I thought it would be but that's probably because all the pictures I've seen don't have people for scale. Or maybe my most familiar association with Stonehenge (where the demons dwell) is the one where it was "in danger of being crushed by dwarfs." Just like in Delphi, Aneel and I made a point of doing acrobatics in front of the monument. I even asked for permission first! I'll put up the pictures later.

On the way back to London to get Moof, however, we ran into a few problems. Smoke came out of the underside of the car when we slowed--thrice! Each time it happened a few minutes after we decelerated after high speeds. We noticed some stuff leaking down there and we don't know why it's doing it. The leaky stuff seems like water and the smokey stuff--well, we don't know. The exhaust pipe, where the smoke was coming from, was covered in a reddish fluid. We have plenty of the right fluids and none of them seem to be going down. No warning lights on the dashboard, either. The car itself seems to be driving fine. Damn! The only good part about all of this is that we found out while we are still close to the mechanic.

Then, as a bonus, I put the important car papers (registration, etc.) in the glove compartment and locked it to prove that we could leave it in the car instead of carrying it with us. I couldn't unlock it! Neither could Aneel or Moof. Turns out neither of us should touch anything, really, electronic or otherwise. Maybe this is our punishment for our inappropriate levity at Stonehenge (where the demons dwell--oops, can't stop).

We're going to the mechanic again after the rally launch instead of going through the Chunnel. This isn't terrible since it gives us more time to pack and prepare, and our original plan was to leave Sunday morning anyway. This probably means we won't be able to convoy with anyone but that's probably for the best because we'd probably break another team's something something. We got the roof box on, so that's good.

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## **Kicked off!**

**by Aneel Nazareth on 10 Jul 2010 at 17:19**

We checked the fluid levels this morning, and there were no suspicious puddles under the car, so we figured it was safe for us to go to the Rally kickoff instead of heading straight to the dealer. Sure enough, we had no problems. There was not a hint of steam or smoke.

The kickoff was at the Woburn Safari Park, and we got to drive through the lion enclosure and do a little light offroading. With its new All-Terrain tires, the car barely notices that it's on a gravel slope. Encouraging! It was fun to



meet some of the people we'd been corresponding with for the past few weeks.

On the way back south, we tried to replicate the conditions that had made the car steam. Air conditioning on, long fast stretches interspersed with very slow stretches. No dice. We pulled up at the dealership and had another look at the exhaust pipe junction that yesterday was dripping wet and sizzling. Dry as a bone. We left it there for them to have a look anyway, and went to have lunch at a strange pan-Asian restaurant called Wonderful Patisserie.

When we got back to the dealer, they were just pulling the car back out of the garage. They couldn't find a problem and suggested that what we'd seen was an overflow of coolant flowing down the outside of the exhaust pipe and steaming off. That agreed with my most optimistic guess, so I was glad to hear it from a mechanic. Since we still have plenty of coolant, I feel good about setting off for real tomorrow.

The afternoon was devoted to packing at a pretty relaxed pace. When we had the new tires put on, we saved the best two of the old ones. Chris tried some elaborate schemes for mounting one of the spares on the roof in front of the roof box, but there just wasn't enough space. We've put it inside the roof box. Even with the tire in it, the box has room for two gas cans, all of the carpet, and all of the camping equipment. That's probably a good load for it, because the box is cheap and plastic, and shouldn't carry too much weight.

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## Catch Up 1: London – Luxembourg

**by Aneel Nazareth on 11 Jul 2010 at 17:59**

I've fallen a little bit behind on the journalling because it's taking us longer than we scheduled for to get from place to place (surprise!). It's not usually that the roads are slower than expected (we've taken a good chunk of the route so far at 130 km/h), but that we didn't really account for the little delays. An hour at lunch, a thirty minute train delay, fifteen minutes at a gas station/rest stop, a couple hours at a scenic site... it adds up. The result is that we've been arriving pretty late in the evening, and I've been going to bed pretty much immediately after dinner. Driving is more physically tiring than I expected. I've done long-distance motorcycling, which is definitely more physical and there's no swapping drivers, and I was expecting driving to be easier. It is, but not as much easier as I'd imagined.

Sorry about the lack of details in the mobile posts. Part of the 140 character limit gets eaten up by the GPS coordinates.

When I last journaled, we were packing. That ended up working as well as we could reasonably have hoped. Mostly due to Chris's packing skills, we can fit everything (including two spare tires) into the roof box and the back of the wagon without anything being visible in the car.

The Chunnel was perhaps a little disappointing. Lots of waiting (the train was 30 minutes late), and not the smooth, futuristic experience I'd imagined. However, it *was* retro-futuristic. The train cars look like something that would be at home in *Aliens*: flickering yellowish lighting, deck-plating everywhere, warning klaxons, LED text screens, black and yellow warning stripes.

We stopped for dinner in Lille, which is a city I'm going to have to return to sometime. I had a great flemish aspic a French beer (Page 24) and a milkshake made with spiced bread. The golden hour stretches for a long time at this latitude, so we had a stroll around and took pictures of the city center before getting back on the highway.

Belgium flashed by. Very good roads. There was a surprising lack of billboards, and those that were present were set back from the road and fairly subtle.

It was quite late by the time we arrived in Luxembourg. Yes, we stopped in Luxembourg. It's was shameless ploy to check off a country I've never been to before. The hotel bathroom had a lot of the SF touches that the Chunnel Lacked. Seriously, the shower stall was like a turbolift.

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## We're Off!

**by Chris Chun on 11 Jul 2010 at 18:31**

The Woburn Safari was pretty sweet but, for some reason, I kept hoping for dinosaurs (like Jurassic Park) instead. We

received a ton of stickers to put on our car but we will wait until later to adhere them. It was nice seeing the other teams!

Like Aneel said, we went to the mechanic after the rally launch. The mechanic was super nice and he opened the glove compartment. It doesn't close anymore, though, and it kind of gapes open even after I tied it. They said the smoke wasn't anything to worry about. We haven't seen the smoke since. The Wonderful Patisserie and Cafe was surprisingly good. The only disappointment was the "Giant Har Gow," which wasn't this big-ass dumpling I expected, but a few dumplings in a clear broth with vegetables. Bummer, right? On the other hand, they had a huge mochi collection--about 8 flavors.

Aneel let me try putting the tire on the roof so we'd have more space, but it didn't work. We had just enough space for everything, anyway. We measured the spaces and luggage to make sure we'd be able to pack easily the next morning. Moof was able to get all of his stuff in, which wasn't too much since he's not doing the whole camping part. Since we planned so well, we were only 17 minutes behind our departure goal of 10 a.m.

I drove to the Chunnel. It was neat how so many exits had points of interests, like old abbeys, churches, etc. It's definitely not like that in the States! I didn't get to see any white cliffs so I didn't get to quote the lines I knew from "Dover Beach" (after teaching it for 6 years, it's the sort of thing that sticks in your head). The Chunnel was uneventful. I drove the car into a train and parked. We got out of the car, did some acrobatics, and waited. Thank goodness it was air conditioned. Since we were in the last car, I walked to the first car. I got back from the first car, sat down, and took out my ukulele to try out a tuner application I got for my phone. As soon as I turned on my phone, we got out of the Chunnel!

We stopped at the Calais commercial center and ate some food. Only the restaurants were open, and they were arranged like a faux town inside the mall. One of the fake building fronts had a sun dial on it, except there wasn't a sun in the mall, only fluorescent lights. We drove through for gas but I didn't see Rodin's Burghers of Calais. That's the first one! There are 10 total in the world, and the 10th is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This explains why I have seen so many copies in my travels! There's a rule that says you can only have 11 castings of Rodin sculptures. I wonder about the who/what/when about the uncast eleventh.

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## **(Some of) our adventures, part I (London to Mannheim)**

**by Tom Spindler on 12 Jul 2010 at 05:59**

Hiya. I'm moof, one of the Johnny-come-latelies to the rally. I'm only going as far as Kiev, as I couldn't get more vacation time, but Jarek will be arriving soon after I leave. Anyway, our adventures thus far:

I live in London, which made things a bit easier for Aneel and Christine in staging supplies and whatnot. The trip to Folkestone and the Channel Tunnel train was a bit more full of excitement than planned, with the GPS advising us to turn down several microscopic streets that allowed two-way traffic, followed by arriving at the tunnel station and then hurrying up and waiting. France was quite nice; we stopped in Lille (which the French consider to be part of Flanders), ate dinner (which ended up being a chicken, pork, and rabbit confit -- a surprise, as I wasn't expecting cold meat jello), and continued on to Luxembourg for the night.

Luxembourg was pleasant; while attempting to find *le petite dejeuner* that consisted of more than solely a croissant and coffee, we came across a rainbow array of macarons. Christine was ecstatic! After picking up an obligatory Luxembourgian keychain, we proceeded on to our next stop, Mannheim. While many pretzel stands tried to seduce me with their salty twisted wares, I ultimately escaped their siren song (alas.) The lamia/sphinx women guarding the local water tower seemed to be quite placid, despite the heat.

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## **The Almost-All-Food Blog Entry**

**by Chris Chun on 12 Jul 2010 at 06:01**

After the Chunnel, Aneel drove us through lovely northern France (Nord) and we stopped in Lille. Moof and Aneel got potjevleesh (pot of flesh, says Aneel). I thought it was going to be some kind of chunky stew with rabbit, chicken, and

pig! Actually, it was a ceramic dish full of what appeared to be a clear broth with chunks of meat. Aneel picked up the gherkin decorating the dish and dipped it into what I thought was the soup. The soup bounced back! It was an aspic-meat jello! Awesome! Aneel liked it a lot and Moof thought it was okay. Aneel also got a milkshake flavored with pain d'espice! Spice bread, right? He said it had little bits of bread--like a grainier and milkier bread pudding. He liked that also. Oh, L'Omnia used to be a brothel, then it was a cinema, then a pornographic cinema, and finally a restaurant. I drove from Lille to Luxembourg, about 3 hours. We passed through Belgium, which must have some kind of world record for the most obscured signs. We thought England was bad, but we really couldn't read at times up to 80% of a sign because of the vegetation growing over the words. England was more like 30%. If we didn't have the GPS, we'd have trouble getting to the right exits and interchanges. We got into Luxembourg at night. In the morning, we checked out and I drove to the city center. Actually, I didn't catch what the GPS was trying to tell me to do (this happens very often unless I am on a highway) and we ended up with some nice views off of our anticipated path. We walked to a square and rustled up some breakfast to go. Aneel got a bucket of porridge. Seriously. He's a man who can eat, but it was so much porridge that he had to admit defeat. We found macarons on the way out! They had flavors I hadn't seen before, like olive oil vanilla, cream cheese and orange, and raspberry lavender. I was so excited! Moof and Aneel, who are very sporting, said we could go to a vegetarian restaurant in Mannheim, Germany. It was a buffet where you paid according to the weight and everything was labeled vegan, gluten-free, with alcohol, etc. It was so good that I bought a reusable plastic container (the only kind they had for big meals to-go) and filled it for my dinner that night.

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## Catch Up 2: Luxembourg – Prague

by Aneel Nazareth on 12 Jul 2010 at 17:59

We got up earlier than my body would have liked and headed into Luxembourg City for breakfast. A few wrong turns gave us an excellent view of the chasm through the middle of the town and of the cool modern bridge that spans it. We had breakfast near the Place d'Armes. I had some excellent porridge with honey. It was really surprisingly good.

We got back on the highway and headed for Germany. The autobahns are fine roads indeed. Excellent surfaces, good lines of sight. Very quick. We made good time to Mannheim, a city we knew next to nothing about. We chose it because it happened to be the right distance between Luxembourg and Prague for a lunch stop and Chris found a vegetarian restaurant that she wanted to try. We were convinced that we had the address of the restaurant wrong, because it was "N7 13-15", but that turned out to be correct. Mannheim has an interesting layout with a ring road around the city center and named/numbered blocks rather than named streets within it. We had a brief stroll around and took some pictures of a tower in the middle of town.

Our next stop was Prague. Chris had found us a hotel with parking, so we pulled up in front of the hotel. Chris hopped out and found out from the reception desk that the parking was in a garage down the street. We unloaded the luggage and drove around to the garage. I had a bad feeling when Chris mentioned that there was a car elevator that we were supposed to use to get to the proper parking level. Sure enough, our roof box made us too tall to fit in the elevator. Happily, the hotel obliged us with a dashboard sign that allowed us use of the reserved parking immediately in front of the hotel. Convenient!

We asked at the hotel desk where we could find an ATM and where we should eat, and then set out on foot. After trying various ATMs, we finally found one that worked and headed towards the restaurant. Along the way, I was approached by a woman who started with "Pardon me, could you tell me where..." in English and I shook my head, sadly. I'm often approached for directions, even in places where I don't know the lay of the land well, but this was a new low. Here I was, being asked for directions after only fifteen minutes in the area. She was disappointed: "Oh, I hoped you knew where a Bankomat was." Hah! Practically the only directions I could properly give! I pointed her on her way. Hopefully that earned me a tiny bit of direction-credit. I suspect I'm going to need it on this trip.

Dinner was great. I had some goulash and many different kinds of dumplings. Also a plum brandy aperitif and a half liter of beer. Good times. There was an accordionist in a military uniform (the top half a dress uniform jacket, the bottom half cargo pants) who played occasionally during the meal, but seemed uninterested in applause or tips. He was probably the best accordionist I've ever heard live. Really complex grace notes and ornaments.

After dinner we did a bit of tourism. We walked down to the river, and then across the famous Karlův Most into the Old Town. Then back across into new town, stopping for ice cream, and back up to the hotel.

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# (Some of) our adventures, part II: Mannheim to Prague

by Tom Spindler on 12 Jul 2010 at 17:59

When we last caught up with our intrepid adventurers, they had been admiring the bosom lamias at the Mannheim, Germany water tower. After a brief stroll around the center of town and Christine had obtained an egg roll, we duly paid up our ChipToken, escaped from the parking garage, and headed towards Prague (or as those Czech would have it, "Praha".) At the border, there was some a rather large building and a big sign saying something in Czech – but there was nothing in English (or German, for that matter). Aneel said something along the lines of "Does that say 'ticket'?", but as there was no customs area or passport inspection station, we collectively shrugged and carried on.

After driving by Plzeň (birthplace of the Pilsener beer style), we arrived shortly afterwards at Praha. It greeted us with open arms – and by that, I mean that there was a tremendous backup in traffic trying to get across one of the bridges. After quite a few minutes, and then a few scant seconds admiring the (presumably) disabled bus in the right lane causing the snarled traffic, we arrived at our hotel. Whilst I guarded our luggage in the reception area, Christine and Aneel went to go park the car. They returned with sheepish looks on their faces: while the car would have fit into the parking elevator, the car and the rooftop box atop did not. Fortunately, the hotel let us park on the street, right in front.

After playing an exciting few rounds of "Where's an ATM, and does it have any remaining cash?", it was time to eat. The concierge had suggested we go to Hostinec U Kalicha, a traditional Czech restaurant, and so we ambled our way over. On the way, a woman approached us; Aneel looked a bit hesitant until the question emerged "Where is the Bankomat"? He pointed her towards where we'd successfully looted some Czech Crowns, and remarked afterwards "I'm glad she asked the only question I *could* answer."

After a brief stroll, we arrived at Hostinec U Klaicha, where the dulcet tones of accordion music greeted us. After a shot of slivovitz (plum brandy) followed by a liter of beer, and some gawking at the New Zealander and Japanese tourists nearby, our food arrived. Goulash for Aneel; for me, something turducken-like – in this case, pork loin stuffed inside a duck or goose, and dubbed "Czech dish". Christine arrived at the restaurant soon afterwards; just as she was about to order, the Japanese women next to us had a plate full of dumplings arrive. Aneel's eyes briefly popped out on springs; after asking the waiter what that plate was, he too ordered a plate of four types of dumplings. Everything was quite delicious.

Bellies full, it was time to stroll along the river up to Charles Bridge and admire the sights. While the scenery was quite nice, being cheek-to-jowl with throngs of tourists wasn't especially wonderful. After maneuvering our way across the river to the castle-side bank, my feet started aching quite a bit; as it was already starting to get a bit late, we walked back to the hotel. Tomorrow, we'd wake up bright and early to go see the Kostnice Ossuary.

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## Catch Up 3: Prague – Budapest

by Aneel Nazareth on 13 Jul 2010 at 17:59

We got off to a slightly late start today, and didn't arrive at our planned midday stop in Kutná Hora until about 12:30. We then spent a long time driving in circles trying to find our way to a restaurant near one of the churches in town. Eventually, Chris hopped out of the car and got a town map from a hotel information center.

After lunch, we visited the Sedlec Ossuary, a chapel decorated with the bones of over 40,000 people. I'd read about this in the guidebook during my European trip in 2001, and had been meaning to visit ever since. It was not at all what I had expected. Somehow, I'd envisioned the bones being used in structural ways, rather than as surface decoration. It was quite creepy to see huge pyramids of skulls.

The Czechs seem fond of mythological beasts for their gas station mascots. We bought gas from a station with a six-legged fire-breathing dog on the sign, and passed unicorn and pegasus themed stations as well.

I've been enjoying passing through the agricultural areas of central Europe. I've been admiring some [agrarian landscapes on 1x.com](#) and it's great to see the kinds of fields depicted in those photos (although in less spectacular lighting conditions).

Midway through the afternoon, Chris got tired of driving, so we pulled off the highway to swap. While we were

stopped, the car started steaming again. Now that I know what to look for, it was very clear what was going on. I could see water dripping off of something in the engine compartment and falling directly onto the exhaust pipe, which was hot enough to boil the water off. I browsed the Haynes manual that we brought along, and I'm fairly sure that the thing that's dripping is part of the air conditioning system. I am optimistic that the problem is being caused by condensation due to the temperature difference between the outside air and the A/C system.

We got back on the highway and continued towards Slovakia. Maybe 20 km from the border, I noticed a van with blue lights hanging around in traffic. At once point it passed us, and I saw the passenger look over at our car and frown. It was the kind of expression that says "Hmm, I wonder if they know what is wrong with their car", which had me feeling paranoid. Then the van pulled in front of us and a scrolling LED sign came on in the back of it. It said, in a variety of languages displayed in a rotation, "Please Follow Me". Uh-oh.

We followed, and were pulled off into a strange rest area. A gentleman in uniform got out of the car and walked over. He looked at the UK tax disc in the corner of our window and then asked me something in Czech, with a distinct frown. I responded in English, and he handed me a little brochure that described, in a variety of languages, how a usage permit was required to drive on certain Czech motorways. Oops. So that's what that pull-off near the German border was for. We saw a sign saying something about stickers as we entered the Czech Republic and considered turning around to go back to it, but it was impossible.

The policeman levied a fine of 1000 Koruna (\$50 USD). Of course, we only had 200 left. When we asked if we could pay in Euros, he pointed at a small building 50 yards away. It was a money changer's shop. Come to think of it, this "rest area" had no amenities. No gas station. No bathrooms. Just that one building. Funny, that. We changed some Euros, got the receipt for our fine, and were pointed at the Slovak border with the understanding that we should leave (since we still had no motorway usage permit).

We erred on the side of caution in Slovakia, stopping at the area where all of the trucks were pulling off. There Chris was told that there *was* a motorway usage permit in Slovakia, but that it was only for trucks. We crossed the country without incident.

At the Hungarian border we stopped at the deserted border control post and found that there *is* a usage fee here, and that it's enforced with camera systems. We paid up and drove towards Budapest.

Finding our hotel was a bit tricky, since it turned out that the street it's on is pedestrian only. No wonder the GPS couldn't find it. Then we found that it wasn't a hotel per se, but an apartment rental outfit. Eventually, I tracked down their office, to discover it had closed at 9 pm. Luckily, I still have a few pounds of credit left on my UK sim card, so I called the contact number and after ten minutes, a woman showed up to let us in to our apartment. Our car fit into the garage, even with the roof box. We narrowly managed to avoid backing into the pit in the garage floor that led down to the sewers.

Time for a rest.

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## Rest day

**by Aneel Nazareth on 14 Jul 2010 at 15:42**

Today was our first scheduled non-driving day. We have these spread through our schedule so that we can absorb delays and relax and see some sights. Budapest was a very pretty place to do this. We spent the day wandering around, covering first some of the highlights of Pest, then taking the metro to near the river Danube, walking across the Chain Bridge to Buda, and taking the funicular up to the top of Castle Hill. We stopped in at the National Gallery for an exhibition about the Futurist Fortunato Depero and his influence on Hungarian art, had some bracelet-shaped fried dough, and watched the twilight descend over the Danube.

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## Into Romania

**by Aneel Nazareth on 15 Jul 2010 at 15:56**

Traffic was light leaving Budapest. We made good time towards the Romanian border, stopping to fill up on gas. We filled a Jerry can, mostly to test it out. It doesn't seem to leak. We stopped for lunch in Debrecen, where our route

changed from highways to two lane roads.

The Romanian border was more exciting than the ones we've crossed to date. Since it's not a Schengen country and we don't have EU passports, we were singled out for extra processing. We handed our passports and car documentation over and pulled over to the side of the lane to let everyone else go through. After a while, I was approached by a tall border guard who spoke good English. He asked me about the unusual visas, and why we were planning on going so far east. I told him we were driving to Mongolia, and he asked why, so I told him about the rally and donating the car to charity. All of a sudden, recognition hit him: "I saw a program about that on the Discovery Channel!" He was much more enthusiastic after that and ended up shaking my hand and wishing me luck.

Driving has definitely slowed down a lot since we entered Romania. It may be a long time before we see another multi-lane highway. There was a long stretch outside of Oradea that crawled along. Eventually, an ambulance passed the other direction, and then the traffic started moving in pulses. It seems that someone managed to crash into the back of a cement mixer, breaking the mixing barrel. The police were alternating traffic directions on the uncemented side of the road.

Romania is gorgeous. Once we passed out of the plains and up towards Transylvania, the terrain became mountainous and lushly green. The sides of the road are strewn with wildflowers and flowering trees, and the cool mountain air smells sweet.

We've stopped for the night in Cluj-Napoca, a university town. We couldn't get beer with dinner because there was a big event going on in the central square that the Police were trying to keep orderly. It appears to have been a rally for the Cluj University Football Club.

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## Moldova

**by Chris Chun on 15 Jul 2010 at 23:51**

After Romania, our first difficult border crossing was Moldova. They gave Aneel a hard time about the vehicle registration form. We stayed one night in Chişinău, the capital of Moldova. Moldova is one of the poorest countries in Europe. What it lacks in charm and attractiveness, it makes up in potholes (in both roads and sidewalks) and an alarmingly large number of ambulances driving around at night. The hotel was unbearably hot and I had to keep getting up to wet my clothes so I could stay cool at night. Moldova is known for its wines and I don't drink wine, so I didn't get to enjoy it. We did pass through Soroca, the "gypsy capital of the world." We passed a ton of "gypsy mansions" in the midst of being built. I didn't know anything about the Roma community in Soroca until I poked around online later. Alas, we didn't get to meet the ["Gypsy King"](#). This puppy was the only good thing about Moldova.





It was hanging around our hotel. Later, we saw a boy pick up the puppy and run it down half a block. He tossed it into a gate and shut the gate, then ran back to where he started. After a couple of seconds, the puppy poked his nose out of the gate, got out and ran after the boy.



We saw lots of storks on poles in Romania. I think we shot this in Moldova, but I don't know for sure. These are the only 2 pictures I took in Moldova. Aneel might have more.

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## Transilvania

**by Aneel Nazareth on 16 Jul 2010 at 15:03**

We had planned a short day today, but, based on our previous experiences with road conditions here in Romania, we knew that we'd be later than scheduled. This may be the first place in the world I've driven where I've considered the speed limits too *high*. We're driving on twisty mountain roads with occasional bumpy or potholed sections, lots of slow traffic (heavy trucks, farm machinery, horse carts), and urban areas. There's just no way to safely maintain 100 km/h in those conditions. Luckily, most of the drivers here don't try to. There's the occasional insane person who passes with a hair's breadth between them and the oncoming traffic, but they're the exception, not the rule.

I'm still really enjoying the scenery. Green mountains and valleys, rivers, wildflowers. A glimpse of rural life that is absent in the states. I saw people cutting grass with actual scythes today. Looked a lot more efficient than the push-mower.

We got in to Braşov (Probably The Best City In The World) in the middle of the afternoon, after a brief rainstorm in the plains below. We parked the car and went for a walk around town, stopping by the main square, the gothic cathedral, and the Black Tower and White Tower (which were part of the city's defenses in medieval times, and are good vista points for looking down at the city today).

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# Escape from the EU

by Aneel Nazareth on 17 Jul 2010 at 15:33

The drive east through Romania was through more beautiful countryside. Lots of switchbacks up and down the mountains and then more cultivated grasslands. Lots of corn and **huge** fields of sunflowers. We hit the frontier at about 4:45 pm. Leaving Romania was easy. Entering Moldova... less so.

The Moldovan officials were *really* unhappy with our paperwork for the vehicle. We tried to explain that we'd bought the vehicle too recently for a new V5 with my name actually printed on it (rather than hand-written) to have been sent yet. After 45 minutes of watching immigration officials conferring about whether to let us through, we were planning a route back through Romania to Ukraine. Longer, but doable.

Then the official came back and handed us our papers. Apparently they'd decided to let us in after all. We still had a perfunctory customs search to get through. I think the customs guy was too amused by our shovel and spare tire to bother searching the rest of the vehicle.

We also stopped to buy Moldovan vehicle insurance. It *seemed* straightforward enough, but I'm not totally sure that all of the things were entered in the right boxes. I hope we don't have to find out.

Chişinău seems a lot smaller and more run-down than I expected. But their meatballs are good, and the local beer is a respectable lager.

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## Mr. G's Hometown

by Chris Chun on 18 Jul 2010 at 13:19

Hey! Sorry I haven't been updating lately. A great deal of my internet time has been spent looking for hotels for the next two nights. For those of you who don't know, I'm an English teacher. The math teacher at my school is from Vinnytsia, which is where we are having dinner right now! Gotta go before my netbook battery runs out.

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## Kiev for Two Nights!

by Chris Chun on 19 Jul 2010 at 14:32

Luckily, I found a place with wifi, air conditioning, hot water, and parking. Whee! We saw a crypt with mummified monks (you could only see their dried hands and feet) and a [microminiature museum](#). Moof found us a cafeteria and we ate a lot of food for very little money. We could see a square where traffic moved about without any signs, lights, or direction. Cars approached from all angles and got through the square without hitting each other. I took a video of it. I'm afraid I'll have to deal with one tomorrow and I'll get a ticket like Tony in Steppe by Steppe. No one really smiles a lot around here, or maybe I smile too much and they smile the right amount. I don't know.

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## To Kiev, and Resting

by Aneel Nazareth on 19 Jul 2010 at 20:30

I was woken up at 5:30 am by a loud crash. I groggily looked out the hotel window and saw an accident had just occurred in a nearby intersection. Not a great portent. My shower was ice cold as I tried to wake up.

Since our car paperwork was questioned when entering Moldova, we decided that it was probably wisest to *not* take a route east out of Moldova that passed through Transnistria before entering Ukraine. The Transnistrians have declared themselves an independent republic and their border control stations are reputed to be very exacting (and prone to requiring bribes to let travelers through). So we decided to take a longer, slower route north. The first border point that would avoid Transnistria was marked on the map just outside of the town of Soroca, so we set out early and

headed up there.

While the roads from Romania to Chişinău were nice and smooth (better on the Moldovan side than the Romanian, actually), the road up to Soroca was rough. Luckily, it was lightly traveled on a Sunday, so we could use both lanes to avoid the worst potholes when necessary.

We arrived in Soroca at around lunchtime and looked around for a restaurant. It took a little wandering around, but eventually we spotted an awning and a patio that looked like food was being served. We went in and asked for a menu. Cyrillic. Okay. We have to start somewhere, right? We actually succeeded in ordering almost perfectly. Everything was, generally speaking, what we'd expected except the water, which was fizzy.

After the meal we headed over to the border. We took increasingly small, improbable-seeming turns as we approached it. We stopped and asked directions multiple times (even committing the faux pas of asking a Romanian-speaker for directions in Russian (which I'm hoping will be intelligible to Ukrainian-speakers), and people kept pointing us the same way. Eventually, we found a dirt road that passed by a last few houses and then ran parallel to the river. Sure enough, there was a gate there with some buildings nearby. Only the gate was open, and the buildings looked deserted. I got out and looked around for a minute or two before I saw the sign saying that the border post was closed on weekends. Oops.

We asked the first person we saw (a man drawing water up from a well with a hand-cranked bucket). He pointed to Otaci, a town on the map about 60 km to the northwest. I asked him "Sunday?" in my terrible Russian (I *knew* it would be handy to memorize the days of the week. Thanks for the mnemonics, Irina!) and he said yes. So we headed back into Soroca.

We wanted to fill the tank before continuing, but we discovered that none of the local gas stations accepted credit cards (though they all have "We accept credit cards!" signs posted). So we spent the last of our Moldovan currency on half a tank of gas. We were feeling nervous about the prospects of this border crossing, so we decided to visit an ATM in Soroca before we continued on. The trick was that we couldn't actually find one. So we pulled over and asked a pair of cops. They turned out to be friendly, so while Tinny and Moof walked to the Bankomat, I asked them about the border. They also indicated that Otaci was the place to go. Cash in hand, we set out down the road to Otaci.

The weather turned gloomier and gloomier as we progressed and discussed our options, if we couldn't get through today at Otaci. Back to Chişinău seemed like the best option, since services seemed sparse near the border. Fat raindrops began to fall.

Encouragingly, the road got bigger instead of smaller as we approached the border control point. Sure enough there was a cluster of money changers, insurance sellers, and duty free shops clustered around a border control point at the end of a bridge.

We got out of Moldova in about 20 minutes, and drove across the bridge. Some Ukrainian soldiers on the other side conferred about what forms they should give to Americans. Once they'd decided on a set we pulled up into the entry line and started on the paperwork. It was generally straightforward, but there wasn't nearly enough room on the form for all of the information about the car. How am I supposed to fit a VIN in a quarter inch long space?

The Ukrainians seemed generally amused by us. Our car was pulled aside for a search. They were curious when we admitted that we had medicines with us, and asked about the conditions that each was for, but seemed satisfied with our explanations. They made me sign a declaration that they had searched us for drugs and failed to find any.

They called me back a couple times to ask questions about the V5. Each time, my heart sank, expecting the worst, but generally there were things like "which part of this is the street address, and which is the town?" They let us through, wishing us good luck on our trip.

We found an insurance place just outside the gate and had a long, involved conversation with the woman inside about which numbers were what on our car forms. There was a lot of miming about engine sizes, driver's license cards, and the number of days we'd be in Ukraine. It all seemed to work out in the end and we were given a paper that we hope makes it legal to drive here and a warning to keep our speed under 45 because of the cops.

We found a gas station almost immediately, and succeeded in buying gas with a credit card, then got directions to an ATM and supplied ourselves with local currency. Then it was off towards Kiev, the insurance woman's warning ringing in our ears.

Just *where* were we supposed to keep our speed under 45? In town? Everywhere? Much of our trip involved hoping for traffic going the right direction so we could follow them and match their speed.

We stopped in Vinnytsia for dinner, and to swap drivers. As we left town, we were treated to an enormous lightning storm in the distance. We still had hours to go before Kiev, so I napped while Chris drove. She woke me up after midnight to swap again, and I drove the final stretch to our hotel. We didn't check in until 1:30, but, happily, our reservation was at a giant international-class hotel, so reception was open at all hours.

I slept fitfully, and not nearly long enough, worrying about our car's papers. Moof would be flying back to London from Kiev, and we had a few more days planned in Ukraine after that, so if we could get new documents sent to him in time, he could send them by DHL to one of our planned stops or something before we attempted the Russian border.

After breakfast, I talked to the local UK embassy, who told me they couldn't help us with the forms, but gave me the number (in the UK) for the DVLA. After wrestling with the DVLA's phone tree for quite some time, I finally managed to speak to someone. He reassured me that, not only do we actually have the correct papers, but if a border crossing objects to them, we can call the DVLA and they will fax a document to the border officials that should get us through.

Phew. That was a huge relief.

We spent the rest of the day in celebratory sightseeing, taking the Metro to visit historic monastery catacombs and miniatures, and, at the other end of the scale, museums of war and nuclear disaster with enormous statues and disturbing art.

When we returned to the hotel, I reveled in an actual *bath*. I suspect we'll soon leave the land of hot water for a long time.

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## Fond Farewells and Fortuitous Findings

by Chris Chun on 20 Jul 2010 at 06:05

We dropped Moof off at the Kiev airport, which was much easier to get to than the concierge at the hotel let on. I'll miss him! He was a lovely travel companion. After we dropped him off, Aneel contended with a traffic light that went like this: red and yellow, yellow, red, green for half of a second, red and yellow, yellow, etc. He just guessed and we didn't get pulled over, even though none of the other cars followed.

We stopped for gas and we filled our 2nd jerry can full of gas. We got back on the road and stopped because we heard a rattling noise. We opened up the roof box and saw that the jerry cans weren't rattling so we re-seated the straps and that seemed to fix the problem. As we pulled back onto the road, a red van drove in front of us. Aneel remarked, "That van is from the UK...." We realized it was Driven Mad! We pulled up next to them and, since they have a right-hand drive and we have a left-hand drive, the passengers could talk and the drivers could keep their eyes on the road. We stopped at a gas station to do proper introductions and chat. We hope to meet up with them in Kharkov before they head on to Donetsk.

Aneel found a restaurant for lunch, Autogrill, that has a hunting theme. There are lots of dead animal skins everywhere and lots of folk art. Also, wifi!

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## We're doing Fine

by Aneel Nazareth on 20 Jul 2010 at 12:33

After leaving the fabulous hunting-themed restaurant (which I wasn't entirely sure was a restaurant at first glance, because the patio is covered with camo netting), we made pretty good progress towards Kharkov. There's a lot of road work being done on the M-03, which means that it repeatedly switches all traffic on one side of the road. The Ukrainian cops use that for an excuse to put in lots of speed traps. I think the speed limit when you're on the wrong side of the road is supposed to be 50 km/h. There's a sense of togetherness among drivers here, though. People flick on their brights to warn oncoming cars of speed traps.

We managed to get within 20 km of our destination, and Chris was using the GPS to try to locate a restaurant for dinner, when I suddenly saw that I was being flagged over to the side of the road. Unfortunately, we've been using the GPS as our speedometer (the car's dial is in mph, with tiny, hard to read km/h markings), so I didn't know exactly how



fast I was going.

After quite a bit of discussion, in which it transpired that the cop and I were utterly unable to communicate, I got out a pen and paper and wrote down "83", the number he had shown me on his radar gun. And he wrote down "60". Aha. He wrote down another couple numbers: 255 – 343, but I couldn't make sense of them. Eventually he got frustrated and called someone and handed me the phone. His friend on the other end of the line informed me in English that the fine for going 83 in a 60 zone was 255 to 343 UAH. I said okay, but the policeman wouldn't actually tell me how much he was fining me for. Eventually the friend was put back on and I was told that I would be written a ticket and would have to pay the fine tomorrow at the bank, but that if I wanted to, I could pay now by discussing it with the officer. Ah. I wrote down a number on the pad, and the policeman assented. Clearly, my opening bid should have been lower...

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## Yellow and Blue

by Chris Chun on 20 Jul 2010 at 22:21

I suppose, then, the ostensible unfriendliness of the Ukrainians and western Russians was probably the biggest element in culture shock for me, other than the food. I never got tired of the sunflower fields, though. I read that sunflowers either followed the sun from east to west, always faced east, or followed until they got older and then stuck facing east. In any case, I loved the sunflowers, which started in the Czech Republic, became the most prevalent in Ukraine, and lasted through Russia. They provided a pleasant rural alternative to the non-smiling urban landscape.



I wondered if the Ukrainian flag was based on this common sight, but I read later that the yellow was supposed to represent wheat.





Starting in Romania, we noticed that the colors of the national flag would be painted on telephone or light poles, on the metal bars of bridges, or on playgrounds. It happened in Ukraine as well and I didn't notice that many in Russia. The US doesn't really do that, does it?

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## Kharkov towards Donetsk

by Chris Chun on 21 Jul 2010 at 12:23

Our hotel in Kharkov was very nice. The room was so big compared to all the previous hotel rooms! It was precisely 2 cartwheels wide (I checked). Everything was clean and lovely and the air conditioning was frigid. Poor Aneel! Moof would have liked the AC, though. Kharkov was brimming with young folks and I found out later that it is home to 13 universities and about 150,000 students. We ate at the cafeteria-style place Moof found in Kiev since it was so good last time. It's also nice being able to see and point at what you want instead of trying to order in Russian. For those of you who don't know, I'm a gigantic pain in the butt and I don't eat meat, dairy, or eggs.

We had a nice, early night and slept long into the morning, our excuse being that breakfast wasn't served until 9 a.m. We fretted over our route for a bit. We thought we'd bypass Donetsk after all so I cancelled our reservation at the Beatles-themed hotel and then frantically reinstated it after Aneel crunched the numbers on the route and decided we'd be okay. Aneel drove the whole way for 4.5 hours! He's a trooper. Maybe it's because he has more experience driving long distances on a motorcycle. Actually, it's possible he drove the whole time because he's had enough of my music and singing. (Whoever is driving is in charge of the music, and most of my music is sing-a-long kind of stuff.)

Unlike Aneel, I don't really stay still when I'm driving. I usually move around in following positions: tuck my left toes under my right thigh, switch it so my left knee is bent near my chest with my foot on the seat (alternating with my left elbow on the inside or outside of my knee), stick my left foot out the window with my toes next to the side-view mirror, or, rarely, put my left foot down where it belongs like a proper driver. Even when I switch it up, my butt goes numb and I can't make it past the 3.5-hour mark, though this is an improvement over the 3-hour max I could handle a week ago.

We didn't see as many police as yesterday and we didn't get pulled over at all. We saw lots of old Communist statues scattered about. We saw more gas stations with mythical creatures on their logos. Every time I think I've seen the biggest sunflower field yet, I'm proven wrong. Aneel pointed out a hill with 3 dinosaur statues! I love dinosaurs! We stopped to buy peaches by the side of the road and they were delicious! Much better than the peaches in California, almost as good as the ones in Maryland. Maybe the humidity helps or something.

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# Donetsk, Don't Tell?

by Chris Chun on 21 Jul 2010 at 13:20

moof is back in London and he has a sore throat. Poor moof! He's also stuck with a bunch of Moldovan money no one will change, as if his sore throat wasn't bad enough.

The hotel I booked in Donetsk has a Beatles theme. There's an attached cafeteria and a restaurant with the same theme. Two speakers outside play 2 different Beatles' songs at the same time, but the hotel itself doesn't play any Beatles inside.

Our hotel room is tiny, like a college dorm room, and Aneel has to be careful not to hit his head. The window has a photo of Liverpool stuck on it, so we can't actually look outside. I opened the window to look outside and I broke it (of course). The whole window came off, but I managed to get it back as Aneel looked on, completely unsurprised. I opened the refrigerator in the room to see if we could chill our water and saw that it was filled with the usual: drinks, candy bars, booze, etc. It also had a bag of potato chips and a condom! I've never seen either of those in a hotel fridge before.

The restaurant was very strange. It was huge! It had private booths with posters of Depeche Mode, Kurt Cobain, and Pink Floyd. It had a catwalk, red phone booth, and tons of pictures of the Beatles. Our table was set over a glass floor, which covered a scene with straw, a hat, and fake flowers. I got trapped in one of the fancy bathroom stalls and considered climbing over the wall into the next stall to get out, but I gave the door one hard push after struggling for another minute and I escaped. The tables had phones and you could call the other phones at the other tables. They had a set of rules, which mentioned both a dress code and "face control." I'm glad we went when it was empty because I don't think my chances would have been so good had they been busy.

They had tons of Japanese food and traditional Ukrainian dishes. I tried to get Aneel to order the salted lard dish and the "Woman's Prank" dish, but he declined. Now we'll never know what Woman's Prank tastes like.

I'm back in the lobby of the hotel since the connection isn't so great in our room. I saw a picture of Paul McCartney holding up some Ukrainian traditional costume behind the front desk. I asked if it was Paul McCartney and the guys at reception--one of which was wearing a slim-cut Beatles suit from the Hard Day's Night era--said it was indeed Paul. I asked if he had been to this hotel and they laughed and said no. The one in the suit added, in broken English, "I think he looks like woman."

We're waking early tomorrow so we can get across the Russian border and into Volgograd when it isn't too late. The GPS won't play nice anymore, so we'll see how that goes.

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## Smiles

by Chris Chun on 21 Jul 2010 at 18:18

Ukraine pictures are [here](#).



Aneel asked me to get this when we were driving. The dude in the background cracks me up. Ukraine felt cranky to me. I know they're not actually cranky and that it's a cultural difference thing. Actually, it was like that in Russia until we got to Lake Baikal. I think Ukraine was crankier than Russia, to be honest. From what I understand, smiles are for people you know well and actually like. They're not insincere or used just for politeness. That kind of makes sense. My brother's Russian friend said that smiling shows that you are weak. The

Russian teacher at my school said that if you smile at a stranger, they might think you were making fun of him and you could get beat up. I read elsewhere that smiling for no good reason might make people think you were mentally deficient.

I knew not to take it all personally but I was starving—who knew I needed smiles so desperately?—for a smile or even a nod by the time we got to Kazakhstan. I'd gratefully accept insincere ones and I wouldn't have minded at all if they were making fun of me. I decided to smile, nod, and wave at people anyway just to see if I'd get any response that wasn't a neutral face. I was a tourist and, by definition, mentally deficient anyway. I didn't get many positive responses and when I did, they were usually from people who were in the tourist industry. People warmed up when we got out of Ukraine and Russia and into Kazakhstan. The friendliest people were the Uzbeks, at whom I waved when we were out and about or driving in our car. They universally waved back or smiled, and I was in heaven.

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## Waved over by Russian cops at a checkpoint....

by Aneel Nazareth on 22 Jul 2010 at 08:33

Waved over by Russian cops at a checkpoint. Turns out they got a photo of me passing across a solid line. Oops. They asked for USD \$500, but relented after multiple repetitions of phrasebook "pay later at bank".

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## Crossing into Russia

by Chris Chun on 22 Jul 2010 at 13:02

It took us 3 hours to get from the Liverpool hotel in Donetsk to the Russian border. It seemed like a minor border post so we didn't have to wait long at all. Unlike the other borders, we had to buy our insurance for the next country before the border crossing, and a very affectionate Ukrainian led us to his insurance hut where another man was waiting to sell it to us. By "affectionate," I mean he kept taking my hand and kissing it, kissing up my arm up to my shoulder like the cartoon skunk, and petting my arms or my hair. We tried to pay for part of the insurance with our remaining Ukrainian money, and he kept taking it and pretending to spit on it. Unfortunately for him, we insisted on using the money and we paid for the rest with dollars. The Russian border guards were pretty nice. The guy doing our papers called his daughter for English translation and he helped us fill the forms properly. One asked us to open the roof box, which was a first. They didn't look inside it, though, just glanced and said we were fine. They also skimmed our luggage but didn't ask us to open anything. It went pretty well! They had a good laugh at my finger moustache and then we were off. Everything was easier and faster than I expected. First gas across the border took dollars, whew.

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## Moustache Shenanigans

by Chris Chun on 23 Jul 2010 at 09:27

As we got closer to Volgograd, the traffic increased and the GPS kept telling us we were an hour away from our destination... for hours. There comes a point when there's no use in passing the truck in front of you because there are more cars and trucks in front of it. We noticed a convoy of watermelon trucks. The trucks had two square holes in the back and you could see the watermelons peeking out. We remembered that watermelons were supposed to be delicious in Astrakhan, so we promised to buy one before we left.

We approached a train crossing. People parked their cars and walked around so we did the same. The vehicle in front of us was one of the watermelon trucks. I got the bright idea to take one of the fake moustaches (I packed a lot for this trip) and stick it on the watermelon looking outside the window of the truck. I figured the truck driver wouldn't be able to see the very back of his truck, so I picked the curliest moustache from the pack, ran up, and stuck it on a watermelon. I think the truck driver wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't gotten back out of the car and taken a picture of my handiwork. He noticed that I was taking a picture so he got out of his truck—he was a big dude! He walked around the front and stared walking to the back of the truck. Aneel and I got nervous. He walked over to the first window, full of un-moustachioed watermelons, and ran his hand over them. Then he walked over the second window. We held our breaths. He saw the moustache on the watermelon and he didn't know what to make of it. He ran his hand over it and then turned around—Aneel and I were cracking up. I ran out of the car with my pack of moustaches

and explained what I had done. He started laughing and motioned me towards the cab of the truck.

We walked over and he pulled out the other two guys in the cab so they could look at the watermelon. We all had a good laugh and I gave moustaches to everyone. One guy put his on upside down, so the ends curled up around his nose. Another put his moustache on his forearm. It turns out he liked my moustache better so we traded and I wore the one he had on his arm while he wore the one I had on my face. Some kids with buckets (for washing cars?) came by and I gave them moustaches as well. We took pictures and videos with the watermelons and moustaches and had a jolly time until the cars started moving again. About 30 minutes later, I passed the truck and we waved to each other, moustaches still on.

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## Cyrillic Keyboard Nightmare

**by Chris Chun on 23 Jul 2010 at 01:01**

We're in Volgograd! The ease with which we crossed the border was surpassed by the difficulty of a police stop, traffic, traincrossings, and, as Aneel mentioned, moustachioed watermelon convoys.

We're in a hostel/hotel that used to be a heavy-duty Soviet apartment building. Yes, they had internet access, but the keyboard was typing in Cyrillic and we couldn't get the ethernet cables to play nice with our laptops. We drove around Volgograd looking for a nonexistent internet cafe and finally gave up before midnight.

This morning, I used my netbook, which has Windows 7, and a translating dictionary to change the settings and now I can type! We have to run, though, so this is a short blog entry. The last definite internet access is our hotel tonight so I'll try to make up for it. Bye!

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## Astrakhan

**by Aneel Nazareth on 23 Jul 2010 at 11:01**

We're checked in to our hotel in Astrakhan, waiting for our last team member's flight to arrive from Moscow.

Apologies if you've texted me in the past few days. It seems my Latvian global SIM card will let me receive messages on the network here, but not send them! Oops.

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## To Astrakhan

**by Chris Chun on 23 Jul 2010 at 22:32**

It took 2 hours to get out of Volgograd. The road forked in the city and I could see the traffic lights turning yellow on the right fork, but I was going towards the left. I used the bus to my left, which was going in my direction, as a cue for whether to keep going or stop. It stopped so I stopped next to it. The cop to my right pulled me over. Darn! He indicated that I didn't stop in the right place for the red light and I tried to explain that I couldn't see the lights because the bus was in the way, which was true. I didn't see any light at all and only stopped because the bus stopped. It's not like they pulled the bus over! He ignored the \$20 in my International Driver's Permit and took both the car registration and my license into the police post. I didn't know whether to follow him in so I sat there for a while. Eventually, I went inside and saw a different policeman sitting at a desk with my documents. He wasn't really mean, mostly amused. I kept trying to explain why I didn't stop at the right place and he kept telling me there was a fine. It's like the only word I know in Russian other than "thank you." I kept pretending I didn't know what he was saying even though I did I kept an apologetic tone and he wrote 100 on a piece of paper. I asked if he meant rubles or dollars. He said dollars. Even though it was \$400 less than the \$500 a cop tried to shake down from Aneel, I put on a scared face and showed him the only money I had (on me, as I had plenty in the car). I offered to go to the bank and I offered the 500 rubles I had as well. After a while, he relented, took the \$20, and I asked if I could keep the rubles to pay for gas. He laughed and let me go with my rubles. I know that other teams have gotten away with paying nothing but we were willing to pay so as not to lose time.

The road toward Astrakhan was straight and smooth, so we made good progress. The temperature got up to 102 Fahrenheit and we inadvertently massacred gigantic locusts. One came off the windshield and landed behind Aneel's back when he was driving, and I extricated it. Another splattered on his arm so we closed the windows and put on the air conditioning. Later, we found tons of them wedged into the crevices of the front of the car, dismembered, crisp, and attracting bees for some reason. Our hotel was on the Volga river, right in front of military ships festooned in strings of lights. It was just like any ocean boardwalk. Families and couples strolled along while youths in rented in-line skates faltered and crashed around them.

We drove to the Astrakhan airport to pick up Jarek. Aneel said he would wait outside since he had a pocket knife and couldn't get through security. The officials laughed at the size of his knife, noting that it was too small to do any damage, and let him in. It was funny, considering nail clippers and such were off the list for a while in the U.S. Jarek's plane was free so we took advantage of the free wifi and waited. After we collected him, we tried to get into some floating restaurants for dinner, but we were underdressed (or didn't pass face control?) or the restaurant was full. We found another one that let us in—it was empty—and the wait staff was playing computer games on their laptop. They insisted on very loud music and later the bartender crooned into his microphone for us.

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## **Guns 'N' Roses Pub in Atyrau**

**by Chris Chun on 24 Jul 2010 at 23:38**

The next morning, I anxiously re-packed everything. I put my suitcase into Jarek's suitcase, rearranged things, and everything fit perfectly! I was so pleased. We got to pay a toll for going over a pontoon bridge. It was neat seeing the bridge wobble and float before us. Aneel took us out of Astrakhan, Russia and into Kazakhstan. I made nice with the guard at the border and we went over the names in English that he knew, which included Barak Obama (happy face); Bush, Clinton and Lewinsky (frowny faces); Paris Hilton (we both preened and flipped imaginary hair); and Arnold Schwarzenegger, "governator" (we flexed our muscles and mumbled in a macho manner). It didn't take us that long to get through the border. The only thing that got searched was my little purse of menstrual products. The guard peered in, Aneel shrugged (I wasn't there), and the guard made hand motions indicating breasts. Aneel nodded and that was that. Good thing, too, since that's where I hid my dollars.

Atyrau was strange. It was exceedingly clean like Singapore, according to Jarek, and the streets were wide. Large buildings, the result of the strong oil business, loomed and workers swept dust from the curbs. Florid posts on one side of the Ural river indicated that we were in Europe and, as we crossed the other side, another post told us we were in Asia. We pulled into the parking lot of the hotel where I made an online reservation the night before and saw about 5 London to Tashkent rally cars. Neat! It would be nice hanging out with them at the Guns 'N' Roses pub. When we got in, the desk staff professed not to know anything about our reservation and, besides, there were no rooms left anyway. They found us another hotel further down the same road.

We crossed back from Asia into Europe, checked in, cleaned up, and went back to Asia to hit the Guns 'N' Roses pub. I could get in free but the cover was 2k for Jarek and Aneel. We looked at the menu—pretty expensive—but the menu was in English and there were ralliers inside! We paid the 4k and went in. The London to Tashkent ralliers were primarily British, with a couple of Germans and Americans. We saw the owners of the black Jeep we saw on the road from Kiev several days and two countries ago. They had been convoying for 24 hours! We traded stories and chatted about routes, driving, etc. The Americans had to ditch their car in Poland and they joined other cars. One joined a brother-sister team because the brother had enough and flew back home. Based on everyone else's stories, our team had been incredibly lucky with our easy and quick border crossings.

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## **Goodbye, Kazakhstan! Hello, Uzbekistan!**

**by Chris Chun on 26 Jul 2010 at 01:43**

We left Atyrau and I was able to hit speeds of 150k, which was nice. Later in the day, however, Aneel had to contend with potholes. We reached Beyneu much sooner than planned because of my speed, so we stopped for lunch. My vegetarian meal was an oily rice pilaf with chunks of meat, called plov (the oil is purported to be an aphrodisiac). Aneel gamely ate my meat and I supplemented with the cucumber-and-tomato salad which seems to be the only salad I can eat of Germany. I hate cucumbers but I am learning to tolerate them for this trip. I went to the bathroom and came back to find a Kazakh yelling at Jarek while his comrades looked amused. The women running the



restaurant castigated him and he grumbled off to another table. Another Khazak apologized on his behalf and made a flicking motion at his throat, which I had learned in a Russian phrasebook to mean that he was drunk. He shook our hands, sat at our table, and poured himself a beer. I think he asked Jarek if he followed Allah at some point.

We went to the bazaar and bought more water, apples, and plums. Aneel got us to the Uzbek border, despite the terrible road. It took half an hour to get out of Kazakhstan. We had to wait for the right official to stamp our car paperwork. I chatted with the guard who spoke English pretty well (after only a 2-month course) and everyone giggled and watched one staff member, an older woman, continually fail to stay awake at the computer. I offered American cigarettes and entertained myself by folding origami. Eventually the dude showed up after half an hour and stamped something—it took a few seconds—and we left. A set of young fellows in military garb went to look into our car. They asked for money jokingly and asked if we had drugs. After I offered to open our luggage, they waved us on and got back into their air-conditioned box. We went to passport control and a Khazak guard examined our Central Asian phrasebook. I asked if it was correct and he kept shaking his head and laughing at it. We went through my passport and talked about the pictures inside. He recognized Mount Rushmore and he even recognized the date on the Statue of Liberty's tablet as our independence day.

At the Uzbek border, we got in line behind maybe 6 cars, got the forms, and filled them out. We saw the guards make people take everything—and I mean everything—out of their cars for examination. One group had to take the carpet out of the trunk of the car so they could look underneath! To be safe, we indicated exactly how much money we had in a variety of currencies. We got back into the car and waited for about two hours. I read aloud from the Lonely Planet guide on Uzbekistan and eventually the two fellows dozed off. Aneel woke every so often to bring our car forward. Eventually, it looked like the post was closing down and it occurred to me that we might have to spend the night there.

Finally, there was just one car left next to us as the sun was setting. One of the passengers of that car talked to the guard at the post and pointed to us. For some reason, that got things moving quickly we were in Uzbekistan under ten minutes after we got into the gate. They barely looked at our customs forms and they only glanced inside one open car door at the contents of the car before continuing the game of fetch with the young German shepherd. We were told we wouldn't need car insurance in Uzbekistan. We changed money at the border—for some reason, we keep getting great rates from money changers at borders so perhaps the dollar rallied since we took our notes on exchange rates. We declined the refilled water bottles and passed out plums to the sellers. I entertained people with my finger moustache and nose ring. We drove away from the water sellers and money changers, away from the border, and away from the hot pink, orange, and purple clouds around the setting sun. Aneel drove toward the full moon, gigantic, luminous, and gravid at the horizon.

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## Camping on the Steppe

by Chris Chun on 26 Jul 2010 at 12:49

Our first night of camping on the steppe! The land was cracked and dry, spotted with shrubs and large, black beetles. The moon was so bright that we hardly needed our headlamps, and it cast shadows on the ground. It was silent. We prepared some dried meals, brushed, and got into our tents. I kept hearing something poking around near my head outside the tent and wondered if it was a rabbit—I had seen droppings earlier—snakes, or scorpions as I fell asleep. It was warm when I drifted off but I crawled into my bag later at night. The next morning, we woke and saw the land spotted with camels. After we packed our tent, I found a lime-green scorpion fussing around the area where we had slept. It scuttled into a hole as Aneel and I ran for our cameras and wouldn't come out again despite Jarek's threats.

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## Tipsy Uzbeks

by Chris Chun on 26 Jul 2010 at 20:32

Uzbekistan was my favorite country! Here's Aneel the morning after we camped on the steppe.



Look how tiny and cute he is! We tried to get to Khiva but we discovered that the bridge was closed. Helpful locals made crosses with their arms to explain that the bridge was closed to vehicles and, since it was getting dark, we had to find a hotel in Tortkol.



It took a while, but we found the only hotel! I was so happy! Jarek and Aneel warned me not to be happy until we knew we'd have a room but I was happy anyway. It was pretty empty, actually. The proprietor didn't want to tell us how much a suite with 2 beds and a bathroom (en suite) would cost. She kept hemming and hawing because she thought we'd balk at the price but she wanted \$30. Sweet.

We walked to the cafe outside the restaurant and tried to order vegetarian food without dairy for me. Lots of Uzbeks came up to try to help, and one even called a friend in another city so Jarek could talk to him in a common language. We walked to a booth and two tipsy Uzbeks invited us to their booth. We joined them since they seemed to explain they'd only bother us for a minute (it ended up being much longer). They successfully got Jarek and Aneel exceedingly drunk. They tried to convince us skip Mongolia and, instead, go over to their houses and hang out for four days until the bridge to Khiva opened again. We kept having to explain that I couldn't have any alcohol because they kept forgetting. They continued to refill Jarek's and Aneel's bowls with vodka--they didn't use glasses but small, shallow bowls instead--and everyone except me became increasingly drunk.

You can see shots of them at the bottom of the page [here](#). I had to use flash, sorry. That's probably the sixth time I've used the flash on my camera since I bought it years ago. I noticed that they were reluctant to smile for the camera and I learned later that this was pretty common for the rest of the trip. That was the first night I broke out the printer. They were so happy to get prints of themselves. The food we ordered didn't do much to buffer the alcohol and we got a little worried about how we'd be able to escape them. Aneel kept waving me away from the table and I made the excuse of putting my printer back. I retreated back into the hotel room and later Aneel and Jarek came up. Whew!

Considering how much they imbibed, they weren't too hungover the next morning. Aneel remembered that Irina, our friend who had been teaching him Russian, warned him that he'd have train his liver in addition to learning Russian. He suddenly understood what she meant.

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## Buying Gas in Uzbekistan

by Chris Chun on 27 Jul 2010 at 01:50

We drove toward Nukus, skipping gas stations that had lines and noting that many gas stations were abandoned. We figured we had plenty of gas and that we would get some more easily in Nukus. It turned out that the gas stations in Nukus had even longer lines. We stayed in one line for twenty minutes and talked to people who said it would take an hour for us to get gas if you figured 2 minutes for 30 cars. I suggested that we get lunch first, change money, and come back for the gas. Jarek said he was concerned they'd run out of gas, having seen gas lines in Communist Eastern Europe, and I thought that was unlikely. We headed into town and got pulled over by a friendly Uzbek policeman. He was curious about us and he helped us find out where to change money (bazaar, of course). We changed money at the bazaar and found a variety of street food, primarily pastries. One type of dumpling had a potato filling, not meat, so I was pleased. I paid for some tomatoes and cucumbers as well because my rice-bread-potato-pretzel diet wasn't really working out for my digestive system.

Sated, we drove off to get into the gas line again. It wasn't any longer than it was before, so we figured we were doing fine... until every one started pulling out of line! Since we were last in line, we drove to the next gas station first and ended up in the middle of a very long line. The people in the front of the previous line were last. We noticed that some of the men—we didn't see any women—were siphoning gas out of their tanks into jerry cans or old water bottles. Fool that I am, I figured I'd go and try to find out why. Jarek had to come and bail me out and we discovered that the station had a 20-liter limit for each car. They were emptying their tanks so they would have more space for that quota. Of course, that led to chatting about our trip to Mongolia, where we were from, what our car was like, etc. We were told that we could get more than 20 liters since we were tourists. Everyone else would have to get back into line again if they wanted more. They also told us to skip to the front of the line since we were tourists, but we thought it'd be fair to stay in line so Jarek and Aneel tried to find the words for equal, justice, and fair in our phrasebook (and failed).

In the meantime, I shared around some American cigarettes we had purchased for bribes since no one seemed to want them for bribes and I didn't want to have to cart them all back home. What would I do with them if I brought them home? There was a little girl, and I gave her a light-up pig key chain with our rally logo. I remembered the stick-on moustaches and put one on, then gave one to her. The men we were talking to didn't know what I was up to, so I showed them and they all took moustaches, laughing. Only a couple men put the moustaches on, some saving them for later I guess, but it was good for some laughs and Aneel got some pictures. After a little over an hour we got to the front of the line and discovered that the car before the car before us had taken the last gas. We should have skipped the line as we were encouraged to do earlier! The cars floated away and a few remained, maybe waiting for the pumps to be turned back on? As we were about to leave, one man offered to sell us gas at 12 dollars a gallon, but we declined. He went down to 8 a gallon, but we decided to look for another gas station instead. We still had 40 liters of back-up gas in the jerry cans but we didn't want to break into that just yet.

We found another gas station further down where someone had indicated there would be one earlier. It was obvious because of the enormous line of about 60 cars (Aneel counted). I walked (and walked and walked) to the front and found a man in camo, a policeman. I chatted with him and found that the limit was 30 liters. I asked if there'd be enough and he said there was plenty. After talking with him some more, he said he would let us take 50 liters. For the entire two hours, I wandered back and forth between chatting with the people around our car (including a 16-year-old who had taken 3 years of English in school) and the policeman. He graciously accepted another pack of cigarettes and I shared some gum around since we weren't really eating the gum at all. They've had gas problems since May. The gas station manager decides how much gas each person can have. The whole of Uzbekistan has this problem, but we should find the lines slightly smaller in Tashkent. I learned that very few women drive but we'd find more

female drivers in Tashkent. Only about 20% of women smoke. We chatted about our jobs, learning English, why we were going to Mongolia, etc. At one point, a taxi driver came by and he must have said another station was open because about 10 cars sped away from the line. We thought about abdicating our space but the guy behind us said his friend, who had left, would call if gas was easier to get there. He never left his place in line, so we stayed. For the next half an hour, about 10 more cars drifted off, so our wait became shorter.

Eventually, we got our gas and drove towards Khiva. Jarek never said, "I told you so." He's lovely.

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## Friendly Uzbeks and Booze

by Chris Chun on 27 Jul 2010 at 02:00

The land, which had some sand dunes before we hit Nukus and became green again, became filled with sand dunes and we even saw a mesa. I noticed an airplane sitting in the sands next to a telephone pole, which was odd. Aneel said the environment looked like Mexico. Every so often, we'd hit a verdant oasis. These oases became more frequent and suddenly the land was populated again and Jarek would have to steer around donkeys pulling carts, bikes, and people. After a turn, we heard a lot of yelling and Jarek backed the car up to discover that the bridge leading to Khiva was closed. They explained another, much longer, route and we decided to drive towards Bukhara instead while we considered our sleeping options. It was much too populated to find an unclaimed space for camping, but we weren't sure about our chances of finding a hotel.

Aneel noticed that Tor'tkol was a small city with an airport, so we stopped there and asked for directions to a hotel. We finally found one. The proprietor showed us a room with three beds and we asked for another one, perhaps with a bathroom included. She took us to a better room with a bathroom en suite and stalled on the price, repeating that it had both air conditioning and television. Finally, she quoted us \$30 (total, not each)! We happily agreed and wondered later if we were expected to bargain it down because \$30 was so expensive. After bringing up our luggage, we went down to eat. It was a group effort for us to order. Jarek did the best he could while a local called a friend in Tashkent for English translation. Other Uzbeks gathered around and tried to help. Finally, the order was sorted.

As we walked towards a booth, two tipsy Uzbeks called us over. Before we knew it, Aneel and Jarek were forced to drink vodka and beer with our meals. Our friend Irina was right when she told Aneel he'd have to train his liver as well as his Russian language skills for our travels. Aneel had enough sense to ask for bread and keep eating it to make a buffer. Jarek kept leaving the table to talk to the translator on the phone or accidentally spilling his vodka. We took pictures of each other and I got to use the portable printer (an old one that my father doesn't use anymore) to print pictures for them. They alternately tried to get us to go over to their houses to hang out or convince us to stay 4 extra days until the bridge to Khiva was fixed. They were so drunk that they kept asking our names. Eventually, we had to make an exit plan. I left first to return the printer to the room and Jarek and Aneel somehow made it back to the hotel room without further alcohol ingestion or detours into Uzbek homes.

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## Into Bukhara, Uzbekistan

by Chris Chun on 28 Jul 2010 at 11:14

It took a while for us to find a place serving breakfast in Tor'tkul. When we finally found one, we ended up with something that was pretty much lunch. I had my 2,309th tomato and cucumber salad. Jarek somehow ordered a kilo of meat, which ultimately wasn't finished in favor of not feeling so heavy during the drive to Bukhara. Like the restaurant in Astrakhan, the staff insisted on playing extraordinarily loud music. We could barely hear ourselves talking. After we ate, we went back to our hotel and cleaned the dust off of the windows. Even though it was my turn to drive, Aneel got into the driver's seat and got us out of Tor'tkul and towards Bukhara.

We drove away from the green and entered the arid conditions we had seen earlier. Often, we'd find ourselves behind a truck blowing sand all around, so it was hard for Aneel to see. Sometimes the wind would blow the sand into the road, which also decreased visibility. Aneel got us through all of this like a champ, though. We saw lines at gas stations for a while but decided not to worry until we had less gas in our tank. We stopped in Gasli, figuring it would have gas, but we were told it didn't have any. Two Italians on motorcycles stopped by and asked us if we knew anything about the situation in Kyrgystan (we didn't). The family where we stopped had an eagle (golden eagle?) tied to a tree. It looked pretty undignified and peeved. They let me take pictures of them and I gave the kid one of the

flashlight pig keychains. The friendly Uzbek truck driver, who gave us the low-down on the gas, gave us three small white balls as snacks. Jarek and Aneel tried theirs, and they seemed to be balls of cheesy salt. Since we didn't know when we'd see a gas station, we decided to transfer 15 liters of the gas from our jerry can to the car, which was kind of messy until Jarek cut a better funnel from an old water bottle.

We came across a trucker whose back wheel had come off entirely, leaving a scar in the tarmac. He declined a ride from a van, so we knew he'd pass over a ride from us. We offered him some water, which he took, and we sped away. As we passed, I noticed the cab of his truck was gone, so I assumed someone else had gone on to get help and he was left to watch the truck. We got closer to Bukhara and Aneel noticed a woman and her son looking to hitchhike. We had picked up two young adolescents in Kazakhstan and that went well, so we decided to do it again. They had a hard time figuring out the seatbelts, trying to get into the loop instead of taking the loop across the body. The mother paid at the end of the ride, so that was Aneel's first foray into taxi driving.

To our surprise, we found a gas station that was open and didn't have a line! Everyone there was super nice, from station attendants to other customers. Despite the sign that said we couldn't fill the jerry can with gas from the pumps, they let us do it. We took lots of pictures with each other and I passed out gum. I saw a little girl and decided to give her stickers. When I got the stickers and went to find her, I was disappointed to find she was gone. However, she ran back into sight with apples in her hand to give to us. Nice trade!

Jarek was navigator as we headed into Bukhara. Unfortunately, the map didn't indicate which were one-way streets or pedestrian-only streets. We somehow ended up with a 10-year-old Uzbek boy in our car giving us directions. He told us to go left when he meant right and vice versa. He had us park and then walk into the old city, but it seemed like he didn't really know where the hotel was after all—just a general idea. I saw a sign for the hotel, so it worked out. Aneel gave the kid the money he earned from being a taxi earlier. The hotel was lovely, with a 19th-century dining room with faded, but elaborate decorations. We walked around and took pictures. When the sun set and I had to rely on a higher ISO for my pictures, I suggested that Aneel and I put on an acrobatic show for the kids running around. The kids and moms enjoyed our performance, and one brave girl even did a trick with me. We went back to the hotel for a dinner prepared with vegetarians in mind.

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## Yay, Bukhara!

by Chris Chun on 29 Jul 2010 at 02:18

We saw an Uzbek family in a yurt on the way to Bukhara. I waved and they waved back.



It turns out that pretty much everyone in Uzbekistan will wave back if you wave to them. Since waving at people is one of my favorite past times, this worked out pretty well for me. The plentiful waving is one of the reasons Uzbekistan was my favorite country. Another reason was that the cities we visited were really photogenic. I didn't



really enjoy taking any pictures until I got to Bukhara. Before Bukhara, I was just taking pictures because I felt like I should. Bukhara reminded me of Fez and Marrakech because of the [architecture](#), of course, but it was much cleaner, brighter, wider, and emptier. Tons of [children](#) ran around in the open spaces and people leisurely rolled around on [bicycles](#).



This man is talking on his phone and you can see some women and kids in the background. Later, I talked Aneel into doing an [acro](#) performance for these kids. They loved it. After acro, the sun was setting so Aneel and I got shots while Jarek stood around being his infinitely adorable and patient self.





More shots [here](#), including a [baker](#) at night, an [Uzbek kitty](#), [Jarek](#) making nice with a kid, and the [kid](#) looking at me because he doesn't know what to make of Jarek.

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## Bukhara to Samarkand

by Chris Chun on 29 Jul 2010 at 16:22

The next day, we had a lovely breakfast and walked all over Bukhara. Jarek was, as usual, patient while the photographers got the shots they wanted. Aneel had been taking tons of pictures during the whole trip but I had only been taking a few shots here and there out of a sense of obligation. It wasn't until we arrived in the splendid Bukhara that I felt the photographic urge, so that was nice. At lunch, the server was fascinated by Aneel's iPad. Aneel showed him the features and the server noted that it was similar to the iPhone. Aneel agreed and pulled out his iPhone to compare. The young man's eyes popped! He asked if he could play with it and then tried to get Aneel to sell it to him for \$100. Aneel declined, but every time he came to bring a dish or clear the table, he'd ask again. It was pretty entertaining.

Between sightseeing, buying gifts for my family, and taking pictures, I disseminated stickers to the kids all over the city. Even some adolescents were happy to put stickers on their shirts. I took a bunch of pictures of the kids near the hotel and compensated them with prints from the travel printer my father let me use for the trip. The printer caught the interest of the family running the hotel, so I took some shots of them and gave them prints as well. The teen working the desk asked if I'd print some photos for him the next morning and I said I would. I expected him to print pictures of his friends, but he wanted to print pictures of his grandparents, his siblings, and I guess his niece. It was really sweet. Unfortunately, at breakfast, we couldn't get the printer to play nice with his photos. It wasn't until after two downloaded drivers that I could get it to work.

This delayed our departure from Bukhara, and I wasn't driving terribly quickly, so we didn't get into Samarkand until the afternoon. I've never seen so many police before! They either ignore us or wish us luck on our journey. As in the past, police waved us through the border check points. However, Aneel had to go in and register the car at one check point, which we hadn't been required to do before. In the meantime, a police officer talked to us. He asked if Jarek was my "I love you," and I responded that Jarek was, indeed, "muy moosh." I read that another rally team had heard "I love you" as the word for "spouse." The police was disappointed that we hadn't any "kinder" and he said he had 5 kids when I asked him if he had any kinder. He gave Jarek a talking-to. It was a lovely and amusing chat, but Aneel came back and then we were on our way again.

I didn't last very long in the driver's seat. My butt became tired quickly and I felt like I hadn't slept enough the night before. The roads weren't terrible but the rough bits coincided with my full bladder, so that wasn't good. Jarek took over and promptly got pulled over for going 91 in a 70. Oops. They don't post signs with the speed limit, so we figure the speeds are public knowledge—public knowledge that we don't have. We just do the best we can with other cars as cues. He didn't seem mean, though. We responded "American" to his question, "Francais?" and then he waved us on as though we hadn't done anything at all even though a ticket and fine would have been warranted. I promised we'd be more careful and Jarek slowed down going into Samarkand.

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## Kids in Bukhara

by Chris Chun on 29 Jul 2010 at 22:32

This is one of my favorite shots from the whole trip!



The girl in the middle was the only one who would stay still.



I gave out stickers because I knew I'd eat all the candy by the 3rd day of the rally if I tried distributing candy to children. This kid wasn't wearing anything but his underwear so he just stuck them on his belly.





It was neat because teenagers--older than kids in the group shot above--wanted stickers, too. You're never too old for stickers!



This girl is wearing a plastic chili pepper on a safety pin. They are good for warding off the evil eye. After I took pictures of the kids and printed them, I went back and gave them some more sticker sheets. It's funny because out of all the themed stickers, which were unfortunately split into the blue and pink pack and gendered, not a single child or adult on the whole trip voluntarily picked any sticker from the police theme page.

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## Samarkand

**by Chris Chun on 29 Jul 2010 at 23:27**

Sorry about the boring titles. I'm trying to get these up as quickly as possible.

We had a hard time finding the hotel so Aneel asked a cop for directions. The cop said he'd get into the car to help us locate it and we eventually found it with his help. We walked to the Registran and ogled three azure-tiled medressas. A woman came up and offered to be a guide for the equivalent of \$4. We agreed and it was one of our best decisions! She knew so much! She even answered questions that weren't relevant to the history or architecture of the place. She explained that chili peppers acted against the evil eye. This answered Aneel's question about why they were on trinkets in Bukhara. I asked why women drew unibrows with eye makeup and she said it was a protective act. She took us into shops, which were set up in the old students' rooms in the medressa. She likely got a cut of whatever we purchased, but we still learned a great deal about ceramics, instruments, and embroidery. Someone showed us an astrolabe from the early 19th century but, since he didn't know how to use it, he just disassembled it and put it back together for us. I asked him how he got it and he said it was a secret. Near the end of the tour, she asked what my relationship was to my two companions. I explained that Jarek was "muy moosh" and Aneel was my friend and acrobatic partner. Of course, she wanted to see us do tricks so Aneel and I did some tricks in the middle of the medressa while shopkeepers and tourists looked on and applauded. Not bad for no warm up and no practice for

months! Aneel executed pops perfectly and he didn't drop me into the rose bushes. Again, thanks to Jarek's limitless patience for these shenanigans.

We struck a deal with a guard to pay some money to go up the stair of a leaning tower. The guards pocket the money for this, so we knew we'd be able to bargain with him. After climbing up the tower and working our way back down, we walked back to the hotel before dinner. Some young women accosted me and I assumed they wanted me to take pictures of them together but it turned out they wanted to take pictures with me. I don't know why. Was it because I'm Chinese? Because I'm so short? Because my hair, which becomes bigger and bigger the dirtier it gets, was being particularly huge and unruly? One of the women talked to us and it turns out she wanted to practice her English with us. She was getting married in a few days and she would return to the United States, where she had studied abroad for a year. She invited us to her wedding but we'd be in Kazakhstan by then. She was surprised that Jarek wasn't our Russian language guide and that he was, in fact, "muy moosh." This has actually surprised quite a few people; I guess they don't see interracial relationships very often.

We went to dinner and Aneel had to wait 30–50 minutes for his meal. Eventually, he received what looked like a chicken–fried pork chop. It was a very fatty cut, and we discussed the possibility that fatty cuts were considered good cuts, taking into account the fatty cuts Aneel received at dinner for the previous night. The server from the night before seemed surprised that Aneel had eaten only the lean parts, and I tried to pilfer the leftovers to sneak to the mewling kittens that were begging for food or playing with Aneel's shoelaces or backpack straps earlier. I noticed a woman in a belly dance outfit going into the dining room (we were seated outside) so I went to look. The large dining room consisted of females from young girls to grandmothers. I think I saw one man busy at his meal, but otherwise ignoring the belly dancers. Four belly dancers worked the room, plucking money from the women seated at the tables. The server finally got us our check and we went back to the hotel. Tashkent tomorrow!

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## Cursed Headlights!

by Chris Chun on 31 Jul 2010 at 23:15

We took some time in the morning to visit some other sites in Samarkand. We saw old mosques that had not been restored, which was captivating in a different way than the restored buildings of the Registan we saw yesterday. There was a gigantic Koran book stand, under which women are supposed to crawl in hopes of bearing many children (I didn't crawl under). On our way to a mausoleum, we came across some Uzbeks who wanted to practice their English. One said that he learned a great deal of English by listening to pop songs by Enrique Iglesias and the Backstreet Boys. He gave us his e-mail address and I gave him our rally website. When we got to the mausoleum, we read a list of rules about respectful behavior. Most of the rules were to be expected, but there was one rule against leaving money on the tombs. Our guide from yesterday explained that people leave money on old things, which explains why we saw money tucked into the bark of an ancient mulberry tree in Bukhara a few days earlier. As we entered the mausoleums, we found that many people opted to ignore this rule. It's great seeing Islamic art and architecture with Aneel since he knows so much about it.

We sat in another gas line before heading off to Tashkent. It took an hour and a half to get gas. In the meantime, I talked to the other people—all men—in the lines. We ended up taking pictures together and I printed them from my portable printer. Everyone was super nice and I was offered vodka from little bowls but I declined and accepted soda or bubbly water instead. Jarek drove us to Tashkent, having to steer around more people, donkey carts, vans, etc. than in previous roads. We noticed that honking has become more frequent the further east we go. This should match up with my understanding of driving in China and the Philippines, which involves honking for any and every reason possible.

Since we entered Uzbekistan, people have been flashing their headlights at us. Usually this is to indicate a speed trap, but we knew something else was up and we eventually understood our lights were supposed to be off. We can't turn the running lights off, though, so we figured we'd bear the flashing and get on with it. Unfortunately, the single mean cop in Uzbekistan (the rest are friendly and smiling) decided he wanted to get a bribe for any reason possible. He even messed with the controls in the car and saw that it wasn't going to turn off once we turned the engine on. Unfortunately, Jarek let on that he knew Russian and he couldn't play dumb. We agreed to pay the \$10 bribe—our smallest one so far, since mine was \$20 and Aneel's was \$30—and continue our journey to Tashkent, as it was getting dark. Jarek was peeved but it was a small price and he got his first one out of the way. Though it wasn't too bad the first time we went through Kazakhstan and Russia, we understand the police will be worse.

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# Uzbek Money

by Chris Chun on 31 Jul 2010 at 23:49

We finally made it to our hotel after Jarek tried driving on the sidewalk. He said this was the norm in ex-Soviet places, and that he was sure we would be fine... until the wheels dipped into the deep gutter next to the sidewalk. Our 4-wheel drive and excellent tires got us out and we entered the do-not-enter gate to get to our hotel instead. We had a late, expensive dinner in the restaurant of the hotel, which looked uncannily similar to Denny's back home (unheimlich, talk about the return of the repressed!). Later, at breakfast in the same restaurant, they were playing the same dance music. It's never too early or too late for a dance party in Uzbekistan. The hotel staff wanted us to pay for our rooms and we discovered that the price in Uzbek sums was 28% less than the price in dollars, based on the exchange rates we had been getting from money changers at the bazaars.

So, we went out to the bazaar via the only subway system in all of Central Asia. Unlike in the past, we couldn't find any money changers and hoards were not approaching us offering to change money. Perhaps this is because of the huge police presence. I've never seen so many police in one day, and it felt like I saw more police than the rest of the trip thus far. We weren't having any luck so I suggested that we get some lunch and walk around some more. I stopped for potato dumplings and asked the proprietor where we could change money. It turns out he was happy to change the money for us at a better rate than the two previous changes. I have a feeling many, many Uzbeks would be willing to change sums for dollars. He gave Aneel a few bricks worth of Uzbek money, we had lunch, and went back to the hotel.

We counted out the hotel bill and Jarek and I stuck the money in a plastic bag and went down to pay. As they were counting, I asked the hotel staff if anyone carried wallets and she said no. The stacks of bills didn't fit, so everyone carried bricks of money in their pockets or in plastic bags, which is what I had observed. Each 1000 bill is the equivalent of \$0.50 and we haven't seen any coins. We've found some 500, 200, and 100 bills but sometimes cashiers cannot even make that kind of change so we shrug and let them keep the change—cents to us. We asked her if the money had always been like that and she said yes. We wonder why they won't print bigger bills.

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# Uzbek History

by Chris Chun on 31 Jul 2010 at 23:53

We walked around Tashkent, mostly the huge squares dotted with fountains. Everything was sanitized and wide open. The lawns and gardens were perpetually watered, and we had to walk around excess liquid streaming onto the concrete. I don't know when they turn the water off. They had planted pine trees but they had to put up shades for each of them because the sun was too harsh.

We found the Uzbek history museum, which covered the Stone Age through contemporary Uzbekistan. Some of the displays looked like history projects from high school, but there was a ton of English translation and I learned a lot. As the exhibits entered the time after they gained independence from the Soviets, they became less cohesive, comically so. They had this one display that only consisted of pictures of their president shaking hands with other heads of state. George W. Bush (two thumbs down so far from a Russian border guard and a Uzbek waiting in a gas line) was also shown shaking hands, but his name was spelled Jeorge. Aneel found a display that had random scans of degrees or certificates of participation with the names blanked out, one of which was from a small college in Michigan.

We splurged and took a taxi back to the hotel (\$1.50) and did nothing until dinner time. We found a place that served pretty much the same food as every other place but it was different in that there was a dance performance. (We did get some more salty cheese balls that no one wanted.) None of the customers really paid attention to the women dancing except for us, and of course we were enthralled. No one clapped at the end of each act, either, and I had to restrain myself because I wanted to applaud so badly. I tried to get a video but the light was reflecting off of so many sequins that I don't think any of the videos came out. The last act was a belly dancing performance, and the women walked around to the tables to collect money. We sat around, digested, and wrote postcards to our most generous donors before heading back to the hotel.

Now it is breakfast and we are heading for the Uzbek-Kazakh border. Here's to hoping it won't take 6 hours and too many "fines."

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# So close...

**by Aneel Nazareth on 01 Aug 2010 at 06:49**

It's a little depressing to pass a sign at 4 pm that says "Shymkent 95 km, Tashkent 20 km" when you left Tashkent for Shymkent at 9 am and have already driven about 200 km. The map shows several border crossings north between the two cities, but whenever we got close to one of them police told us we wouldn't be able to take the car through. They told us that the nearest crossing where we could take the car into Kazakhstan was 80 km southwest, near a town called Chinoz. We ended up driving down there, having lunch in a cafe under loudly-buzzing power lines, and heading to the border.

Apart from several hours of extra driving to get down to Chinoz and then back up on the other side of the border (where we saw that sign), the crossing went pretty well. Getting out of Uzbekistan was easy. Getting in to Kazakhstan involved some forms and a customs check. I was directed to an official who insisted on "helping me" to fill out my paperwork for a small cash payment (even though I'd come prepared with pre-filled copies of the forms from the previous entry to Kazakhstan). Customs was a little more thorough in their check than usual. I had to take all of the luggage out of the back of the car and show the guards what was in the spare tire compartment. Chris has packed a lot of the emergency supplies into that area, so they poked around a bit there. A border guard asked me what was in a container of baby wipes, so I opened it for him and he asked if he could keep it. I said sure. He also asked if my Clif bars were chocolate and asked to keep a couple of those. I don't think he was happy when he actually tasted them and found that they were chocolate flavored, rather than chocolate bars.

When we finally got to Shymkent, we looked around for a cafe that Chris had read had good vegetarian options. It wasn't where it was supposed to be, so we settled for an inviting-looking cafe with a different name. A close inspection of the menu determined that it was, in fact, the same place. They'd changed the name of the restaurant, but not the names of their specials.

Chris bumped into someone in the line for the bathroom who spoke English... it turned out she was a Peace Corps worker from Florida! We had a great chat about what we were doing and what she was doing. She gave us lots of good information about this part of Kazakhstan, including some places in Almaty to check out.

We hit the road again, hoping to make Taraz, as scheduled. Unfortunately, dark fell rapidly (oops... new time zone!) and we were on a mountainous road with lots of turns and lots of trucks. We decided to stop for the night in the next town along the way. There were a few false starts. The first hotel we found was fully booked by a wedding party. Eventually we stopped and Chris and Jarek found some people to ask. They pointed us a few kilometers further down the road, where we found a hotel. Unfortunately, the hotel only had one bed free. Fortunately I have all of my camping gear with me, so sleeping on the floor is almost as comfortable as sleeping in a bed.

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## Uzbek People

**by Chris Chun on 01 Aug 2010 at 06:52**

Click on the blog title to get the full entry and pictures if pictures aren't coming up.

Many, many women in Uzbekistan had unibrows. Most were penciled in, but some women were lucky enough to have natural unibrows. Our guide in Samarkand said something about how the unibrows would help the women get into heaven or something. I said Jarek would get into heaven for sure, but she said it only applied to women.



Uzbek men and women boasted gold teeth. I read somewhere that women got gold teeth from their husbands when they got married, so you can tell single women by their un-gold teeth. I also read that the prohibitive cost of getting a new wife a set of gold teeth prevented wives from being divorced by their husbands.



This guy was at a gas station. Most of the gas stations in Central Asia were set up so you could only talk to the gas station attendant through a tiny window. He let us fill our jerry cans even though there was a sign as big as me saying

that wasn't allowed.



I loved getting portraits and my subjects loved getting prints of themselves!





These last two people worked at the B&B in Bukhara. Some of my Uzbek portraits are [here](#) and I'll be posting way more soon.

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## Expando-Entry!

**by Chris Chun on 01 Aug 2010 at 17:54**

Aneel already updated but I had already typed one of my typically verbose entries, so it's going up anyway. It took a little over 2 hours to negotiate the Uzbek-Kazakh border! As in the past, short border processing seems to have a price. The border should have been less than an hour away from Tashkent, but the friendly Uzbek police en route told us we couldn't get into Kazakhstan the way we were going and they advised that we take another route. We gave them some cigarettes in gratitude, because it would have been a waste of time to arrive there and discover that for ourselves. Once we got to the other route, which didn't take very long, the locals told us we couldn't cross there either. One man offered to get into the car and drive with us to the border crossing, which was at least an hour away. He said he would do it for \$50 and lowered down to \$30, but we had maps so we declined. So we drove back west through Uzbekistan (we had been working our way east) and finally found a border crossing. It was time to eat so we had food. We parked the car and when we emerged, we heard a buzzing sound. We looked up and saw power lines hovering above us, humming treacherously. Exciting!

We went into the cafe (which had yet another kitten roaming the floors). I spied two sisters—like a pair of sparrows—so of course I passed out stickers. Then I took out the portable printer so I took photos and made prints for everyone. First the girls had portraits done, then their female relatives. One of the sisters was impatient and kept grabbing for the print when it wasn't ready. I realized it was my first time communicating (or gesturing, really) with women and girls. The sisters dragged out their grandfather and sat with him and their grandmother for a portrait. I requested a photo of just the grandparents and the grandfather kept snaking his arm around the older women, who

would blush and push him away. It was funny. Unfortunately, Jarek and Aneel, who were anxious to make the border crossing, had to wait for me to finish printing so I have to be more careful about timing in the future. A family being served in their restaurant asked if I would print photos, and they offered to pay. I ultimately declined, pointing to my imaginary watch.

Leaving Uzbekistan wasn't too difficult. After they finished the paperwork, the guards jokingly asked for a bribe and, since the process had been simple, we were anxious not to return home with the cigarettes we had brought, cheerfully gave them a few boxes. We drove on and saw buildings stuffed with people and forms. Jarek and I got into the line while Aneel asked around for the procedure. He must have performed some magic because he found a fellow who coached us through our forms. As I finished, two ancient, be-scarved, and be-formed women came up to me and started talking to me. I didn't know what she meant and our guardian fellow tried to shoo them away, but I realized she was illiterate and couldn't fill out her forms herself. I took their forms and started transferring letters I didn't know how to write when I realized they'd be better off finding someone who knew the language or someone who, at the very least, had studied the Cyrillic alphabet as Aneel had instructed her to do weeks earlier. I made apologetic faces and noises and gave them my black pen. I felt bad but I saw another man start on their forms as Aneel and Jarek were finishing up.

I drew a breath and headed back towards the formidable line, but Jarek told me Aneel said we didn't have to wait in the line. I chased the two fellows as they squeezed to the front of the line, through confused and irritated bodies who had been waiting for who-knows-how-long. I tried making apologetic faces as I went through but I wasn't apologetic enough to get in the back of the line. Thinking back on it, I still feel guilty! Aneel said we didn't have to wait in the line because they were processing a busload and we were not on the bus. I was afraid we were getting special treatment for being Americans, which wouldn't be fair. Anyway, our papers were processed quickly and we headed to another booth with another line, which we jumped as well and I tried to cushion with my apologetic faces. Just like the last time we entered the Kazakh border, we separated from Aneel and walked through the rest of the paperwork—the Kazakhs must have some rule about people walking through the border rather than driving through. We found ourselves at the back of another line that we weren't sure were were allowed to jump and, frankly, I thought it was fair to do my penance at some point despite the heat.

The problem with lines in Central Asia (as far as I can tell) is that the line isn't really a line. It's more like a clump and if you're accustomed to queuing instead of clumping, you find people getting in front of you. I've had practice so, even though I am relatively small, I am usually skilled at preventing clumpers from getting in front of me. (Hints: coordinate with your partner, stick to the person in front of you, put your hands on your hips with your elbows out, and use baggage to extend your domain.) However, I still felt guilty about skipping ahead earlier, which conflicted with my natural instinct not to lose my place in line. A guard saved me from my internal struggle by beckoning us forward. I didn't feel guilty enough to stay in line and we got through customs pretty quickly after that, though one officer noted the discrepancy in our Kazakh visas: Jarek had been given 2 months and I only got 1 month. This is something we noted earlier and we didn't know why. Was it because they thought I was Korean?

Tangent: I discovered later that the Korean diaspora had reached into Almaty. We even enjoyed Korean salads from a bazaar in Almaty! We noticed that the cuisines of Central Asia, like Europe, didn't have the tongue-scorching spice of the Thai or Mexican foods I avoid in California. The cranky Korean woman dispensing her salads and pickles in plastic bags at the bazaar in Almaty had toned down the heat and the results were perfect for me! We saw that the car was still parked behind us, so we went towards it after we finished. Guards motioned us forward. We walked on a bit and stopped to gaze back at the car, hopeful Aneel would emerge and take the car with him. Some more guards told us to keep walking, so we played this game with different guards over and over, trudging forward as little as possible so we could keep an eye on the car. We noticed that Aneel was emptying the hatch in the back, which he described in his post.

Eventually we found ourselves out of the border post, car and Aneel out of sight. I gave some rally stickers to the people outside the post, who were selling refreshments or offering taxis. They put the stickers on their shirts or baseball caps, and I took a picture of them. I love how everyone, even adults, appreciate stickers. I gave one of Phil's stickers to a woman and she put it on the front of her cooler and posed for pictures. Aneel finally drove up with the car and headed to the shack selling insurance. He splurged and paid for 15 days (\$6) of insurance even though we'd need perhaps 7 at the most. I noticed that the television in the shack had a sticker of Bruce Lee and next to a sticker of our home state's governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger (did I mention that his name is on my degree?) as Conan. I gave him one of Phil's stickers as well, which I adhered carefully next to Bruce.

Insured, we drove into Kazakhstan for the second time. The grass turned yellow immediately, as if it had misplaced the green a mile behind us in Uzbekistan. We saw horses galloping about and lots of rolling hills. We aimed for Shymkent, optimistic that we'd have dinner there and then drive on to Taraz where we'd find a hotel. We walked past a sign for a future Guns 'N' Roses pub and eventually found a restaurant. On my way to the bathroom, I met a Peace



Corps volunteer from Florida, Sipra. She had just finished a year in Shimkent and she had one more year to go before returning back to the States. Not only did she help us order in Russian, she gave us some recommendations for Almaty as well. We told her about the rally and she admired Aneel's iPad, which she hadn't seen because she left before it debuted. We exchanged farewells and headed off to Taraz.

As often happens at night, it got dark. This normally wouldn't be a problem, but we were contending with serpentine roads, sloth trucks at the fore, and anxious cars aft. It was too populated to camp, at least that's what we guessed because we couldn't actually see anything. We asked around for directions to a hotel and finally found one, after declining a friendly Kazakh's offer to stay at his house and unsuccessfully trying to find a room in a hotel booked for a wedding. Despite the fact that the entire hotel seemed unoccupied other than us and the family, there was only one room available. Jarek and I took the bed, which was as hard as the floor, and Aneel took the floor, which was as hard as the bed. We were off early the next morning.

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## Now **\*this\***...

by Aneel Nazareth on 02 Aug 2010 at 12:52

Now **this** is what I was hoping Kazakhstan looked like: rolling golden hills, with patchworks of dark and light from the giant clouds overhead, purple mountains in the background, apple trees in the foreground. The occasional horse-cart laden with hay. Goats; sheep; cows; seemingly-unattended horses running along village streets.

We got up early at our hotel 100 km south of Taraz and hit the road. Taraz wasn't what we expected, but we had a pretty good brunch there and continued on to Almaty through canyoned grassland. We picked up a couple of hitchhikers (or "unofficial taxi" customers, it's hard to tell what the custom is here) going to Кордай, and they prevented us from taking an unnecessary detour through Шы.

All of our maps claim that the road we took crosses into Kyrgyzstan, but our passengers assured us that it was only in Kazakhstan. I'm skeptical, since we spent some time on the wrong side of the barbed wire, and some of the road markers had Kyrgyz colors on our left, rather than on our right. But... no trouble along the road.

We picked up another hitcher after we dropped them off and he saved us from another wrong turn (the street we wanted was under a bridge that we would have otherwise gone over, had he not warned us). Our hotel in Almaty turns out to be a bit further from the center than we thought, but it's half the price of the ones closer and has free wifi...

It looks like none of my recent phone posts have made it through, so I'll have to go back and fill things in. But sleep is in order first.

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## Taraz to Almaty

by Chris Chun on 02 Aug 2010 at 21:03

Jarek drove first, getting us into Taraz for lunch. The bustling city center wasn't bustling at all, and we found a cafe next to a school. The fellows had dumplings and I had a mashed potato dish with vinegared carrots. When I went to pay, I saw the mom put down some pastries to cool. I asked if they were potato pastries (potato is one of the five words I know in Russian) and she said yes, so I had my very first hot potato pastry. It was as greasy as the cold ones I'd had before, but the heat made the grease more bearable. I burnt my cheek with the steam flowing out of the pastry and I wondered if I was back on the all-carb diet for Kazakhstan. I got to drive next, which was fun because the roads were long and flat, and I could pass slow trucks easily and get back to the 120 kph speed I liked so much while singing along to my songs that Aneel and Jarek didn't like so much.

I picked up two hitchhikers who encouraged us to take a road to Almaty that we weren't going to take since we thought it would route us through Kyrgyzstan, for which we didn't have visas. They assured us that we would be fine and, indeed, we were. We noticed loads of silvery barbed wire along some of the roads and Aneel said that he saw colors on posts that matched up to Kyrgyzstan's or Kazakhstan's flags, so perhaps there was some funny business about borders after all. Aneel took the wheel after a few hours and dropped off our passengers. Later, he picked up another one as we entered Almaty. I taught the young man how to make an origami flapping crane. When I showed him how to make his crane flap, his face burst into the same delight that my students would get when I taught arts

and crafts at a camp in the summers of my youth. I showed him how to make stars as well, and then made him a lily, balloon, and dragon as gifts. I gave him extra paper so he could try it at home. He discovered that we were going to stay at a hotel and he said the hotel would take all of our money, and that we should stay with him instead or at least go to a different hotel he could recommend. Kazakhs are so hospitable! We insisted on staying at the hotel we'd found online (wifi was guaranteed), so he helped us make the right turn to find our hotel and, after we found the hotel, he left. Aneel pointed out that all of our hitchhikers that day saved us time since they helped us with directions.

The next day we went to the Republicka Square and saw the statue of the Golden Man (though some studies suggest the warrior is a woman) atop a winged snow leopard. We had lunch at a noodle place Sipra recommended, which was next to yet another Guns 'N' Roses pub, and I had some broccoli, which I had been craving at least 8 countries back. It wasn't cheap but at least we could pay with credit card, which we couldn't use at all in Uzbekistan (though the food was so cheap in Uzbekistan that using a card wouldn't really have been worth it after all the fees). Jarek expressed interest in a geological museum and we found it. After handing over the equivalent \$2 for our three entrance fees, a surly woman took a break from her tea and led us into a heavy-duty, ancient elevator. She closed the grate and we descended. When we landed, we were in a mock mine. A huge metal cart on wheels was stuffed with a variety of rocks. Next to it was a table with more rocks, some mining equipment, a notebook, and headlamps. As we were marveling, an old man led Aneel to a map. We discovered that each button on a panel below the map corresponded to a resource: oil, gold, diamonds, aluminum, uranium, zinc, pretty much every mineral I could list off the top of my head and then some. When you pushed the button, the lights would indicate where in Kazakhstan that resource was to be found. Wow. I thought they were rich just because of the oil, but they are filled to the brim with other good stuff. I wonder how getting it out will impact the economy as well as the environment. The old man walked from case to case, explaining the contents of the cases in Russian. Of course, I could translate the Russian words for minerals into English very easily, but I could understand him remarkably well when he told stories or facts about the minerals as well. I didn't need Jarek or Aneel to translate that much. The great thing about this museum was that you could touch many specimens. He even let us pick up and put down rocks that, for some reason, were universally displayed on glass tables.

Oh! I asked him about the tattoo near his hand, since I had been seeing similar tattoos consisting of symbols or letters on the hands and wrists of other older men as well. He explained that it was from his military days, which corroborated the guess I had made by cobbling together bits and pieces of information from a variety of places online. Most of what I found on the internet was about the elaborate language of tattoos for Russian convicts and mafia members, which didn't match up to the simple tattoos I had seen on grandfatherly men who seemed more likely to have built prisons instead of inhabited them.

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## More Almaty

by Chris Chun on 03 Aug 2010 at 07:26

Later, we took a cable car up to the side of a mountain to find a place that felt like a casual amusement park without a fee. It had a play area for kids, Kazakh souvenirs, junk food, small rides, a table tennis court, fountains, ponds, amazing views of Almaty, a statue of the Beatles, a huge apple (Almaty is the birthplace of apples, a zoo, etc. I was sure the place would have cotton candy and, sure enough, Aneel spied some kids with cotton candy just as I had given up hope of finding the confection. I tracked it down and a man made a new one for me. Bees walked all over the crusty, caramelized sides of the cotton candy machine. Underneath, you could see some ex-bees were entombed in a sweet, sweet death.

We got back down into the city and we decided to try hitching a ride like locals. After a few minutes of sticking out my hand, a van came by and the driver said he'd take us to the bazaar for 300 kzt. This bazaar was more difficult to navigate than the other bazaars we had seen in Uzbekistan. I had grown fond of the laundry soap bar I got in Bukhara so I picked up another one. Aneel didn't like his bar so I am hoping to pilfer his as well.

By the way, we've been doing laundry in sinks and I'm really good at it! It's nice knowing the arms I earned in aials have some practical applications. Unfortunately, doing all this laundry accelerates the loss of my aials calluses and I'm down to my last layer of callus. It's going to be painful building those back up. Anyway, I work the wet, soapy clothes like I'm wedging clay, putting special effort into underwear and socks by soaping them individually and rubbing them together. As I finish rinsing out the soap and dirt, I hand the laundry to Jarek, who squeezes them over the bathtub. For pants, we employ "the Chunski squeeze," which is where we each take an end and twist. A lot of this is like parts of felting. So, if you have a background in ceramics, felting, and aials, you should be great at hand-washing laundry.

In addition to laundry soap, we picked up some odd Russian notebooks, fresh pomegranate juice, and Korean salads, which I mentioned earlier. Aneel thought he saw a London-to-Tashkent rallier we'd met in the Guns 'N' Roses pub in Atyrau and he was right! This guy was one of the few Americans at the pub. I chased him down and we chatted for a bit before going our separate ways (again). We had dinner at a Georgian restaurant. It wasn't cheap, but it had excellent vegetarian food. My favorite was grilled eggplant rolled around some kind of walnut-based pate. I discovered later that Almaty was one of the more expensive cities in the world, which explains why hotel and food costs were not as cheap as we were hoping.

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## Registering Visas in Almaty

by Chris Chun on 03 Aug 2010 at 11:35

When we got back to the hotel, we discovered that registering visas was not only expensive (\$33 each), it would take until the following evening. Since it only took a couple of hours to register our visas in Astrakhan, Bukhara, Samarkand, and Tashkent, we didn't think anything of waiting until our second (and last) night in Almaty rather than getting it done as soon as we arrived. We were faced with a third night in Almaty, putting us two days behind schedule instead of one. The woman at the desk said that the man who picked up the passports for visa registration would arrive between midnight and 1 a.m., and he spoke English, so she'd have him call us in our room. At 1:20 a.m., we went downstairs because he never called and it was because he never arrived at the hotel.

We decided to call the "inviting agency" listed on our visas in the morning. They quoted us a fraction of the price and they said it would be done that day. When we arrived, they said it might not be done until the following night! We had to stay an extra night in Almaty already and, if we had to wait until the next night, we'd be even further off schedule. We didn't really have any choice, since the fines at the border would probably amount to \$100 per person, and we needed to get it done if we were staying in Kazakhstan for more than five days.

We dropped off our passports and headed to the Museum of Kazakh Repression, hoping for the unlikelihood that we'd get a call saying the registrations were complete by that evening. Unfortunately, it was closed, so we went to the Kazakh State History Museum that was closed when we tried to go the day before. Unlike the Uzbek museum, which started with the Stone Age, the Kazakh museum started with fossils of early sea life, dinosaurs, etc. Eventually, it worked through periods in history including the Mongols and Soviets. I loved the exhibit with traditional clothes and cultural artifacts. Elements of a nomadic culture manifested in the smallest details, such as curved leather containers to keep fragile porcelain bowls intact for travel. (By the way, we had been drinking tea out of small bowls, not cups, while in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.)

One exhibit featured a huge number of cultures who made their homes in Kazakhstans: Kazakhs, Tatars, Jewish people, Kurds, Russians, Koreans, Poles, and more. It was pretty impressive. The final exhibit was about Nazarbaev, Kazakhstan's leader since 1989. He has been president since Kazakhstan became independence (last to declare independence post-Soviet break up). He has won elections (in which he was the only choice) and they've made a constitutional amendment to allow him to reign for as long as he'd like, though all presidents thereafter are limited to two terms. They showed photos of him with a variety of heads of state, letters from embassies, gifts from countries. The best pieces in the exhibit are the large ceremonial plate and face bearing his face, though the tapestries of his visage are pretty impressive as well.

Tired, we somehow located a cab (after being rejected by quite a few) and we got back to the hotel. They didn't have a message from the travel agency so Jarek called, but no one picked up. We walked to a cafe near the hotel and, since it was on the outskirts of town, it was dirt cheap. I found a pastry shop on the way back to the hotel! My favorite pastry—I don't know what it's called—was this tube made out of something similar to waffle cone, filled with caramel. Delicious!

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## Charyn Canyon

by Chris Chun on 05 Aug 2010 at 11:57

The next morning, anxious and devoid of caramel tubes, we drove to travel agency and our passports were ready! We were planning for the worst case, which involved going to the canyons and coming back the next day for the passports. Excellent! We drove off to the canyon, enjoying beautiful Kazakh scenery. We stopped for a lunch and,

unfortunately, Jarek and I ended up with the salads bathed in mayonnaise, the salads we knew existed but had been avoiding for so long. We could only eat a few bites before we had to stop (less what went in came back out). We got to the canyon by the afternoon. Jarek had to drive on a dirt track for a while, but it wasn't too difficult or long before we got to a shack. We paid our fees and drove in.

Charyn Canyon is smaller than the Grand Canyon, but it is still gorgeous (coming from someone who doesn't typically enjoy nature). Buffeted by the winds, we took pictures from above and then found the road going down into the canyon. The nice Kazakh ranger from the shack—the one who had a golden eagle at home—said he could tow us out the next morning if we had trouble. Jarek carefully maneuvered down the steep track, avoiding scrapes to the undercarriage of the car as well as he could. Finally we got down to the bottom and weaved through the canyon, curving around bits that had fallen off over time. You could tell they fell because their striations didn't match the horizontal striations of the canyon walls around us.

We stopped at a flat area with a river next to it, the river that the ranger had warned us not to ford. We looked at the water furiously tumbling by and found it hard to imagine that anyone thought they'd be able to ford it. The trees near the water had bits of fabric tied to the branches, which I think is a tradition for trees near bodies of water that are considered spiritually significant. A few other tourists were about, but they eventually left and we claimed the best camping spot for ourselves. We poked around and climbed some trees. Aneel tested the water and said that it was very cold and the current was strong. I got back into another tree, which was difficult because it didn't have any branches to grab or hold onto. I had to kind of hug it with my arms and and scoot up inch by inch until the trunk made turn and ran somewhat perpendicular to the ground. I guess being absent from months of aerial classes will make a girl miss heights, so I stayed up there for a while after Jarek handed me a book.

Over the next few hours, we napped, read, wrote, and typed by the river. We had some food and went to sleep. We left early the next morning. Jarek got us out of the canyon and back up the steep hill. Right before the end, we were having trouble getting traction and we smelled burning tires. I got out and redirected Jarek until the wheels found something to hold onto and we got up. We took a few more pictures and made our way to the shack where the ranger gave us directions out.

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## Dirt roads take their toll

by Aneel Nazareth on 06 Aug 2010 at 14:36

We woke up refreshed in Charyn Canyon. I slept very well, with the noise of the river lulling me to sleep. After packing up the car, we drove back up to the lip of the canyon. The guy with the eagle wasn't there, so we had to navigate the last bit of gravelly slope without the promised Lada tow. Jarek got us through.

The eagle guy was at the entrance post and shook our hands before pointing us to the other dirt road out. It was a nice drive and after 30 km or so we found the junction with the paved road we were looking for. Instead of backtracking towards Almaty, we took some roads that the map showed as white (one grade down from the yellow major highways) towards the northwest. We made good time.

Our plan had been to spend the night in Taldykorgan, but we were there in time for lunch. Oddly, there was a German-style beer hall restaurant downtown. We decided to press on towards Semey, and to find a hotel or camp when it got too late to continue. Since the white roads had treated us well in the morning, we decided to go north and skirt the eastern edge of Lake Balkhash instead of going northeast and then northwest along the highway.

The road was fine up to Lepsi, where we passed a junction with a road leading back to the highway. As we went over the hill past the junction, the road abruptly got worse. Where it had been basically good blacktop with the occasional pothole south of Lepsi, there were bigger and bigger potholes north. And then sections of gravel. And then sections with no gravel, just a dirt track. And then multiple criss-crossing dirt tracks, with no clear indication of which was the right one to take.

We crossed some train tracks, then realized that the road on the other side didn't go anywhere and crossed back. We asked a guy who was fixing a motorcycle near a train depot for directions to the A350 to Aktogay, and he pointed us on along a dirt track. We drove along that for a while before we heard a crunch and a rattle and Jarek yelled to me to stop.

These tracks clearly don't get much use, so they're basically two ruts in the dirt with plants of various sizes growing between them. The plants camouflage the center of the road, so you can't see how much clearance you actually have.

Sometimes the center is high enough that something bumps the bottom of the car. Sometimes, it seems, something snags the rear bumper cover enough to pop out the fasteners holding it on to the car. Oops.

Luckily, it was easy enough to pop the bumper cover back into place. Some of the fasteners were clearly not going to hold for much longer, even if we got them back into place, so Chris added a bunch of zip-ties at the connection points and we were on our way again.

We finally found the A350, and decided to head in to Aktogay rather than out to the major highway, in the hope of finding a hotel. No such luck. We were told by a couple guys on a motorbike that there was no hotel in the town.

The A350 got us back to the highway, but not very pleasantly. There were huge potholes, and I had to spend most of my time dodging them rather than making much forward progress. It turns out that most of the wildlife around here is nocturnal, so when I wasn't dodging potholes, I was trying to not run over little hopping and scurrying rodents who seem fascinated by the car's headlights.

It was well after dark before we got to the highway and found a gas station. The gas station attendant told us that we might find a hotel 100 km north, and that we'd find food, hotels, and whatever we needed in Aktogay, 175 km north. 100 km north, a policeman told us that there was no hotel before Aktogay.

It was 1 AM by the time we arrived in Aktogay, but Aktogay is apparently a lively place on Friday nights. There were fireworks being set off and lots of people were wandering the streets, so there was no shortage of people to give us directions to hotels. The first one was full, but we found a room at the second and collapsed into a deep sleep.

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## Terrible Kazakh Roads (Part One)

**by Chris Chun on 07 Aug 2010 at 02:43**

I know I'm overlapping with Aneel's post in some parts, so I will avoid too much repetition. We stopped for lunch served by a mother and her 13-year-old daughter and 15-year-old son. They kept giggling at Jarek's best efforts at Russian, and we discovered that they only served meat. The best Jarek and I could do was to get a soup made with potatoes and meat and pick the meat out (which Aneel, always generously, helped us finish). I took pictures of them and made prints for them while we tried to make conversation with our limited Russian. The landscape of Kazakhstan was enchanting and Aneel was able to get lots of the landscape shots that I don't like taking. We saw lots of large, predatory birds.

I drove past Lake Balkash on this dirt track, which was neat because it was so remote. The track had some yawning potholes on the side, and you could tell because people had stacked rocks before and aft so future drivers would know to avoid them. After about an hour and a half of absolutely nothing and no one, a truck came by in the opposite direction. I was so excited to see another vehicle! Later, when we got to the end of the dirt track, I wondered where it had come from and why it had gone that way. Some small birds, startled by our car, would fly out in front of the car and zig zag ahead of us before finally swerving off. I couldn't tell if this was some kind of game they enjoyed or if they were scared and too stupid to figure out how to get out of our way (it's not like I was driving very quickly).

It was an interesting drive, but my bum knee (I tore my ACL while jumping on a trampoline and refused surgery), which usually doesn't bother me these days, didn't like my frequent braking. Aneel took over and I have nothing to add to his excellent description of the rest of the drive and ensuing hotel. Oh, some people at a gas station asked if we were on a rally, so I guess they've seen our sort come through before. I must admit that I was asleep during the bulk of his driving, which speaks either to his ability to avoid potholes or my ability to sleep through even the most jarring situations.

The first hotel we found claimed to have no rooms. Was it because Jarek's Russian so bad? Maybe I didn't pass face control. I didn't see any cars and I doubted the people staying at the hotel walked there. We found another one near the gas station. It was old but clean. Sleep.

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## The worst road yet

**by Aneel Nazareth on 07 Aug 2010 at 08:00**

Ayaguz to Semey looks like a pretty short drive on a map. However, the road is probably the worst I've ever seen. Four lanes of potholes wider than the car and several feet deep. Cars zig-zagging every which way, crossing the median and then cutting back over to use whatever piece of pavement looks the best at any time.

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## Awful Kazakh Roads (Part 2)

by Chris Chun on 07 Aug 2010 at 18:03

Oh, the roads to Semey were horrific! How silly to think they were awful on the previous day! Aneel described them very well, and I took some videos so you can see for yourself at some point. I won't go into them any further. I suppose the title of this entry is misleading.

We went into Semey and, like the previous night, were told that no rooms were left in the first hotel. The second hotel had rooms. The receptionist wanted us to pay in tenge but we were about 800 short. The credit cards weren't working and I offered to pay in dollars since we hadn't found an ATM yet. She kept punching the calculator with numbers that improved the currency exchange in our favor. After a while, she took \$50 in two twenties and a ten (not the \$55 I offered, for some reason), and fretted some more about the authenticity of our bills. Eventually, she switched out a twenty for another, newer one. Finally, she asked a local about the exchange rate and whether the bills looked correct and she accepted the payment. After that, she was all smiles. She tried making conversation with me but, unfortunately, I didn't understand her.

We put our stuff in the hotel room before heading off to dinner. On the way out, the receptionist came back and (still all smiles) pointed at the \$55 I had written and I asked her if she wanted the last \$5 she didn't take earlier. I was glad she came back because I felt bad she hadn't taken it, and was working out a way to get it to her later. I gave it to her and showed her how to hold the bills up to the light to see the security thread running through it. We took out the twenties and ten I gave her earlier and looked at them together. I'm glad she felt confident I wasn't trying to cheat her.

Before we left for dinner, we met a French man, Francis, who was driving around the world on his motorcycle. He left Grenoble, France, worked his way through Iran, Turkmenistan, etc., before he met us in Kazakhstan. He said he had met with 4 Belgians earlier, who had talked about us. We explained that there were many teams in many charity rallies going through Central Asia, and established that his Belgians were probably thinking of someone else (since we hadn't met any Belgians). His English was pretty good and we had dinner at a Turkish restaurant together. He was in the same line of work as Jarek and Aneel. After dinner, we looked for the Communist statues (apparently they stuck all the old Lenins and Stalins in one place after independence) and got directions (and an offer of a ride) from a potentially drunk man. We gave up the search and went back to the hotel. I gave Francis some of Phil's stickers and a pig with our website on it. He gave us his website as well and we agreed to meet for breakfast.

Oh, Jarek and I had the good fortune of staying in a lacy pink room at that hotel. The pillows, walls, robes, bedsheets, curtains, and towels were pink and lacy. Unfortunately, my side of the bed felt like a sheet had been thrown over a bunch of springs, and I slept through the night balanced on the narrow wooden space between Jarek's bed and mine.

Next morning we found breakfast after a couple of false starts (not many places were open). I talked Aneel into showing Francis some acrobatic tricks with me, with a windshield sun reflector as a and I showed Francis some acrobatic tricks. I couldn't find the car key, which we found later back at the hotel. Also, we didn't find the Communist statue park. We didn't get to see the one in Budapest, either, so I'm super sad! I hear the largest Lenin head in the world is in Ulan-Ude. It's huge! If I don't see it, I'll be triply dejected.

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## "Russia Nyet?"

by Aneel Nazareth on 08 Aug 2010 at 07:19

"Russia Nyet?" The Kazakh border guard is confused. Why am I walking back into Kazakhstan after having gotten through all of the border formalities on their side and then having waited hours at the Russian side of the border before finally being allowed through the gate?

It turns out I am missing an important piece of paper.



We got through Russian passport control easily enough. We're pretty adept at filling out the entry forms by now. When we went to customs, I expected to be given a Russian customs declaration form to fill out. I had my pre-filled English and Russian examples and everything. But the customs officer didn't give me the form.

Instead, he asked for my Kazakhstan customs declaration form. Okay, weird, but sure, it's right... here... No, wait. It's not in the Folder of Important Documents. Hmm, I must have taken it out with the last set of obsolete documents, so it must be in the car... Nope. We search all of the plausible places in the car. Hmm. I know I had that form. It was the one I had to pay the paperwork fee for. When was the last time we might have taken anything out of the Folder of Important Documents? Uh-oh. It was when we were registering our visas in Almaty. Three days of driving away. In a country that I only have a double entry visa for, which I've just exited for the second time.

Nothing for it but to admit to the Russian customs officer that we don't have the form. He is adamant. He calls someone to ask them what to do, and then insists that I must have that form. He tells me to walk back to Kazakhstan and get a customs declaration. I explain that I can't go back to Kazakhstan because my visa is used up. He gets on the phone again and tells me to walk back to Kazakhstan. He has called them and they'll let me come over. Ooooookay.

I get a lot of strange looks as I walked back the wrong way. First the Russian border guards and then the Kazakh border guards have to get on their walkie-talkies and confirm that I am allowed to do this. A Russian woman waiting at the Russian gate says something to me that I can only assume is commiseration. I warn a Mongol Rally car waiting in the line to be sure they have that form.

Back to the customs booth. Will they be willing to let me fill out a form now and stamp it for me? Seems questionable at best...

It turns out that I *hadn't* left the form in Almaty. I'd handed it to the customs official along with my car registration and passport when I left Kazakhstan. A perfectly reasonable thing to do, since it was their form and I was leaving their country. At all of the previous border crossings, I've turned in that form on exit and never looked back. So I had thought nothing of it when the Kazakh customs agent didn't return it. Why would he? After a little discussion to establish who I was, he finds my form and hands it over, seeming a little puzzled.

I waste no time walking back to Russia before someone decides to change their mind about letting me have the form or letting me just walk through.

The Russian customs agent seems mollified by the correct form, and okays me for the customs search. They are more thorough than anyone since Ukraine, tapping door panels and having me pop the hood and open the roof box. Eventually, they tell me to go, and quickly, which I do. We don't stop to repack the luggage or resecure the roof box until we are well past the last Russian gate.

Only once we were ten kilometers down the road do we realize that nobody had stamped a *Russian* customs declaration for us. I turn the car around and drive back. The Russian exit guard has to make a walkie-talkie call to be sure, but he tells us that we don't get a stamp. Hopefully we won't find out that there was a mistake on the other side of Siberia...

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## Siberia

**by Aneel Nazareth on 08 Aug 2010 at 10:00**

Another abrupt shift in terrain. Kazakhstan was dry, with short-grass plains under blue skies until very close to the border. Siberia is misty and gray under a cover of clouds. Pasture has given way to fir forests and fields. There are some new additions to the familiar sunflowers and corn: short green grain plants and something with white flowers that give the summer evening a snowy cast.

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## Border, Barnaul, Novosibirsk, Tomsk

**by Chris Chun on 10 Aug 2010 at 07:46**

The Russian border was very close to Semey. We drove out and noticed that the road was flanked with more and more pine trees or sometimes ex-pine trees, which you could spy on logged hills that were dotted with piles of branches.

More buildings were built with wood and the air became more humid. We got to the border and saw Francis on his motorcycle a few cars ahead of us. Unfortunately, there were quite a few cars in front of him. After a while, we made it through the first gate and finally we got out of Kazakhstan. We had to wait in another line—in the no-man's land between the two countries—and we think we arrived at the lunch break, since no cars were moving at all. I gave Francis a gift of a pack baby wipes, which he was very glad to receive because he got so dirty biking. We read books and I walked to the three vehicles left between the borders. Two were completely stripped and one was on its way. I saw the outhouses but luckily (and surprisingly) did not have to use it. Aneel had to use it, though, and when he returned he proclaimed it to be the foulest one he'd ever seen. Later, I saw a woman take her son over and I could hear her shout in disgust, even though she was far away. She opted to take him behind the outhouse instead.

Aneel described the Kazakh customs form debacle, so I'll skip that part and stick to the stuff I like to talk about (like stripped cars and outhouses, apparently).

After three tries in Barnaul, we found a hotel room. We also had to try two ATMs before we could find one that would relinquish some rubles to Jarek. I'm thinking back on the hotel and I can't think of anything interesting. Oh, we had dinner at another peasant-themed restaurant. I think it was a chain, and the closest chain I can compare it to in the U.S. is Cracker Barrel. Peasant theme means lots of logs and sunflowers. You wouldn't believe how many peasant-themed restaurants we've eaten in during this trip.

We drove to Novosibirsk, which was sprawling like Volgograd. We saw statue of Lenin as a toreador and some disaffected youth, one of which was wearing a Fuck Bush shirt. I bought a wonderful hat at a good price. Possibly the proprietress was happy to be selling a child's winter hat to an adult in the middle of the summer. It's a pod-like shape that I'd seen sold by Etsy sellers in Europe, and I had been contemplating asking them to make an adult size for me but the prices made me reluctant. But now I have a(nother) ridiculous hat!

We drove to Tomsk, a university town and we found another French dude on a motorcycle! He was taking his bike from Moscow to Irkutsk. This is somewhat less ambitious than Francis' trip from Grenoble to Grenoble, but still pretty awesome because he was inspired—at the age of twelve!—by Jules Verne's story about Michael Strogoff, who traveled from Moscow to Irkutsk. We walked to the waterfront and saw a statue of Anton Chekhov. Tourists were taking pictures in front of him and rubbing his nose. I tried to figure out what was special about his nose and the best we could get was that we'd return to Tomsk if we rubbed his nose. Later, I read that Anton Chekhov pronounced Toms and its inhabitants dull, and this statue was erected in order to mock, not honor, Chekhov.

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## Tomsk to Achinsk

by Chris Chun on 10 Aug 2010 at 20:17

After Tomsk, we drove to Kemerovo for lunch. The restaurant was another peasant-themed deal, of course. We took advantage of the free wifi at the Traveler's Coffee cafe across the street in exchange for buying 3 cookies, so I got to enjoy my first real chocolate in about a month. More specifically, we e-mailed Go Help for more information about the border entry requirements for Mongolia. The guidebook warned us that part of Kemerovo was an "industrial hell," which we got to see as we drove out of the city.

We hoped to get to Krasnoyarsk by night, but it became clear that we had left Tomsk too late and dawdled too much at lunch. We aimed for Achinsk instead. Short of Achinsk, however, Aneel spied with his little eye a gas station/cafe/hotel trifecta that had vacancies. It wasn't as cheap as we thought it would be, but it was clean, a sure bet instead of wandering around Achinsk, and we didn't have to search for food. We got settled into our rooms and Jarek discovered that our room was missing a doorknob. When we asked downstairs, we were told that a previous customer hadn't returned the key and they had to remove the doorknob. We ordered dinner and settled down in front of a large television.

I got tired of waiting so I wandered around outside. I saw a young man near a cage at the bottom of a hill next to the hotel so I waved and walked down. The cage was divided in two and each side contained a huge dog. I can't begin to guess what kind of dogs they were except that they were huge, almost as big as ponies. Since I haven't learned any Russian, I speak in pantomime and I was able to learn that the dogs were age 6 and 7, they were fighting dogs, the yellow dog was stronger than the brown dog. We chatted some more about my ethnic background (this comes up very frequently), California, and the "governator," a term everyone seems to know. The fellow was feeding some kind of gruel to the dogs and they gobbled the food, pausing to bark and indicate their dismay that I was so close to their cages. I waved goodbye and went back to dinner.

The fellow came in later and put in a DVD that was dubbed in Russian. It was about Flanders and it starred Viggo Mortenson. We started chatting. He said he was Muslim and that there were many Muslims in this area. He said the director of the hotel was Muslim and he asked if there were mosques in the United States. He asked us about our religious affiliations and countries of origin. He said Jarek looked Russian and seemed to think Jarek was telling him he was from Spain even though Jarek said he was from Poland. I asked about the pull up bar outside so, after dinner, we did some dips and pull ups (not many, since I haven't been training). I did a toe hang, skin the cat, and dislocation as well. We were getting eaten by mosquitoes so we went back inside. Aneel went up to sleep and I stuck around, took some pictures of him and the nice young woman working the restaurant. I gave them prints of themselves and let them attend to more customers who were streaming in as night fell.

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## Achinsk to Irkutsk

**by Chris Chun on 11 Aug 2010 at 08:54**

The water in our bathroom smelled metallic. I kept comparing the smell to blood and Jarek compared the smell to uncooked liver. When I took a shower, the water didn't drain very well and I could see it was a rusty brown color.

We drove into Krasnoyarsk for lunch, noting the fake plastic trees all over the sidewalks of the city. I'm not sure what was going on with that. We stopped again at another Traveler's Coffee for lunch since we knew it had wireless. We needed to hit the ATM and found 6 in a row at a grocery store, which was convenient since we needed more water. Alas, we weren't able to maintain our high speeds. Crews were fixing roads, so we'd have some nice, smooth tarmac squeezed in between dirt and potholes. We thought we'd left the terrible roads in Kazakhstan, but they followed us into Russia! To make things more difficult, it started raining, which made it difficult to pass trucks. It didn't help that lots of people decided that the mandatory daytime headlights were not, in fact, mandatory. We thought about powering through and getting to Irkutsk but, as it got darker, I remembered how difficult it was to drive at night while battling slow trucks and curves. This time we'd have to deal with the inclement weather as well, so I suggested that we start looking for the next hotel/gas station/cafe combo if possible.

We found one before the town of Tulun. There was a big neon "MOTEL" sign sticking up above the trees (in English). Lots of trucks were stopped. There was a gas station and a cafe as well. Across the street was another, similar complex. The hotel had one room with four beds. The beds cost 50 rubles an hour and, if we didn't want the fourth bed rented out to a stranger, we could rent that one as well. We checked across the street and found the same situation for 10 rubles cheaper but less character, so we went back to the first. Besides, a Mongol Rally ambulance was parked there and we'd have the opportunity to make conversation in English with people other than ourselves. The fellows in the ambulance were Marcus, Craig, Jim—Team Alliance. They are one of 55 ambulances driving for the Mongol Rally this year. They had lots of time to prepare and get sponsors (unlike us). We traded stories and my favorite was the one where they got invited to a birthday party or wedding (I forget which) and Jim had to get up dance with the mother-in-law.

We went back to our by-the-hour beds. I got some smiles out of the receptionist by printing photos of her cat and I got a shot of her as well. The next morning, we got back on the soggy road and headed for Irkutsk. The roads were still awful and we stopped at a train track where the train wasn't moving. Ahead, we saw Team Alliance and, in front of them, Biscuits and Orange Juice and Bah Tat, all from the Mongol Rally. They had been there an hour already and everyone was waiting for crews to get the rocks off the tracks. After another hour waiting, with visits to the other teams every so often, we were off.

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## Irkutsk

**by Chris Chun on 12 Aug 2010 at 12:58**

Saw Mongol Rally teams Alliance, Biscuits and Orange Juice, and Ulan Bataar Bah'tat on the road today! Made it to Irkutsk late, so didn't get to message and meet up with them. Mostly I am posting this so the map shows our progress.

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## Irkutsk

**by Chris Chun on 12 Aug 2010 at 22:00**

We knew it would be difficult to find lodging in Irkutsk because it was high tourist season. We stopped by a hostel that boasted free internet and laundry, but it was full. The guy there made a lot of phone calls and found what we thought would be a bed and a floor at another hostel down the street. When we got there, we discovered that we'd be crashing in some kindly old lady's home. She seemed nice but we didn't want to impose so we thanked her and ran away. After that, we visited perhaps 5 hotels. They were too full or too expensive. One of them made calls for us until we found a hotel in a better price range outside of the center of town. It was actually newer and cleaner than the other viable option, and had free internet access as well.

It's odd because we had heard Irkutsk would be full of travelers but it seemed as though all the travelers and tourist services were hiding from us. Certainly the hotels were full but that was the only indication we had that this city was a tourist attraction. Since it was raining still, we checked the weather and figured we would leave for Ulan Ude the next day and wait until the sun came out so we could see Lake Baikal at its best. There are villages in the east shore and delta area.

We had dinner at the hotel and Aneel had the misfortune of ordering sushi, the rice of which was so undercooked that it crunched between his teeth. His pasta was similarly undercooked. Jarek ordered a fish dish at random and he received the local Baikal fish, omul, fried in an egg-and-pine-nut omelet. The next morning eggs came with my pancakes and I ate them, even though I had stopped eating eggs (in non-pastry form) for years because they made me feel ill when I ate them. I stupidly ate 2 fried eggs. It was so heavy and gross, I ate kyam-wei (I don't know how to spell it), salted plums, that I took with me on this trip in case I felt nauseated. I didn't have to touch them until the eggs. It helped a little, but I didn't want to eat anything until dinner time. Anyone that knows me knows that I do not skip meals—I usually add meals to my day—so I was feeling pretty rotten. I make this mistake every couple of years and I remind myself to lay off the eggs again.

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## **Around the Lake**

**by Aneel Nazareth on 13 Aug 2010 at 09:13**

Our schedule for today called for sightseeing around Lake Baikal, but it was pouring rain, so we opted to drive to Ulan-Ude instead. Perhaps we'll get to look around the other side of the lake tomorrow.

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## **Last day in Russia?**

**by Aneel Nazareth on 14 Aug 2010 at 08:33**

Our gambit worked out. Instead of trying to see Lake Baikal from Irkutsk in the rain, we got to see it from Ulan-Ude on a beautiful, sunny day. We drove back 100km or so and then took a side road away from the highway which took us through a series of small towns in the Selenga delta region. We wandered around the nearly-deserted lakeside near some fishing boats, stopped in at a restored monastery, and saw some kitesurfing from a rocky beach. A beautiful day.

Tomorrow, if all goes according to plan, we'll head for the Mongolian border!

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## **Baikal and Ulaan-Ude**

**by Chris Chun on 14 Aug 2010 at 12:12**

Baikal was beautiful to look at, even in the terrible weather. We stopped for pictures and Aneel ordered some smoked omul for lunch. As we neared Ulan Ude, the skies cleared and we enjoyed spectacular clouds and light around the river. I wanted to see Nerpa seals so Aneel checked with a travel agency about booking a cruise or something. They said we could only see the seals in April, which made us wonder where the seals went for the other 11 months. We

passed by the largest Lenin head in the world, which was indeed Brobdingnagian. After failing to find 4 restaurants listed in the Lonely Planet, we finally got to Modern Nomad Cafe, which served Mongolian dishes. We found our hotel and paid for internet (1 ruble per megabyte). Jarek and I spent hours on laundry, knowing this would be the last batch before we returned to the states.

The next day, we drove in a circuit around the delta villages on the east side of Lake Baikal. We didn't see many people around, just a couple of wedding parties, some kids, and some fishers. We stopped to walk by the shore, take pictures, and play in abandoned boats. Later, we stopped at a monastery and watched kiteboarding near by. We kept looking for a cafe during the whole circuit but we didn't find any for hours and hours until we got back on the main highway. It was in an old rail car. A wedding party came in to buy refreshments and I noticed that a lot of boys and young men had the same hair cut, which was a close crew-cut with a few uncut strands curling over the forehead. I've never seen that before. I bought a pine cone from the 5 sellers outside the restaurant. They showed me how to pick out the seeds and crack them to get the meat inside. They had a different taste and texture than all the other pine nuts I have had in my life. The meat was greasy and heavy and I only ate about 8 before I gave up and threw the rest away.

We got back into Ulaan-Ude and stopped by a grocery, knowing the border crossing the next day might take a long time and we would want provisions. The grocery was like Whole Foods, expensive as described by the guidebook. However, we picked up lots of food and walked back to the car where we discovered Team Alliance and written "Ring Marcus" all over the dust in our car. I tried messaging them again, even though I had messaged them earlier when they were informally convoying with us (following us) and they didn't respond. I discovered later that I had been messaging Rex from Biscuits and Orange Juice, who probably had no idea why I kept messaging him. We stopped in a hotel and asked if they were staying there but they weren't there. We had dinner and walked back to the Lenin head where we chatted with a Romanian who refused to take pictures of Lenin statues on his travels across Russia. We also met a nice couple on their honeymoon, Pam and Alex (? Sorry, dude).

We went back to the hotel and tried to book a flight from Ulaan Baatar to San Francisco. We could only find flights for twice what we had been seeing for the past several months. We tried every trick we could think of, but the lowest prices were tied to Air China, which gave lower fares to Travelocity, Expedia, Orbitz, Kayak, Farecast, you name it, but only gave higher fares when you clicked through. We'll have to scrimp for the next few months to accommodate the fare we ended up purchasing.

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## Russian/Mongolian Border (Part 1)

by Chris Chun on 15 Aug 2010 at 13:14

We drove to the Russian/Mongolian border, where we found Team Alliance again. We heard strange clapping noises and discovered that the noises came from large grasshoppers in the vegetation around the border post. I also took a video of a chubby insect without wings because it was exceptionally large. Getting out of Russia was easy; it only took 2.5 hours. We entered the Mongolian side of the border and discovered that the VIN number the border had on their list was not the same as the one on our car by one digit! I knew then that we'd be staying the night. Good thing we went to the grocery in Ulaan-Ude. The weather was nice and my belly stayed full, so I didn't mind so much.

Team Alliance was giving their ambulance to a hospital, and some Mongolians met them at the border—including the fellow in charge of customs in Ulaan-Baatar—to facilitate their procedure. I took pictures and printed them for everyone. They wished us luck and we waited around some more. Another Mongol Rally team showed up—Khan't Stop Us Now—so we had more people to chat with after Team Alliance left. Turns out Chris didn't have the right stamp on his Mongolian visa and someone took his passport. Since we arrived on Sunday, we were told we would have to wait until Monday to have it sorted out, and that we'd be done by noon the next day.

Since we couldn't camp in no-man's-land, we had to leave our car, stay the night in a hotel, and come back the next day. The hotel was right across from the border. We shared a room with three beds for the equivalent of \$2 each bed. No showers and outhouses only! Actually, they let me use the toilet inside, but I think this was because they wanted me to take pictures and print photos for them. Jarek and Aneel had to use the outhouses. When we exited the border, we noticed lots of clothing tags and wrappers all over the ground. I thought they were ripped off of Chinese (?) merchandise and resold in Russia. To avoid paying import taxes at customs, they would claim the clothing as personal belongings. The next day, meandering through the vehicle queues to enter the border again, I saw people putting on layer after layer of new clothes before entering the border.

Anyway, we waited at the gate for Robert and Chris but the border but a woman came to lock up the gates so we left.

A money changer came up to us but we had already changed money so I took a photo of him and printed it. When I came back with the print, he was gone and I wandered around the town looking for him. Everyone recognized him and called him changer, making rotating motions with both hands. One person told me he lived on the second floor of an apartment building so I headed up, but he wasn't home. I figured I'd give it to him tomorrow when we crossed the border again.

I went back to the hotel for dinner and Khan't Stop Us Now met with us for drinks and fat-on-bone (what passed for meat at this restaurant). I enjoyed a salad and some rice. I wondered how long I'd be able to avoid meat in Mongolia. Anyway, Robert and Chris said that everyone left the border for the night and they just walked out, even though Chris didn't have his passport. A very tipsy Mongolian chatted with us and gave us candy. I took pictures of him and his tipsy friend and we chatted as best we could without knowing each other's languages. He appreciated the prints and I got to take photos of the women working in the restaurant later that evening.

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## Russian/Mongolian Border (Part 2)

by Chris Chun on 18 Aug 2010 at 03:07

We all met back at the border the next morning. A soldier came up to the car and tried to convince Aneel to sell him the auto tool kit but we didn't want to take the chance of needing it later and not having it. It was funny because the tool kit wasn't actually a good, high-quality kit or anything. Aneel tried to explain that we needed it in case we had a problem with the car. We used it once when the bumper came off and we were hoping not to use it again. Basically, if we sold him the tool kit, we would need it. If we kept the tool kit, we wouldn't need it.

I offered to take his picture and he consented, so I gave him a print. After that, I had an avalanche of soldiers and customs officials who wanted photos. I love taking portraits, so it was a good use of my time until our car cleared customs. They let me plug my printer in. Lots of them wanted to have full-length shots instead of the head shots that I prefer. Anyway, photos are usually not allowed at borders, so that was pretty cool as well. We ate the rest of our food and eyed the clock as noon came and went.

Another ambulance from the Mongol Rally, Genghis Khan't Drive, drove and told their tale of woe. Apparently they got drunk in Irkutsk and a teenager—with whom they were getting drunk—stole a wallet. They thought that if they chased him, they'd be ambushed by his cohorts so they put their wallets and phones in the ambulance before chasing him. Unfortunately, they couldn't find him. Even more unfortunately, he had circled back and cleaned out their ambulance. When I say cleaned out, I mean the kid took phones, cameras, wallets, and clothes. The next day, they went to the police, who showed them a bunch of photos of repeat offenders. The kid was the 6th. They hauled him in and he was wearing their clothes and shoes. He had erased the numbers on their phone and entered his own. He erased the photos on the camera and took pictures of himself. At the end of the day, they got everything back except for their money and credit cards. They had lost their hope in Russians but, after the robbery, so many Russians were kind to them and fed them without asking for money. Overall, they considered themselves lucky and they have a great story to tell, now. (Of course, I stole the story and now I'm telling it.)

I asked a woman (whose photo I had taken earlier and who had tried to pay for the photo but I refused to let her) if we could use her phone to call Dulguun with Go Help. Dulguun told us they'd be leaving for lunch for 2 hours and we should try to get it sorted out before then. Aneel amused some people in customs with his iPad. I took a picture of two women in charge of the customs; one of them was wearing civilian clothing and she was the woman who seemed to be the one standing between us and our entry into Mongolia. I stood around and waited some more, and the first woman whose photo I took asked around on our behalf. A man (whom I had observed playing games on the computer while I printed photos all morning) came out with some paper and looked at our car some more. Instead of waiting at the car, which is what Aneel had been told to do for the whole time we were here, I stood near their desks and watched. The woman berated the woman in charge of the vehicle customs. They spoke heatedly for a little bit, and then the woman in charge of customs smiled and put her arm around me as if to let everyone know she would take care of me. Within 15 minutes, everything was clear and we were allowed to go.

On the way out, I saw the money changer. I gave him the photo. Aneel, who was driving, was called over to a booth. I took a photo of the money changer's friend and a soldier told me not to take photos, since we were still within the gates of the border. I agreed not to take any more photos and printed out the photo of the second money changer. When the soldier saw it, he demanded a photo for himself and I told him he had told me earlier I wasn't allowed to take photos. Other bystanders wanted photos but I pointed to an imaginary watch and explained that I was out of time. Most were pretty cool about it but one man told me, "Fuck you!" and I responded in kind. I thought it was funny



and wondered what percentage of his English lexicon "fuck you" took up.

You know how we said it only took 2.75 hours to get out of Russia? You only need to move the decimal to show that we got out of Russia and into Mongolia in 27.5 hours.

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## Anak Ranch

by Chris Chun on 19 Aug 2010 at 00:38

Within the first few miles, I saw my first gers in the countryside. We saw lots of horses, goats, and sheep. The landscape was gorgeous and you'll have to depend on Aneel's photos for those. The road was paved and we didn't have too much difficulty getting to the turn off for Anak Ranch, where we planned to spend two nights. As in the past, we weren't quite sure what the speed limit was, but the Mongolian police didn't seem to care about us anyway.

We found the turn off for Anak Ranch and the roads became dirt tracks. Eventually, we ended up in the right town, Orkhon, but we didn't have directions to the ranch and we didn't see signs. Aneel drove around for a bit and I jumped out of the car to ask people for directions. None of them seemed to know about Anak Ranch. Aneel kept driving around and then we found a tourist on a horse and a tourist walking next to the horse. They knew what we were talking about because they were staying at the ranch as well, so they pointed us in the right direction. About ten men were in front of the ranch, trying to push a small truck out of the smooshy mud. I was super excited about it so I went out with our shovel to help. That was the only time our shovel got used during the entire trip. We pushed the truck from the front and then from the back and it got out. I wasn't even at the ranch yet and I was getting dirty and having fun. We parked inside the gates and took our stuff to our ger.

The owner of the ranch, Martin, showed us around and explained that we could do anything we liked and that dinner would be at 7. He said he had to get back to work on his pizza oven and we all had a chuckle. Later, we talked to the British tourists, Sally and Richard. They said we could go milk cows before dinner if we liked (I did like!). We walked around and found Martin again, who gave us a tour of the ranch. We were surprised to find that he wasn't kidding about the pizza oven!

At the beginning of our stay, we found it hard to determine whether Martin's statements were true or false. He claimed to be a descendent of a Russian Cossack from Lake Baikal and a Czech woman, he said he lived in Australia for 15 years, and he had been to 80 countries. Later I discovered that he was born in Germany. We couldn't place his accent at all, but he was gruff, humorous, and completely charming. If you ever visit--and you totally should--everything he says is true.

Martin drove through the mud and grass to get us to the cows, which were standing or lying around a bunch of trees near a ger. Two women had calves in a pen. They each would let a calf out of the pen and it would run to its mother and start nursing. Then, she'd rope the calf and tie it to a tree. The mother would stand by and the woman would milk. She was so fast, her hands blurred and she could fill the entire pail with milk frothy from the speed and pressure. When she was done, she released the calf, which finished its dinner with mom. Sally was already there since she had ridden.

She handed me the pail and stool. Aneel and Jarek stood by with cameras. Milking the cow was hard at first because the teats were smaller and more slippery than I expected. I got a nice rhythm after a while and though this never manifested in any appreciable amount in the pail, it was fun. I asked Jarek if he wanted a turn and he said yes. He sat down with the stool and pail and the cow walked away. I tried chasing her down for more milking fun, but that was the end of it.

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## More Anak

by Chris Chun on 19 Aug 2010 at 08:26

Martin [cleaned](#) the infected hoof of a cow and we watched her [limp away](#). She was getting better, he said, and I noticed she was putting more weight on it the next day. Jarek and I went to get more water and I marveled at the Mongolian [sky](#).



[Pictures](#) really can't compare to what I actually saw. See, this is why I don't do landscapes. Before we went to bed that night, I helped chase down a sheep and I used scissors to shear a bit of it. The next day, Rambo--his real name was Saynaa or something, but he never had a shirt on no matter how cold it was and he was totally [buff](#), so Martin called him Rambo—took us on horses to the top of the hills. None of us had been on anything resembling a horse since pony rides of our youth, so this was new! Turns out the Mongolian horses are tiny, just my size! Jarek had a horse that was hard to control, very feisty and eager to take off. I figured out how to make the horse do what I wanted it to do pretty easily, and what I wanted was to go fast! Aneel's horse, unfortunately, just wanted to eat all the time instead of moving forward. Eventually, we got up to the top of the hill and Rambo showed us how to walk around the [ovoo](#) and put rocks on it. We took pictures of the lovely countryside and headed back down.



Before we got back to the ranch, we stopped by the cow ger and they offered us yogurt, cream, sour cheese dried on the roof of the ger, and vodka made from milk. I ingested all the Lactaid I had with me and accepted the [offerings](#) since it's rude to decline and hoped for the intestinal best. When we got back to the ranch, Aneel and Jarek said they were sore and done with riding. I knew I'd be sore the next day, but I wanted to ride that evening so I could herd the cows and milk them again. In the meantime, I took pictures of the [residents](#) of the ranch and made prints for them.



Some other guests from the ranch and I tried milking cows, but it took four of us about an hour to get 1/16th of a bucket, which included chasing calves and cows through the mud and poo. The two Mongolian women finished the entire herd while we were busy being inept.



Oh, the ranch did not have a shower, bath, or toilet. Just an outhouse! Lucky we had baby wipes. It also had a happy [cat](#) that slept with me under my covers every night I was there. Sweet.

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## Bows

by Chris Chun on 19 Aug 2010 at 09:09

We left Anak ranch and headed towards a bow-making workshop. Jarek had taken Japanese archery classes in the past, so we thought he'd find it interesting. The problem is that, once we arrived in the town where the workshop was supposed to be, we didn't have any directions. (You'll notice that our travels in Mongolia involved a lot of driving without any idea where we're going.) After driving around and miming shooting a bow to the locals, we happened upon a sign that announced the bow-making workshop. We drove around some more and didn't see anything that looked like a bow-making workshop, not that any of us had ever seen one before. I walked up to a long, flat building and looked inside. I thought I saw tools and bows inside, but the door was closed. On closer inspection, the metal studs on the door made a connect-the-dots shape of a bow. I banged on the door but there was no answer. We were about to give up when a van bolted up to us and a bunch of Mongolian men tumbled out. They opened the workshop for us, explained the process for making a bow (through Jarek's rough Russian), and allowed us to draw some bows. It was great! They said they were the descendants of bowmakers, and they showed a variety of arrowheads that they had collected over time. It was great! I thanked them by taking pictures and printing portraits for them. Tools for bowmaking:



Goo for bowmaking:



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## Ger Camp

**by Chris Chun on 19 Aug 2010 at 09:34**

We made our way over to the Amarbayasgalant monastery, one of the three largest in Mongolia. The roads deteriorated and multiplied, sprawling out over the steppe in a way that didn't make us confident. Luckily, we picked up a family of hitchhikers before the turn off, so we didn't get lost at all. Taking on locals was a fortuitous habit throughout the entire trip! The landscape was gorgeous but it was hard to get pictures when careening all over the dirt. This was the best I could do.





We found a ger camp. I took pictures and gave out prints while they prepared our meals and the hot water for our showers.



I think I like the [shot](#) without the bird better, actually. They started fires in our gers, but they didn't last very long and we were cold by morning again. So different from the sticky, steaming weather in Europe!

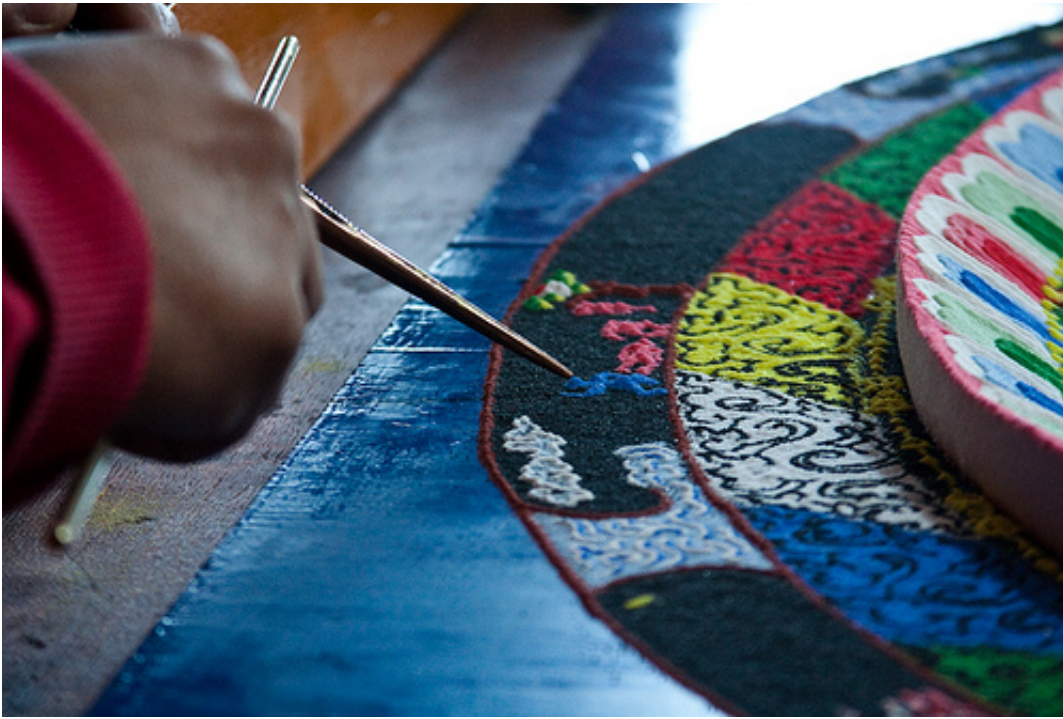
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## Sand Painting

by Chris Chun on 19 Aug 2010 at 11:48

Sorry it took so long. We saw [sand painting](#) in the [Amarbayasgalant monastery](#) in Mongolia! I thought it was just a Tibetan thing, but I guess not. I've never seen this happen in real life before and they let us take pictures.





The sand painting was on a blue board in a covered stand and the monks stood around and added to it.



They put the colored sand in little metal bowls and then transfer the sand to a ribbed metal cone with a hole in the bottom. Then, they rub a thin metal rod over the ridges to let the sand out a few grains at a time. You can see the instructions for the sand painting on the paper. The monks kept referring to it.



I know the border depicts a charnel ground, but I wish I knew more about the specific elements of the stories or beliefs being illustrated. I know so much about Christianity but very little about Buddhism. Still, it was neat seeing the monks "draw" people being ripped apart by animals and skeletons dancing out of corpses.



More pictures [here](#).

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## Terra not so firma!

by Chris Chun on 19 Aug 2010 at 11:49

I drove us out from the monastery to the main road a few hours away. Actually, that makes it sound like we knew where we were going. Honestly, we chose dirt tracks at random and hoped for the best. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't, so we'd have to go back. Driving was a delicate balance of trying to drive in the right direction, not ruining the turf, not tearing out the underneath of our bumper again, and not getting stuck in the mud. Uh, except I got us stuck in the mud. For about five minutes, we all had a go at pushing forward or backward and turning the steering wheel. Then, a family showed up! We pulled out our hitherto-unused tow ropes, and we were out in about ten minutes! That was fast.





We thanked the family and they headed off towards the monastery. We hadn't experienced any major car or driving issues, so it was kind of fun getting this one in before we got to Ulaan-baatar.

Before getting to the main road, we got some pictures of [flowers](#) and stuff.



I don't usually take pictures of nature, but I like this shot of the insects. I think Aneel has some good pictures of some predatory birds and maybe some of the ubiquitous marmots.

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## Oops the second!

**by Chris Chun on 19 Aug 2010 at 12:01**

We drove from the monastery through gorgeous landscapes, dodging trucks and livestock along the way. We even saw a yak! I got tired of it so Jarek took over and got us into Ulaanbaatar. Yay!



We took pictures and got back into the car. Then, Jarek very cleverly drove into a pothole and popped the right rear wheel. We got the spare tire out and I walked it across the street to the gas station to see if they'd get the old one off wheel and mount this one. I figured it'd be easier to lug the wheel around than try to explain in non-Mongolian. The station was occupied by an convoy of trucks filled with Mongolian soldiers. I was told that we'd find a tire guy just down the road a bit. So, I went back, past all the soldiers, and told the guys. We pulled out the spare and got ready to get it on. I know I should have been disappointed about the flat tire, but I was kind of glad we had that experience on the trip as well as getting stuck in the mud. So, cheerful, I got ready to help with putting the spare tire on. Oh, but wait!





These Mongolian soldiers pushed us aside and had the spare tire on in minutes. It happened so quickly that we didn't have a chance to protest. Their convoy started moving, we shook their hands, and they ran off. It was kind of disappointing not to be able to change our own tire but it was pretty awesome being helped out like that.

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## Made it to UB!

by Aneel Nazareth on 19 Aug 2010 at 12:03

It's been a long day, but we've made it to Ulaanbaatar!

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## Ulaanbaatar

by Chris Chun on 19 Aug 2010 at 12:52

Sure enough, there was a tire guy down the road after a few minutes driving on our spare. He had a ton of business, which made sense because of all the potholes in the road. For the equivalent of \$2, he put a tire on the wheel. We put the old/new tire on the car we were off again. It took forever for us to get to our hotel because the traffic was as bad as the guidebooks had described. The traffic was so slow that Mongolian teens walked through the cars with trays of paper cups and sodas with straws for sale. I saw a hand-painted sign.



I saw a boy looking out a window.



It took us a while to find a hotel that was centrally located, wasn't booked, and had internet access. We finally found one a good one that happened to have a strip bar on the second floor, but otherwise seemed like every other normal hotel out there. We ran into a fellow I saw earlier in Tomsk about 10 days earlier! Chinggis (Genghis) Khan is a pretty big deal here.





## Chinggis Khan Statue

by Chris Chun on 20 Aug 2010 at 03:59

We drove to the Chinggis Khan statue--and largest equestrian statue in the world--because, hey, Chinggis Khan and largest equestrian statue in the world! Also, we wanted to roll our trip meter. We got the cameras out to document the numbers going from [9999](#) to 0000. We saw camels and eagles for photo-ops for tourists on the way. But we didn't stop. We were in a hurry because I was going to go with [All Weasel. No Beaver](#) to the book ger that afternoon, one of the recipients of our fundraising efforts. Jarek and Aneel would get the car washed and bring it to the Go Help office to finish our rally. Because we were on a schedule, we were a little anxious about getting to the statue without getting lost and having to backtrack. We didn't see the statue on the horizon for such a long time and then suddenly we saw it!



Whoa! You can go in/up it but we were happy to take pictures and leave. More shots are [here](#). Actually, there was a

dude with an eagle and we couldn't help it, so we paid for pictures with the eagle as well. It looks kind of small next to Aneel.



This picture cracks me up because they are looking balefully at each other. By the time Jarek got the eagle, it was pretty sick of us.



And here's me with the eagle. I can't tell if I'm leaning away because it's heavy or because I don't want my eyes pecked out. Or both.





We drove back in time for me to get to the book ger with Fel, Migah, Paul, and Matt (from All Weasel, No Beaver)!

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## More Moustaches

by Chris Chun on 20 Aug 2010 at 04:23

One of the beneficiaries of our fundraising efforts was a book ger. It's kind of like a library and study hall for kids to use after school. We crammed 6 people into [All Weasel, No Beaver's Ford Ranger](#) and headed off to a ger district. Jarek and Aneel didn't go because they hate children. I mean, they had to get the car washed and cleaned so we wouldn't have any deductions taken from our vehicle deposit when we handed over our keys. Anyway, when we got there and popped out of the car, a bunch of kids surrounded the car. I gave them stickers and Matt and Paul gave them tennis balls. We went into the book ger, which was like a little library. The kids go there to read or study after school. Go help gave out markers, stickers, and other school supplies while I took [portraits](#) and made prints for the kids.



This was the best I could do with the timer. Then, I passed out moustaches.



The older kids thought the moustaches were funny and the younger kids had no idea what was going on.





I don't think she thought it was funny at all. Mongolian girls and boys don't get their hair cut until they're much older. There's a lot of [ritual](#) around it. This girl just had her hair cut.

[This](#) little guy thinks it is pretty funny and the [older girls](#) were getting into it. I like how the moustaches made some of them look like little [old men](#). More pictures [here](#).

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## More Ulaanbaatar

by Chris Chun on 21 Aug 2010 at 00:03

The next day, I tried to find a [Mongolian felt fair trade doodad](#). thought we'd be fine since I got an English-speaking cafe owner, who was selling some of the felt goods in his shop, to write the directions on a paper in Mongolian for me. We used a local taxi--not really official cab drivers, just people willing to give you a ride for a little money--to start out. However, since they don't really use street numbers or addresses here, [seriously](#). That didn't work, so we asked pedestrians and wandered to every yellow building we could find. After an hour, we found the shop, but it was closed. I borrowed phones to call the number and the woman directed me back to the cafe where I got the directions in the first place. Dang! So, we walked back and met up with Aneel.



I don't know when I saw this graffiti. We tried to find the circus school so we could watch some contortion or acro, but it was closed. Alas! This is after I had been e-mailing them and asking the Go Help office to talk to them in Mongolian to arrange a visit. They were under the impression that we were traveling performers, so it was probably for the best. I don't remember what day that was. We also went to the [International Intellectual Museum](#), which was filled with puzzles and toys. It was also difficult to get to, but we took a taxi (like I said, not a taxi driver but this time a nice businessman who had a comfy van and who also spoke English) and found it. There were a few puzzles that, if completed within a certain amount of time, yielded a substantial cash prize (some up to \$100,000). We also went to [Narantuul](#), the black market.



It's not like they sell only contraband, but they do sell everything. I can't really explain "everything" well enough here: [meat](#), [old remote controls](#), [ger furniture](#), [Hitler busts](#). Everything.



Fel took us to dinner at a very [inauthentic Mongolian barbecue](#). It's actually a chain based in the States. However, it had vegetarian food and it was all-you-can-eat, so I was happy.

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## Wrapping up

by Aneel Nazareth on 21 Aug 2010 at 09:25

We've had a good few days in Ulaanbaatar, doing touristy things and turning in the car.

On Friday, we took a trip out to see a gigantic statue of Chinggis Khaan. At 131 feet tall, it's the largest equestrian statue in the world. It is covered in stainless steel, which catches the light very impressively. The statue is 50-odd kilometers from Ulaanbaatar, which we covered in a snappy 90 minutes.

Traffic inside the city is... not fast. I'd been warned that it was chaotic, but I was expecting higher velocity chaos. It turns out to be very much like riding a bicycle, but half as fast. There's the same feeling of judging gaps in traffic and going for whichever ones you can fit into (utterly disregarding lane markings), and the same knowledge that any one of the cars on the road could decide to swerve unexpectedly and hit you at any moment. But, like riding a bicycle in traffic, once you get in tune with the cues everyone is giving (that left turn signal? Clearly that's a lie, that car is about to swerve right to get around that truck...) it makes some semblance of sense.

We rolled the trip meter while still inside the city limit, so we can now honestly say we've been on a ten thousand mile road trip ("nine thousand, nine hundred and eighty three mile road trip" just doesn't have the same ring).

After the statue, we drove over to Go Help's headquarters. Chris went to visit a Book Ger with the Go Help staff and the guys from Team All Weasel, No Beaver. Jarek and I did the final inventory of the supplies and spares and then took the car off to the car wash.

The car wash was impressive to watch. Pressure washers, soap guns, and a whole lot of scrubbing with rags have left the car shinier than when we bought it. It was sparkling for our finish line photos. Afterwards, we all headed over to a pub for a celebratory dinner and drinks.

Today we visited the State Department Store, the Mongolian Circus (which turns out to be closed on Saturdays. Oops), the International Intellectual Museum (which features wooden and metal puzzles, chess sets, and toys. The founder of the museum put on a small magic show for us), and the Black Market.

For dinner, Fel took us to an American franchise restaurant, BD's Mongolian Grill, which some sources credit with introducing the concept of "all you can eat" to Mongolian dining. It was like a homecoming for Chris, who's been to



the BD's in Bethesda, MD. As we were paying the bill, the restaurant PA played "Careless Whisper", making this an official international trip for me. Somehow I *a*lways hear that song played somewhere, no matter what continent I'm traveling to.

All in all a good way to end the trip. Chris and Jarek will catch a series of planes tomorrow morning which should get them back to San Francisco. I'll start shopping for train tickets to Beijing and figuring out what I'm going to do with my last few days in Mongolia.

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# The End!

by Chris Chun on 21 Aug 2010 at 18:22

Jarek and Aneel got the car cleaned. It was sparkling! It was so beautiful that, after they parked it and started walking to the Go Help office, someone tried to offer them cash for it on the spot. Aneel referred them to the Go Help office. They'd have their mechanic look at it and put it up for sale. Then, the money would go to their charities. We were told that our car was the nicest car in the best shape out of all the vehicles ever to make it to the finish line. So, they ended up keeping it for themselves. Go Help had been wanting one for a while since they couldn't get out to their projects like the book ger without relying on taxis. So, that was nice! I'm glad we took such good care of it.

Anyway, we got [trophies and certificates](#) and then we took pictures of us at the finish line. You'll have to imagine Tom there in spirit. I'm so glad he came with us!



The Go Help office had a scrapbook so I drew a picture of our travels.



[England](#), [France](#), [Luxembourg](#), [Czech Republic](#), [Romania](#), [Moldova](#), [Ukraine](#), [Russia](#), [Kazakhstan](#), [Uzbekistan](#), [Mongolia](#)

It says 14 countries but it should be 15 because I forgot about [Hungary](#). Oops. The other figures are accurate: 10,000 miles, 41 days, 4 sore bums

**Left side:** shashlik (meat skewers), [gers](#), [mustachioed watermelons](#), [police](#) with evil red eyes (yelling "Fine!" in Russian), [cows](#), salad (tomatoes and cucumber, unfortunately my primary vegetarian meal for thousands of miles), [sunflowers](#), [eagles](#), flies, marmots, [sheep](#), [goats](#), 1 yak, camels, [squat toilets](#), the [largest Lenin head](#) in the world, [potholes](#)

**Right side:** baby wipes (o, so many baby wipes), [tipsy Uzbeks](#) mosques, [medrassas](#), minarets, Ladas, anti-static strips, [beautiful landscapes](#), [Chinggis Khan statue](#), [grasshoppers](#), [ovoo](#), time, not enough internet access, our [trusty steed](#)

Thanks for reading and thanks for your support!

## Addendum

by Aneel Nazareth on 28 Aug 2010 at 08:14

Just when you think you're done...

A word to the wise: If you bring a car into a country, have documentation about that when you leave the country, even (especially!) if the car isn't leaving the country with you. This was something I was wondering about a bit when I turned over all of the car-related paperwork to Go Help. I should have wondered a bit more and at least gotten copies of everything, just to be sure.

The train from Ulaanbaatar to Beijing stops at a little town called Zamyn Uud just before crossing the border. A border patrol agent comes along the train and picks up everyone's passports, and a customs agent comes along and picks up everyone's customs declarations.

That may have been the snag. Faithful readers will recall that when I entered Mongolia, I didn't have a car with me. At the very start of the process, I'd filled out a customs declaration saying that I was bringing in a car. However, the car had to be left inside the border post because of the VIN problem and I was told that, to enter Mongolia, I needed to fill out a new customs declaration as if I were a passenger, rather than a driver/owner. So I entered with a customs declaration (duly stamped) that said that I had nothing to declare. I had to go back into the border post to retrieve the car the next day when customs finished processing it. I got a bunch of paperwork about the car at that point, but my original declaration mentioning the car wasn't in that bunch. I didn't think much of it, since I had the paperwork that Go Help said I needed.

So when the customs agent came along the train, I gave her the only customs declaration I had, the one that said "nothing to declare". In retrospect, this might have seemed like I was trying to hide the fact that I'd brought in a car and raised suspicions when their computer systems told them I'd imported a car.

After half an hour or so, a customs agent came to my cabin and told me to come with him. He took me to a customs area and proceeded to ask me about the car. Where was it? Had I sold it? I told him that I'd donated it, and talked a bit about the programs that Go Help sponsors to explain what had been done with it. Our interaction was hampered by the usual language problems, and I tried to give him the Go Help phone numbers to talk to them about the car. He shrugged and told me to go back to the train. In retrospect, I realize that admitting that I'd given the car away without any proof that there'd been a legal transfer could easily have been construed as saying I'd abandoned it, particular with the language barrier. I'd clearly said I hadn't sold it, so what does that leave?

After another fifteen minutes, another customs agent came by and told me to come with her, and to bring my luggage. I scrambled to get everything that I'd unpacked over the course of the train ride (12 hours of the projected 30 had elapsed) back into my bag. I was hoping that if the process went quickly enough, I'd be able to be back on the train in a few minutes. I got all of the really important stuff.

The customs agent asked me more questions about the car. She spoke even less English than the last agent I'd talked to, but eventually called the Go Help number that I'd been asking her to call. It turned out that they wanted a copy of the car import document, which I didn't have with me. It, along with all of the car paperwork, was in the Go Help office. At about this point, the train left for China.

After a number of phone calls and text messages with the Go Help folks, the customs agent took me over to the building between the customs office and the train station. She told something to the woman at the desk there, and handed over my passport. She told me to pay 30,000 MNT. I asked what the money was for. A helpful bilingual person who happened to be sitting in the lobby explained to me that it was for my hotel room for the night. Ah. Clearly I'm not getting into China until the morning. 30,000 MNT, hm? I check my wallet. 31,100 MNT. Ah. Clearly I'm not getting dinner either, with less than a dollar's worth of local currency to my name.

On the plus side, it was the nicest hotel room I had during my stay in Mongolia, and also the cheapest.

The next morning I went back over to the customs office. I'd been told that they opened at 8, but nobody familiar with my situation showed up until 9. They stuck me in an office and told me to wait. By 10 I saw that they'd received the fax of the car import document from Go Help. Things moved pretty quickly after that. A nice customs agent had offered me a cup of tea, but, before it was cool enough to drink, the agent handling my case came in and told me it was time to leave. I asked about the refund I'd been told I could get for the portion of my train ticket that hadn't been used, but nobody seemed to understand or care.

After a quick stop to have the exit stamp on my passport canceled, I was taken to the other side of the train station building, where a number of jeeps were hanging around. I was told to pay 50 CNY to the driver of one. When I said I had none, I was escorted to a moneychanger, who changed some of my dollars. I sat in the jeep for about half an hour before a group of people came up and got in. Full up, the jeep made its way the kilometer or so to the border.

It was fortuitous that I had that group of people with me, since they knew what they were doing and had an incentive to get me through the border as quickly as possible so the jeep could continue on its way. They guided me to the passport line with the minibus icon, instead of the one with the jeep icon (I pointed out that we were in a jeep, but they insisted that the minibus line was the right one). There was a delay when the passport agent had to talk to his superior about what to do with someone who already had a canceled exit stamp (answer: give them a new exit stamp). Nobody asked me for a customs declaration. Phew.

On the Chinese side, my fellow passengers helped me finish off my dried, sweetened cranberries (bought in UB, but packed in Petaluma, CA, about an hour away from my house) to avoid the Chinese ban on bringing in plant material. Then they helped me realize that I needed to pay a 5 CNY fee for some sort of inspection and guided me to the Chinese Nationals line, rather than the Foreigners line (reserved for Mongolians?). After much inspection of my visa (they even searched around for a working UV light to examine it under), I was welcomed to China.

The jeep dropped me off at the Erlianhot bus station, where the driver suggested I might find a way to Beijing. Therein lies another story that may be continued in my non-rally travelogue.

Thanks again to the folks at Go Help who talked to the customs officials for me, and to the readers who helped me with communications when SMS to this blog was my only means of contact.