

'A rollicking tale'

MICHAEL BUERK



MISSION
MONGOLA

TWO MEN, ONE VAN...
NO TURNING BACK

DAVID TREANOR

MISSION MONGOLIA

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For Geoff, of course



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Treanor was a BBC journalist for more than 25 years, editing news bulletins for the *Today* programme and Radio 4's *Six O'clock News*. The journey was made in support of the charity Save the Children.

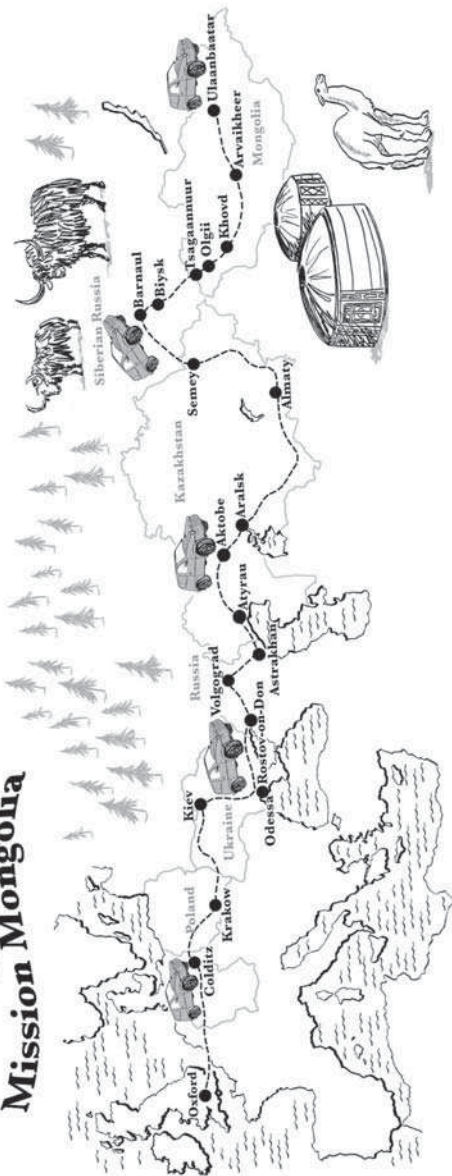


CONTENTS

Map.....	6
Chapter One: Good to Gobi.....	7
Chapter Two: Fire Up the Terrano.....	42
Chapter Three: Cops and Robbers.....	65
Chapter Four: Go East Old Van.....	103
Chapter Five: One Small Steppe for Van.....	131
Chapter Six: Catch of the Day.....	166
Chapter Seven: Almaty Progress.....	198
Chapter Eight: Testing Times.....	226
Chapter Nine: Break for the Border.....	247
Chapter Ten: No Van's Land.....	262
Chapter Eleven: Making Tracks.....	282
Chapter Twelve: Just Deserts.....	307
Chapter Thirteen: Things that go Clunk in the Light.....	326
Postscript.....	346
Bibliography.....	351



Mission Mongolia





CHAPTER ONE

GOOD TO GO*i*

THE email from senior management confirmed the rumours. The BBC was to make big job cuts – 3,000 in all. It was hoped these could be achieved through voluntary redundancies, but, if not... well, people would be told their services were no longer needed. Geoff and I were fifty-four and in our prime – prime candidates to take whatever was on offer and go. Younger colleagues with big mortgages and small families eyed us hopefully – a sacrifice was going to have to be made and they hoped we were it.

This was not an unreasonable expectation. Both of us had spent almost thirty years working day and night newsroom shifts and they were getting harder to handle. A glance in the mirror at nine in the morning after three twelve-hour nights provided convincing evidence that this was no occupation for old men. Indeed, if we wanted to live to be old men it was probably time to have no occupation. At lunchtime,

along with some of the younger members of the team, we headed to the BBC Club on the fourth floor at Television Centre. At the door, the younger ones turned left for the gym while Geoff and I turned right, for the bar.

The barman saw us coming and pulled two pints of Young's. We took our glasses and headed to our usual perch in the corner.

'Are you going to go for it?' I asked. There was no need to specify exactly what. Redundancy had been dominating conversation in the newsroom.

'I suppose so.' Geoff seemed less than fully committed. 'I don't know what I'd do, though.'

We drank in unison. I stayed silent, mainly because I didn't have any idea of what I'd do either. Escape seemed the first priority; once under the wire it was a case of keep running and hope for the best.

Geoff went to the bar for a couple of refills. I picked up a newspaper discarded by an earlier drinker. When he came back, I had our plan.

'We're going to Mongolia,' I said, ignoring his look of exaggerated scorn. 'A road trip for charity, a group called Go Help. They're looking for people who'll buy an old van or pickup, drive to Mongolia any route you feel like, hand it over to the locals on arrival, they auction it to raise some cash to help local children and, hopefully, someone gets a useful vehicle. And we raise more cash for children's charities before we go.' I tapped the newspaper. 'Piece about it in here.'

Geoff glanced at the article. 'It says they don't provide any backup.'

‘That’s true,’ I admitted, relieving him of the paper before he got to the bit about extreme temperatures, bandits and driving across rivers.

‘When did you last look under the bonnet of your car?’ he inquired.

This was something of an embarrassment. My car had refused to start a couple of weeks ago, and not only had I failed to find the cause, I had failed even to release the catch which held the bonnet down. The AA man had been polite and hadn’t even smirked. I suppose they go on training courses entitled ‘Staying Impassive When Faced With Almost Total Ignorance’.

‘It’ll be fine. We’ll get it serviced before we go. Anyway, you know about engines and stuff.’

‘Dave,’ said Geoff, the scornful look returning, ‘I might know more than you, but being able to top up the oil and check the water level in the windscreen washer bottle does not really qualify me for the job of expedition mechanic.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ I said, encouraged by this admission of A-level mechanical skills.

‘How far is it anyway?’ asked Geoff.

I consulted the newspaper. ‘Says here, at least eight thousand miles, maybe more depending on which route you choose. You can take as long as you like, though, it’s up to you. Deserts, mountain ranges, off-road driving, sounds brilliant.’

‘We’d have to get a four-wheel drive van.’

‘Of course.’

‘And get it properly prepared by someone who knew what they were doing.’

‘Naturally.’

‘And when do you have to set off?’

‘You can go any time you like. You sign up to the charity, let them know when you’re starting and they arrange the import papers.’

Geoff went silent. I could see a mental struggle going on between the common sense half of his brain and the part which hankered after a bit of adventure. It was a close call. He gulped down another large swig of his beer.

‘Yeah OK.’

We clinked glasses. Some of our colleagues walked past from the gym, freshly showered and ready for the afternoon’s work.

‘Time for one more to celebrate?’ I suggested.

‘I think we have just cause,’ agreed Geoff. I felt we would make a good team.

Back in the newsroom, I wandered over to the foreign desk and borrowed their very large atlas of the world and flicked through the pages tracing a putative route with my finger. After France, Germany and Poland came Ukraine, the names of the cities familiar from past bulletins – Lviv and Kiev, scenes of big demonstrations in support of the Orange Revolution which brought Viktor Yushchenko to power, his pock-marked poisoned face evidence of how rough politics can be in the former Soviet states. Then down to Odessa – hadn’t there been a song written about that city? I put the question to Adam, a bookish journalist with a first class degree in Law from Cambridge but, more importantly, a Google-sized knowledge of pop music.

He paused from preparing the next hour's news summary. 'Indeed there has,' he confirmed. 'The Bee Gees, 1969. It was the title track off the album and, to be precise was called 'Odessa', open brackets, 'City on the Black Sea', close brackets. As I recall there were some strange lyrics, including stuff about moving to Finland and loving the vicar.'

Adam returned to his keyboard. I was going to miss being around such extraordinary knowledge. My finger moved on, crossing into Russia and reaching Volgograd – Stalingrad as it was known when it was the scene of the most epic battle of World War Two – then down to the Caspian, turn left and into Kazakhstan. Thanks to the comedian Sacha Baron Cohen the words 'Kazakhstan' and 'Borat' are inextricably linked. Which, if you are Kazakh, must be extremely irritating. In the atlas, it looked to be a huge country, about the size of Western Europe with a great deal of desert and very few roads. I followed a route across to the east, close to the border with China. I was now entering an area where the names of the cities might have given the BBC pronunciation unit pause for thought. They all seemed to feature lots of 'z's and 'y's.

I followed a road up to the north and back into Russia, the Siberian region, turning right for Mongolia. The contours of the mountains became more densely packed, with figures above 10,000 feet common. Then, once over the border, it looked about a thousand miles to Ulaanbaatar across a big, empty country. I emailed Geoff an outline of the route.

'Big Country, Adam, anything known, m'lud?'

'Frontman Stuart Adamson, who came from Dunfermline,' said Adam continuing to type. The deadline for the next

summary was only a few minutes away. ‘They found a rather novel way of making their guitars sound like bagpipes. Most famous song was “In a Big Country”, which, I’m fairly certain, was their only US top forty hit. The summary is ready for you to check through.’

I stopped my dreaming of big countries far away and concentrated on a spot of work. More economic gloom, violence in Iraq, an inquiry announced into a case where social workers had failed to spot child abuse, a survey showing a rather disturbing thirty-four per cent of people questioned believed evidence of UFOs was being hidden from the public by the government and, near the bottom, another news item which caught my eye – police in southern Russia were searching for a gang of men who hijacked a van which had been driven from Germany, and forced the driver to lie by the side of the road while they drove over his legs to prevent him raising the alarm. Nasty. And just the sort of news item to put Geoff off the suggested route I had just emailed him.

‘This Russian hijack story Adam, where has that come from?’

‘On Reuters a few hours ago – I was just doing a quick trawl back to find something to vary the mix a bit. Do you think it doesn’t quite make it?’

‘Well, maybe not quite. If it had been a Brit driver, of course, that would have been fine. But a German? And they didn’t actually kill him. Maybe it would be best to drop it and put back in that story about the Government minister who wants compulsory health checks for skinny models.’

‘OK, will do. You’re right. Probably doesn’t quite cut it. And it’s a long way away.’ Adam made the changes and sprinted down to the studio with the summary.

A few weeks later came the news from the Human Resources Department, as personnel is now called in big organisations, that our redundancy applications had been approved. It was winter, and I pencilled in a date at the end of April for us to set off, giving us a few months’ preparation. I reckoned this would be the ideal time – we’d reach Mongolia before the rains in July and August and we could cross deserts in Mongolia and Kazakhstan before the high summer temperatures, which can, in Kazakhstan at least, hit 50°C and more. From Geoff’s point of view this scenario had one big downside – we’d be travelling on our own. If we left a couple of months later we could set off with others who were taking part in an official Mongolia charity rally, giving the prospect of some company en route and perhaps some help if things went wrong.

He had already been open about his worries – ‘Whenever I think about it, the prospect just seems so daunting that I start to feel queasy’ he told me. This feeling wasn’t eased when he began some detailed research on Mongolia, majoring in Deadly Diseases. He rang me with some of his findings.

‘Have you heard of TBE?’ he inquired. I confessed ignorance.

‘Tick-borne encephalitis,’ he explained. ‘Very common in Mongolia. Basically, you’re camping, this tick which lives in the grass nips out and bites you, your brain swells up you go into a coma, then you die.’

‘There’s probably a jab we can get,’ I replied, optimistically.

‘There is,’ said Geoff. ‘I’ve looked into it. Trouble is, it’s only ninety per cent effective.’

‘That sounds pretty good,’ I told him encouragingly. ‘That’s practically a hundred per cent.’

‘Dave, it isn’t a hundred per cent. It’s ninety per cent. That means out of every ten people who have the jab and get bitten, one is going to die. It’s a sort of Mongolian roulette. Given that the stakes are so high, those are not great odds.’

Well, put like that I had to concur, although I did feel that Geoff’s pessimistic side was kicking in.

‘Then there’s rabies,’ he continued.

‘Everywhere has rabies except Britain. France has rabies and you’re not going to stop going to Calais to stock up on wine are you?’

‘We are not talking about a few foxes living in the forest. We are talking one in ten dogs. And that includes family pets. Although “pets” isn’t quite the right word to describe the dogs kept by most Mongolians. I’ve been reading up about them. They’re big, they’re vicious and their chief function is to fend off attacks by wolves. In the absence of wolves, they like to practise a bit on strangers.’

I patted the head of my golden retriever, Humphrey, who was sitting in his usual position at my feet. He seemed a long way removed from his Mongolian relations, terrorised as he was by our cats and, in truth, not one to put up much of a fight against a daddy-long-legs in a bad mood. I tried to look on the positive side.

‘Well, that means nine out of ten aren’t infected! And, again, I’m sure there’s an injection you can get.’

Geoff gave what writers of popular fiction sometimes call a hollow laugh. ‘You can. And there’s one big downside.

Even if you've had the jab, once you get bitten, or even just slobbered on, you have twenty-four hours to get to a hospital. Outside of the capital, Ulaanbaatar, hospitals are fairly thin on the ground in Mongolia. And from the border to the capital is about a week's driving.'

'So the message is, if you're going to get bitten by a rabid dog, leave it until the last day or so!'

Geoff ignored me and pressed on. He'd been saving the worst until last.

'And then there's the plague.'

'What plague? Locusts? Bees? Flying ants?'

'The bubonic sort. Otherwise known as the Black Death. The plague which wiped out nearly half the population of Britain in around 1350. Interestingly, it's thought to have originated in the Gobi Desert in Mongolia and was carried to Europe by the invading Mongol army. I have some facts to hand.'

There was the sound of paper being rustled.

'First recorded instance in Europe in 1347 in the Crimea. The city of Caffa was under siege. The Mongol army decided to catapult infected corpses over the city walls. You might say the first example of biological warfare.'

'And they still have it?' Interesting as the history lesson was, I had to admit that my tenner would have been placed on the plague dying out worldwide sometime during the last couple of centuries.

'Oh yes. Carried by fleas on marmots. A very common rodent in Mongolia, often found in the cooking pot. It likes to get its own back occasionally.'

'And I don't suppose there's a jab against that?' I already knew what the answer would be.