



# Heading East

Husband and wife **Seb** and **Kim Leeson** embark on a weird and wonderful adventure through Central Asia, riding a pair of Suzuki DRZs...

"Are you crazy?" my wife said to me in disbelief. "I'm not sure this is a good idea. But I won't let you go on your own, so count me in." With these words the matter was settled. This was a year ago, when I told her that I had a wild idea that involved her, me, two dirtbikes and a few months going east.

True, the whole idea was absurd to do it on a small 400cc off-road bike with no comfort, no support, not a lot of money, just a real adventure off the beaten track to Mongolia and beyond. So after sorting all the visas, plotting off road trails into the GPS, ordering new tyres in Siberia, equipping the bikes and choosing carefully what to take with us, off we went, eastwards, with two old Suzuki DRZ's, for some life changing adventures.

We drove as fast as we could to the Polish/Ukrainian border, as our plan was to start our adventure in Ukraine. We've been there before and we liked the country a lot, as it's cheap, has lots of backroads and they love bikers. What could go wrong? The weather wasn't great, to say the least, but we had a lot of fun riding (literally) through fields, sandy tracks and mudpools, while trying to dodge the heavy rains. One evening we finally found our way back to a major road as we wanted to stay in a hotel to dry all our stuff, since we had been wild camping the previous days. Two more kilometers to the hotel... and there it was... the first flat tyre of the trip!

I didn't fancy changing the tube in the middle of the road, so we pushed the bike to the hotel, checked-in and started to change the tyre, only to find out an hour later that my spare tube once fitted had also gone flat! After some cursing, I started changing everything again, patching the tube, putting it all into place.... still flat. How was this possible? I have changed tubes more times than I care to remember over the years, and never had this problem. The next morning, after some well deserved sleep, I took the wheel off again, and started a very close inspection of the rim and the spokes, only to find the problem. One of the spokes had snapped from all the off-road abuse and had punctured every tube I'd fitted!

Since I didn't have the necessary equipment to fix the spokes and the rim, it was time to call for some help. This help came in the form of the national motocross champion of Ukraine. We spent a few hours at his home, messing around in his modified Ural Sidecar whilst we waited to get the spokes fixed! Equally bizarre, every day we spent in Ukraine we found some form of money on the ground. We still laugh about this today, as I recall putting up a tent one evening, I said to my wife "we must have run out of luck today, as we haven't found any money!" And before she could acknowledge what I had said, she looked down where she stood with the tent in her hands in the middle of this field, yes,

she looked down where she stood, and there it was, another shiny coin! We took it as good omen.

When we arrived at the Russian/Kazakh border, the guards found us somewhat suspicious, so we were 'politely' asked to wait in a room, until the chief came to have to have a word with us. When we heard that the door had been locked once the guard stepped out, we knew something was wrong. Three hours later, I was taken away for interrogation, having to show them all the footage I had on the camera and on the laptop. After another two hours, we convinced them that we were no threat to the national security of Russia and they let us go. I took off with a wheelie to the Kazakh border.

Kazakhstan is huge, flat, boring and incredibly hot during the day. But despite this, having absolutely no idea whatsoever about what to expect of this country, we can say that we were positively surprised. One night, too tired to look any further for a more suitable place out of sight, we decided to pitch our tent just near a major road, not too far from a small parking area. We were about to go to sleep when the police turned up. We were already thinking of packing up and leaving as we assumed they would probably chase us away. Quite the opposite; they came and told us that they would stay in the neighbourhood the whole night, so we could sleep without any worry. Everytime they passed for the next hour they would honk and wave, and after that, we slept like babies.

A few days later we arrived in Astana,

the capital of Kazakhstan. We usually avoid major cities and certainly capitals, but after hearing "Astana, you love it or you hate it," due to it's controversy of the mixture of new western style buildings and old soviet blocks, we decided to have a look for ourselves.

Riding into town, we stopped the first biker we saw to ask if he knew a cheap place we could stay. He took us to some rather fancy place on the other side of the city where we haggled for almost half an hour with the owner. In the end, we got a full size apartment for not even the price of a normal room, so I decided to stay a few days to recharge our mental batteries. In the meantime, my

## 6 Kazakhstan is huge, flat, boring and incredibly hot during the day 9

wife, whilst waiting outside, had got us invites to a local wedding. We were both completely knackered, but decided to go for a quick shower, change our clothes and just go for it. We got food, drinks and even presents that were intended for bride and groom. We gave our wishes to the newly weds, did some dancing and when the party was finally over, we got to bed, completely dead.

We continued our journey off road, and ended up in the polygon area of Semipalatinsk. This is an infamous nuclear test site of the soviets, in which during the cold war they detonated 456



Central Mongolia



nuclear devices in this area. Even today, the remains of this site are just sitting there, including the bunkers and some buildings, with no security at all, so we just drove in and through the whole area, although we didn't stay to camp. The whole place has a very special atmosphere to it, knowing that they just used it for war and destruction. The dead horse in the middle of the field didn't help either to make us feel more comfortable.

As in Ukraine, where not a day passed without us finding some coins on the ground, in Kazakhstan not a day passed without us getting something for free



from the locals. Every day we got food, drinks or vodka. Everyone wanted to have pictures of us with them and with the bikes, and in the end we started to almost feel like some kind of superstars, but we're not. They are so kind and generous that we felt ashamed of our way of life back at home. Or the fact that we had decent jobs to save up money to do trips like this, even if by western standards we are travelling really cheap.

We left Kazakhstan to go back to Russia, into the Altai region. This region was more fun to ride after the dry of the Kazakh steppe, as we got back to hills,

forests, but unfortunately also rain.

We teamed up with Felix and Phil for a few days, two riders that we met on a track that would become famous as 'Yana's Track'. It's a 50 kilometre stretch that will take an experienced rider ten hours to do. Even the locals don't use it anymore. We finished it in a day and dropped the bikes more times than we can remember. A few days earlier Phil drove his bike in to a hole in the ground so deep they had to use a tractor to pull it out. Apparently it was two metres down!

The next few days the tracks were so muddy that we thought we were riding

through clay. The mud just stuck to the tyres and since both BMW riders had low fenders, this caused them to fall over and over again as the mud just piled up in between the tyres and the mudguard. After a few days we decided to split up as Phil needed some parts for his bike and we didn't know at that time when they would arrive. So Kim and I continued in the direction of the Mongolian border, just the two of us again. We found our first yurt in Russia and decided to ask the baboushka (granny) if we could stay at her place. She told us that normally no, but since I have a lovely wife with me,



Sharyn Canyon, Kazakhstan

## THE BIKES

When planning trips, the 'right' choice of bike is always the biggest issue for most people. We all tend to go for bigger, more expensive and heavier. The wrong choice as experience has told me many years ago. All the money you spend on a bike, is money you don't have anymore to do the actual travelling. We choose the Suzuki DRZ-400E for this trip as they're reliable, cheap, very robust, have no electronics and are simple bikes. Maybe the main point for choosing them was that my wife felt good on this bike and could pick the bike up by herself without problems when dropping it. The main modifications on the bike were long range tanks and off course some softbags for our clothing and camping gear. I tend to take very few spares with me, just a couple of spark plugs (watercrossings) some ductape and tie wraps. And everything to repair and change your tyres, obviously. It's always a good idea to practice this before leaving home. You really don't want to change your first tube in the middle of the desert not knowing how to do this correctly.



Five star hotel

she trusted us enough so we could stay and we just had to pay for the food.

Arriving in Mongolia a guy came over to us as we refuelled the bikes and asked if we wanted to stay at his place for free. Not really knowing what to expect we decided to take another leap of faith as we already did so many times this trip, and so accepted his offer. The food was great and we had another unique experience as his daughter took us to the village showers since they had no running water. We wanted to stay a few days with them for the Naadam festival, but this was cancelled for an unknown period due to an animal illness that roamed the region and affected the horses and cows.

We decided to leave town in the vain hope of seeing something of Naadam somewhere else and thus we traversed the vast nothingness of western Mongolia, ending up on the middle route through the country and getting confronted with the fact that at some point a river we needed to cross was just not crossable on the bikes. We had crossed at least twenty rivers by this time so we knew how to deal with them, but this one was just a no go. We

followed a track that followed the route of the river, hoping there would be a bridge somewhere. We camped that night next to the river in one of the most idyllic spots ever and got company of some boys on horses from 'over the hill'. We swapped stallions briefly; I got a ride on a horse, and they got a go on the bike. I'm sure that up to this day, they are still talking about those two strangers on their yellow bikes. As we are about them, and their horses.

After a detour in to Siberia to attend

## 6 The Pamir Highway was everything I expected it to be 9

a Russian bike meeting at Lake Baikal, it was time to continue our trip, and after a train ride for us and the bikes on the Trans Siberian Railway we got back to Kazakhstan before pushing on in to Kyrgyzstan. Midway through Kyrgyzstan, in the city of Osh, my wife got seriously ill and so we decided that she would rest there whilst I would go to see the Pamir Highway by myself. She wanted to go, and also to Tajikistan, but would have been too weak to cope with the high altitude and lack of basic supplies in the country. (who said chivalry is dead!)

The Pamir was everything and even more than I expected it to be. Huge, lonely, cold, beautiful, remote, extreme. I ended up riding part of the famous M41 and afterwards the Wakhan Valley, the part where a dangerous river forms the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The plan was to ride into Afghanistan, but they closed the border two weeks earlier so no way would they let me go in. Since I couldn't resist doing something completely stupid, I took all my clothes off and went for a swim across the river to Afghanistan, the whole area filled with mines...

I survived and continued the trip, still longing for some more adventure. I ended up riding back through the Bartang Valley, a very rough area in the middle of the Pamir mountains. It was absolutely great and probably the best riding experience of the whole trip, as there is zero tourism and the views are amongst the best in the whole world. I was also invited inside the house of locals for some tea and bread as I couldn't find

## WANT TO DO THIS?

### Paperwork for you?

I am a Belgian citizen so it could be different for British, check with the relevant embassies.

I needed a visa for Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. GBAO permit for Tajikistan is also needed to ride the Pamir. If you take a normal tourist visa for Russia, all the visa and the GBAO permit combined should cost you around 220GBP. Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine are visa free, you just get an entry stamp in your passport. Valid national and international driver's license are required, but nobody ever bothered to ask for them. Just be sure to ask for the longest stay everytime you apply, you never know...

Russia, KZ, TJ and UZB are date specific, meaning that the earliest date of entry is marked on the visa and the last day you are allowed to be in the country also. If you're planning is too tight you will definitely have problems with this... pay an extra 10GBP for one or two weeks more even if you think you might need it. If your bike brakes down the day before crossing the border and you need to wait for a week, you might not be able to leave the country or enter the next one if your visa is no longer valid.

### Paperwork for the bike?

We traveled with a green card (insurance) for Ukraine and Russia. I had absolutely nothing for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan.

To cross the borders you will need your licence plate on the bike, know where the VIN number is located and the original paperwork of the bike (registration). There's no need for a CPD (Carnet de Passage), none of these countries are on the CPD system. Russia and Kazakhstan share the same customszone, so you can't leave your bike for more than three months in any of these countries. In Tajikistan they should write down the details of your bike and you'll pay about 15USD tax for temporary import of the bike. Uzbekistan is about 40USD tax, Russia, KZ and KYG have free temporary import.

### When to go?

Our summer months: June-September. Everything else is too wet or too damn cold!

### How long does it take?

It's about 7,000km to get there so you should allow yourself plenty of time. If you're in an extreme rush, it will take you a week to do

1,000km, riding every single day, missing all the good things along the road. There are two alternatives though: either you ship your bike to Kyrgyzstan (it's about 900€ for one way) and just fly in or you can always hire a small enduro bike in Kyrgyzstan for about 60€ a day if I'm not mistaken. The Pamir itself can be done in a few days, but to fully enjoy it all and venture a bit off track then two weeks could be perfect. If I would do it again, I would stay for a week or two and either fly in and hire a bike or ship mine to the region. James Cargo can transport a BMW R1200GS motorcycle to Bishkek by airfreight for £1,825 or into nearby Almaty, Kazakhstan by airfreight for £1175; [www.jamescargo.com](http://www.jamescargo.com)

### Road conditions?

The Pamir Highway (M41) can be done on a Harley. It all depends on where you're going. If you just stay on the M41 from Osh to Dushanbe then there's no real adventure in it and you can do it on any bike. It's almost completely paved and the only (and main) road in the region.

Everything off the M41 is dirtroad, meaning gravel, small rocks and occasionally some sand. The lighter the bike the better, but this is true wherever you are in the world, so you don't need one, but if you're on a big GS Adventure, you will wish you had a small enduro bike with you as you will feel a lot more confident and enjoying the scenery a lot more.

### What to pack?

This is also a tricky one, as everyone thinks differently about it. In my opinion, you could easily skip the camping gear for the Pamir, as every half day's ride there's a guesthouse. But it's just nice to pitch up your tent in the middle of nowhere on 4,000+ meters altitude. If you camp, a good sleeping bag is important, as at night it gets cold, even in summer.

Tools: whatever you think you'll need. There are absolutely no motorcycle dealers or workshops or anything in the whole region. Take at least a spark plug and tubes and the tools to fix this. If your bike is notoriously known to break down for some reason, take those parts with you also.

Clothing: even in the summer the wind can get very very cold! It wouldn't be the first time it's snowing in august in the mountains. So take some warm things with you and water every opportunity you have. There are also almost no shops so refuel yourself and the bike every time you can.



The Pamir Mountains, seen from Tajikistan



One of the many river crossings of central Mongolia

a shop to buy any. They even asked me to stay to sleep, but this time I refused politely as my wife was waiting for me in the next country. I made it back to Osh in two days, to find her still weak and not fully recovered.

In the end, we decided to sell the bikes and all our stuff in Kyrgyzstan and make a short backpack trip to Uzbekistan, since we already had those visas sorted out before leaving home. We both felt crippled without the bikes and it was a very strange feeling, after four months being on a bike, going wherever you want whenever you want to suddenly be dependable on trains and public transport. When going back to Kyrgyzstan to take a plane home the border on the Uzbek side was closed. The soldiers told us to go back to the last village to find a place to sleep, but we were both too tired and had no money left, so we slept on the groundfloor of a diner just next to the military checkpoint under the approval of the police officer there.

After everything that happened, good and bad, we decided it was time to fly back home with our hand luggage full of memories of this unforgettable trip to central asia. **ABR**

### THE PAMIR HIGHWAY

The Pamir Highway is formerly known as the M41 and passes through Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. It's the only continuous route through the Pamir Mountains and serves as a main supply route to Tajikistan's Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region. It was previously part of the ancient Silk road, running from China to the Mediterranean Sea. There is some disagreement over where the road starts, however the end of it is confirmed as being in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. The road is known as the second highest highway in the world at 4,655 metres. It is paved in some areas, but mostly unpaved. The thin red line running from China in to Pakistan on the map below is the Karakoram Highway, the route that Fern took on page 48.

