

2004 Gobi-Kites Expedition to Mongolia

by Brian Cunningham

The failure of the IceKites expedition in Antarctica over Christmas and New Year 2002/3 left me bruised (Rucksack Journal 2003/4). But by the time Christine and I had completed our unforgettable hike down the John Muir Trail from Yosemite to Mount Whitney in 2003, I'd decided to 'test the water' on a long-held idea of kite-buggying across a desert. This time I got the winds right and in September 2004 we successfully completed the first kite-buggy crossing of the Gobi Desert in Mongolia, covering 1000km in 17 days. The team consisted of myself and Christine, Pete Ash and Kieron Bradley.

The Gobi Expedition

Mongolia is the perfect place for kite-buggying. It is a large country with a very small population and as yet no concept of land ownership. It is known as 'The land without fences'. Although the North of Mongolia is mountainous and unsuitable for kite-buggying, the Southern half of the country is relatively flat. This is the Gobi region, a vast area of rolling plains and desert. The more we learnt about the Gobi, the more suitable it appeared to be for a kite-buggy expedition. It seemed to have everything we were looking for, including a special sense of magic. This was Genghis Khan's



Kieron Bradley, Brian Cunningham, Pete Ash.

Photo Christine Cunningham



Brian waiting for the wind.

Photo Christine Cunningham

land. It was here in the 13th century that he raised the army that went on to conquer virtually all of the known world. His descendants, the Mongolian nomads, still live in the Gobi.

With huge distances between wells and no detailed maps to work from, it was obvious that we would need local support for the expedition. I contacted Bernard van der Haegen, the Belgian owner of 'The Happy Camel Travel Company' in Ulaanbaatar to ask for his help. It transpired that Bernard was a keen paraglider and kite-buggier who had already done some kiting in the Gobi.



Old meets new.

Photo Christine Cunningham

'I think a kite buggy expedition across the Gobi is a great idea' he said. 'I can organise the support and I might join you for a few days if that is OK?'

It was music to my ears. Relevant information on the Gobi had proved difficult to come by and Bernard's first-hand experience was precisely what we needed. Thereafter he was quoted repeatedly when the inevitable 'Do you really know what you're letting yourselves in for?' questions arose.

We landed at Ulaanbaatar airport at 8.45am on the morning of 31st Aug. Bernard's right-hand man met us and took us directly to where the two expedition crates were stored. Two Russian 4 x 4 minivans appeared and by mid-afternoon they were both loaded up and we were on our way Westwards towards Altai where we planned to start the kiting. The prevailing wind in the Gobi blows from the North-West so we'd chosen a West to East crossing in the hope that we'd be able to carry a fair wind for most of our journey. It took us three and a half days to drive to our start point, a distance of approximately 1000km. Within a few miles of the capital we'd run out of tarmac roads. The main highway deteriorated into what was little better than a lattice-work of rutted farm tracks. We took careful note of the terrain as we went along and we became increasingly alarmed at how tough it looked.

We spent a day at our start point erecting buggies and setting up kites. The weather was still and hot – ideal for the work we had to do but far from perfect for kiting. Although we all seemed relaxed that evening around the camp fire, I knew that Kieron, Pete and I had lots of butterflies in our stomachs. From what we'd seen of the terrain, our first couple of days looked hard. First of all it was hillier than we'd expected and secondly the ground was covered in tough shrubs and fierce thorn bushes. Before the expedition I'd been most worried about the wind but now it began to look as if the terrain might prove to be the deciding factor.

They say fortune favours the brave and so it was the next morning. We awoke to a light Westerly wind which showed signs of gradually increasing. Pete put up a 5.5m kite to test the wind and within minutes became overpowered as the wind rapidly rose. Out came the small kites. We lit the blue touch paper on the expedition and tore off Eastwards. Within minutes we were all over the place. The wind was far from steady as it tumbled across the land. Keeping our kites in the air wasn't easy and once dropped it was a five to ten minute job to sort it out and get it re-launched. However, progress was fast and furious. When the wind finally began to die we'd covered over 50km but we were spread out across several kilometres – not a good idea in an empty desert with nightfall approaching. It was apparent we needed a more disciplined kiting system. Over dinner that night we

pooled our experiences and decided to have one minivan drive ahead a kilometre at a time towards our distant GPS waypoint. It would then move off as the kites approached, staying in the lead all the time. The second van would follow and help the back-marker with his kite if it fell, thereby minimising delays. Each minivan had a walkie-talkie so the lead minivan could be called by the rear minivan if one of us got too far behind. On those occasions the lead minivan would turn around and face the kites as they approached. This was the signal to stop and regroup before setting off again when the back marker eventually arrived. We gradually learnt to discipline ourselves and by the end of the expedition this had become a slick process which worked well.

The next couple of days were windless and we gnashed our teeth and sweated in the hot sun as we waited. For a few days this became the pattern, a really good day with a strong Westerly followed by a frustrating calm day. On only one occasion was the wind against us and on that day we managed only 12km. If anything the terrain became rougher and we worried about how much punishment the buggies could take. Then Kieron spectacularly broke a rear axle in a high speed collision with a solid hummock. Fortunately we had a spare. The kites took some awful punishment without any significant damage and we blessed the tyre-sealant in our wheels as we crashed through the thorn bushes. As a gesture of defiance, on one windless and sweltering day we man-hauled our buggies 20km.

During the next two weeks the winds gradually improved and we made decent progress most days. One day we made a route-finding error and took a massive dog-leg up into the mountains. The wind gradually strengthened to around 50kph and for a period at the end of the day hit 65kph. We flew our smallest kites (1.8m) and blessed our off-line flying systems which meant that the kites pulled our buggies, not us. It was dangerously fast at times but our luck held and we were fortunate to finish the day intact.

Daily distances climbed as we got further into the Gobi but the best we managed was still only 81km. I say only, because this distance can be easily notched up in a few hours on a beach. However, the tough terrain severely restricted our speed and a typical kiting day was short. The wind rarely came up before noon and usually died down again between 4pm and 5pm.

We crossed the Gobi from West to East, covering over 1,000km in our buggies in seventeen days. I can honestly say that had we known ahead of the expedition how rough the terrain was, we might well have questioned the feasibility of the expedition. However, having succeeded, it made our achievement much sweeter.

We all fell in love with the Gobi and its proud and resourceful nomadic people. Although Mongolia is one of the most thinly-populated countries in

the world, we never felt isolated or alone. Sometimes in the middle of nowhere, a visitor would appear out of the blue, riding on a camel, or a horse or a motorbike. He would look in amazement at our buggies and kites before riding off into the distance. We never saw a nomad with a compass, let alone a GPS.

One incident in particular typified life in the Gobi. Early in the expedition I managed to wreck the computer charging system. It was 9pm and already dark. Peter had done sterling work trying to fix the problem before concluding the only solution was to get a 240v motor generator.

‘Where could you buy a generator in the Gobi?’ I asked hopelessly.

Believe it or not, by 1am the next morning we had our generator. We’d purchased it from a nomad family whose ger we’d spotted about 40km back along the trail. They had happily parted with their generator for \$150 and would do without electricity for a few months until they next went up to Ulaanbaatar.



Desert storm.

Photo Christine Cunningham