

Suzuki DRZ400

**a quick and
easy ride**





Words and images: Seb Leeson

I remember Walter telling me “Don’t do the track if it’s raining, it’s suicide”. As the sun was shining that morning, and there were almost no clouds, I felt confident that Kim and I would easily make it. We had enough off-road experience, and equipped with light-weight bikes, what could possibly happen? The fact that it had rained for more than a week before this day didn’t cross my mind as a possible game changer.

It was a relief to be in Russia again, especially in the Altay after spending time in the steppes of Kazakhstan. The Russian border guards were somewhat surprised to see us as most tourists use a bigger crossing on the main road, but we decided to go for the smaller one, as we almost always do. We established a new personal record by getting into Russia in under 20 minutes, a big difference with the five hours it took us the year before. Maybe they just felt sorry for us as the rain was pouring down from the heavily clouded sky.

We continued on the road to the village of Zmeinogorsk, confident that there would be a guesthouse there, as we decided to treat ourselves after a few days of rain and camping. Indeed there was one and when I entered, the lady behind the counter looked at me from head to toe and I just knew what she was thinking. But still I hoped for her sympathy. Dripping a combination of water and mud all over the floor of her guesthouse,



“Njet” was her firm answer when I asked her for a room. Sure another wet and stormy night in the tent wouldn’t kill us.

Much to our relief the next morning came and announced itself a beautiful day. An almost cloudless sky and warm sun were there to greet us as we packed everything up, confident that we would do a track that would take us 30 miles north east of Zmeinogorsk to a small town where there was definitely a lodge to stay. Thinking that the track would only take us an hour or so to complete, we didn’t bring any food and left with our last litre of water on what we thought would be a quick and easy ride...

The first part of the track was nice, with some terrific views of the surrounding landscape. But since it had rained a few days in a row and now the sun was giving its best, the track was completely unpredictable. The top layer of mud would start to get hard from the sun, but underneath that the slime was surely still there. I confirmed that it was a short time later, when my front tyre lost grip, dumping me in a deep pool of mud.

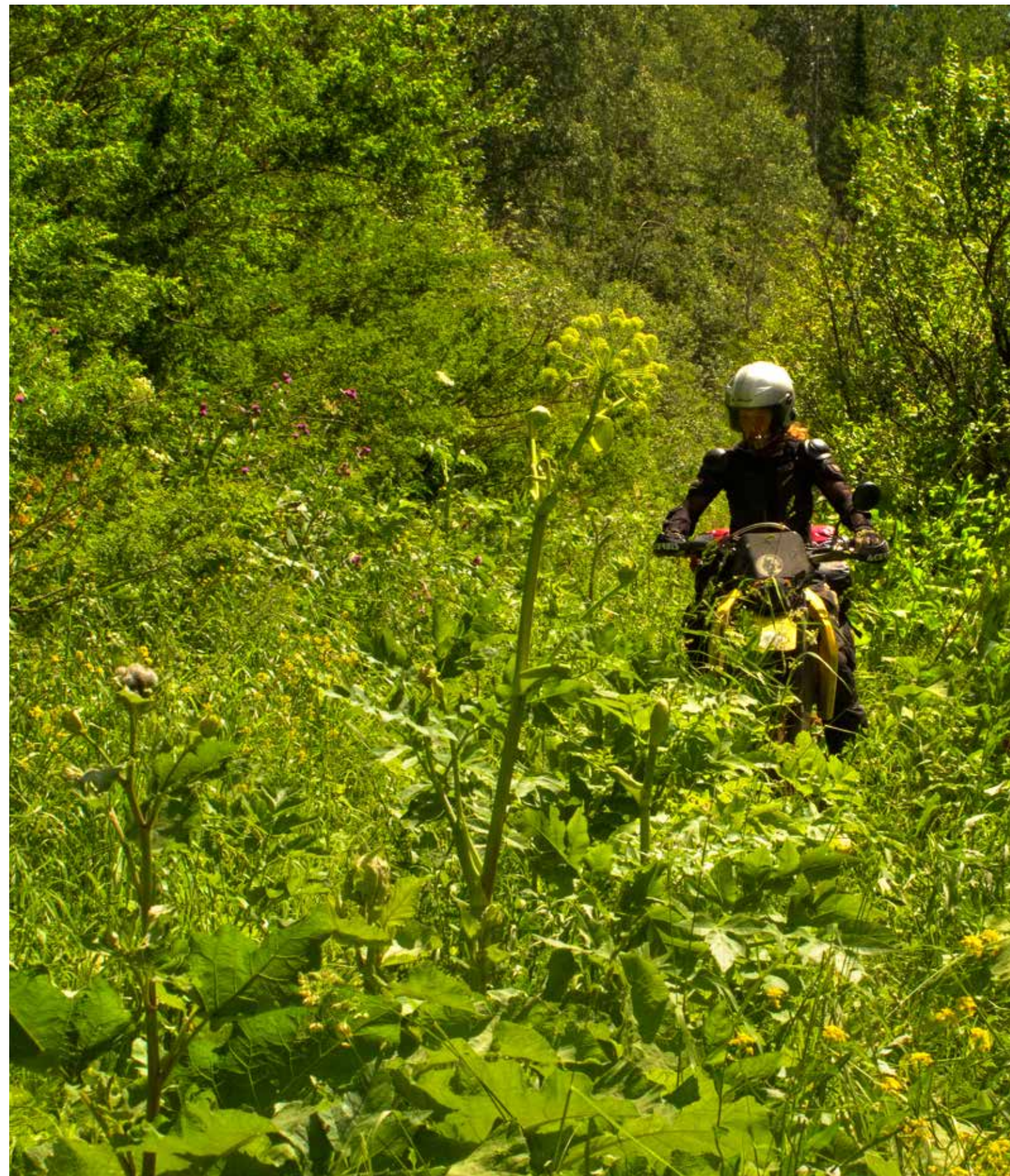
We continued only to arrive in a really dense forest and there was no sign whatsoever of the track, just a line on my GPS telling me that we were on the right path. It was clear to us that no one used this track anymore as nature had reclaimed its rightful place here.





We were now barely riding, in fact it would have been faster on foot than with the bikes. The vegetation was a foot high at its lowest, going all the way up to four feet and I was thinking “This can’t be right”. Walter’s words rang out in my head “Don’t do it if it’s raining.” He was right, but it wasn’t raining now. The sun was burning on our faces and we were going nowhere because of the mud that we were ‘riding’. It was pounding hot, yet the soil was wet and slippery as never before and with so many irregularities that even I couldn’t ride anymore without dropping the bike every now and then.

The first time Kim fell on the track she picked up her bike immediately, like a real lady adventurer. But on the fourth time she just couldn’t and screamed my name. Since I couldn’t put my bike on its stand I just dropped it where I stood and ran to her, as I could see that something was wrong. She was lying in a large pool of mud a foot lower than the bike which had fallen the other way, only a small tree holding it from falling into a ditch several feet lower where there would be no way to get it back as it was that steep.





Kim was completely exhausted and really needed a break, but this wasn't the place nor the time. The horse-flies were eating us alive since we had only our mesh armour on. They really bite and don't let go, so it actually hurts. With one hand we tried to keep them away and with the other hand we tried to keep the bike up, with not a lot of success at either. Was this supposed to be fun? Was this what we wanted after riding off road for two months already on our bikes faraway from home? Being eaten alive by huge horse-flies, under a pounding sun with no water or food on a hellish track, I started to doubt she would forgive me for this day.

From time to time we saw from the vegetation that a motorcycle had passed here not so long ago, and a little later we found a tent near the track, but nobody was there. Inside the tent we found spare parts, clothing, tires and an English book so it had to be from a fellow overlander, but there was no sight of him or his bike. The tent was infested by flies and so we left a note and carried on, wildly speculating at what could have happened or whose tent it actually was. A bit further we saw what was a giant hole in the ground and we started to get an idea of what might have happened here. It took us some

effort to get around that hole and about an hour and a few water crossings later we heard a distinct sound that we knew – a motorbike!

There in the middle of what is probably one of the most awful tracks in the world we met Phil and Felix, two British guys. Phil had dived, with his bike, into the hole and after a day trying to get the thing out, they went for help on Felix's machine and a tractor pulled the bike out. Now they were coming back to get the rest of their stuff.

We arrived at the lodge only to find out that Kim had a tick in her belly. Knowing that in Siberia you have a two percent chance of dying from this, immediate action was required. Yana, the owner of the lodge, called for Andrei, who came to the rescue with a bottle of vodka and three glasses, one for him, one for Kim and one for the wound once he would have removed the tick. "Da, Medicine!" he was telling Kim as he urged her to drink the vodka as he removed the tick. The combination of utter fatigue, only a litre of water, some cookies and a hell of a day on the track meant that when Kim swallowed the vodka I watched her eyes turning and she just fell into my arms, dead drunk at once... ♦



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