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## The long and winding road: 2016 Mongol Rally

Written by [Drew Gurian](#) Published in [Explorers \(/people/explorers\)](#)[\(/media/k2/items/cache/a199a6337ec746064a3cf56a9850e475\\_XL.jpg\)](#)

Water crossings in Mongolia proved tougher than expected

[Drew Gurian](#)

For most, taking a 53-day, 11,000-mile road trip through 18 countries, eight time zones, five mountain ranges and a few deserts, may sound crazy, but that's how Drew Gurian spent last summer, driving to Mongolia in the 2016 Mongol Rally

The premise of the Mongol Rally is as follows: buy a small, rubbish car with an engine capacity under 1.2 litres. Raise at least £1,000 for charity. Then, drive from England to Mongolia. You're provided with a start and finish line, but no support from the Rally's organisers along the way, so it's up to you to plan your own route and get to the end in one piece.

I'm a photographer based in Brooklyn, New York, and my brother, Scott, is a long-time print and radio journalist who lives just outside of the state. Growing up, we rarely went on typical family summer holidays. Our mother was a dive master, so instead, over the years, we racked up quite a few passport stamps from places such as Belize, Bonaire, and the Cayman Islands. Seeing a huge octopus on your first ever night snorkel at the age of 12 certainly leaves a lasting impression on a young mind. Travel and adventure has been in our blood ever since, and we're always seeking out the next epic journey. Since our mother passed away in 2008, my brother and I have tried to go on at least one exceptional trip every year. Before taking on the Mongol Rally, we had visited the likes of mainland Ecuador, the Amazon, the Galápagos Islands, Thailand, Cambodia, and Cuba.

While in Cuba in 2014, we hit it off with a lovely British couple living in Australia, Rosi and Alan. Rosi told us about this adventurous trip she was planning to do in 2016 with her best friend Jane. She asked if we'd be interested in joining them, and without hesitation, we were in.



Waiting at the start line at Goodwood in West Sussex

By winter of 2015, we were in full production mode, trying to piece together all the necessary elements to make the trip a reality. After several conversations with Rosi, we came up with a route plan and talked over timing, getting visas, must-see sights, and fund-raising. Our planned route went as follows: UK, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, and finally Mongolia.

Our next task was to find a car, which proved to be a fun challenge. We knew we'd be convoying with Rosi and Jane for the entire rally, so wanted to get two of the same models of vehicle to make any potential part-exchanging easier. After much deliberation, we settled on two Nissan Micras which, despite their look, were said to have had the highest success rate at the rally in previous years. At 990ml and 60hp, they were about as powerful as a self-propelled lawn mower, but we put our faith in them to get us to the finish.

As the rally approached, we made shopping lists for gear and got to the UK with enough lead time to prep our cars, and get comfortable driving with a manual gearbox (another new challenge for us both). We each purchased six new winter tires – four to put on the car, and two spares for the roof – and fitted roof racks with Jerry cans, got some camping and cooking supplies, and covered the cars in sponsor decals and the names of friends who donated to our charities. We were ready.

On 16 July we met the other teams at the Goodwood Racecourse, a few hours south of London, for the pre-launch party. The next morning, along with 300 other vehicles and 1,000 participants, we made our way onto the racetrack for one full lap, before departing for Mongolia.

Having never been on a trip like this before, it was fascinating to see how much ground we could cover in Europe in just a few short days. Staying with some friends in Belgium and Germany, we soon made our way to the Transfăgărășan Highway in Romania, one of the highlights of the early part of the trip. This windy, scenic stretch of road was once named the best driving location in the world by the TV show *Top Gear*, and I can't begin to tell you how much fun we had driving on it



The Transfăgărășan Highway in Romania has been described as one of the best driving roads in the world (Image: Drew Gurian)

Prior to setting out, we gave some serious thought to the next leg of our journey that would take us through Turkey. On 28 June there had been a terrorist attack in Istanbul's Atatürk Airport, killing 45 people. Then on 15 July, just two days before we started the rally, there was an attempted coup. Since we were planning to enter the country only one week later, we reached out to several friends for some on-the-ground perspective. After lengthy conversations, we decided to still head through Turkey, but with a modified itinerary. We bypassed Istanbul and headed directly to Cappadocia in the east, a beautiful, ancient city where early Christians hid to escape persecution.

From Turkey we headed into Iran, a country that very few Americans have ever been to, let alone know much about. Though we went there with open minds, we were still blown away by the hospitality we received, which was unlike anything we've ever experienced elsewhere in the world. People talked and walked with us just because they wanted to meet an American. Others pulled alongside us on the highway to have a conversation while driving. I lost count of how many toll collectors said 'Welcome to Iran!' before waving us through without taking any actual money. One family even gave us a melon at a petrol station as a welcoming gift. This all helped to keep our spirits high while driving through the blistering hot Iranian desert in July with no air conditioning (another 'fun' fact about our tiny cars).

After nine days in Iran we crossed into Turkmenistan, one of the stranger places you could ever hope to visit. The buildings in the capital of Ashgabat are almost entirely white, and the city has been described as a mix between Las Vegas and Pyongyang. One purpose of our trip here was to see the 'Door to Hell,' the former Soviet natural gas field that collapsed in 1971. Geologists set it alight, apparently thinking it would burn out in a few days, but it's been burning ever since. It was one of the most breathtaking sights I've ever encountered.

Turkmenistan is also where our car troubles really started to emerge. After overheating several times in Europe and running into radiator overflow tank issues, here we blew our head gasket and radiator in the same day. Since our visas were expiring the next day, we had to get towed across the border into Uzbekistan, where we had to wait for nine days for a new head gasket to arrive from Dubai. We all suffered stomach bugs while there, so if there was a bright side to that, at least we were stationary for a bit.



Kyrgyzstan saw some epic mountain scenery

We finally made it through Uzbekistan and into Tajikistan where we spent five days on the Pamir Highway. It is known as one of the most dangerous roads in the world due to its exposed rocky mountain passes and high altitude. A road that can prove challenging for 4x4 vehicles certainly took a toll on our tiny cars and drivers. The first few days took us across the river from the northern Afghan border, and we continued to climb several epic mountain ranges, reaching a peak altitude of 14,300ft. We continued north into Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia and then into Mongolia.

On our second day in Mongolia, we heard there would be some ‘water crossings.’ We made it through one, only to get caught in the second, requiring Rosi and Jane to tow us out. A third seemed impassable, so we took a bit of a detour and each time we tried to reconnect with the original route we failed miserably. We eventually came to another river crossing, but there was no way around it. After attempting, and failing to cross, we got completely stranded in the middle of nowhere, with no help in sight. Thankfully, we brought along a satellite communicator and sent texts to a few friends to find us some local help – not an easy task in a remote location with incredibly limited resources, but somehow it worked. Within hours, the US Embassy was in touch letting us know that NEMA (National Emergency Management Agency) was dispatched to come get us.

After a fairly stressful night waiting for help, and snapping our car’s rear axle on the way out, we somehow managed to make it all the way to the finish line a few days later. Though this may all sound like an utter disaster, mostly due to car troubles, it was an awe-inspiring expedition and I still can’t believe we actually finished it.

This 53-day trip was all about the adventure. Through all of the ups and downs, we somehow managed to make it through and now we have so many great stories to share. But, would I do this exact trip again? Probably not. However, I would certainly go back and revisit some of these places. I guess it’s time to start planning the next big adventure.

**Drew Gurian is a New York City-based portrait photographer, focusing on music and entertainment cultures. You can see his work at [drewgurian.com](http://www.drewgurian.com) (<http://www.drewgurian.com>). His brother, Scott Gurian, hosts a travel and adventure podcast called [Far.From.Home](http://farfromhomepodcast.org/) (<http://farfromhomepodcast.org/>)**



At the finish line with Rosi and Jane

## TEN OF THE BEST

While the car would obviously be the main piece of equipment for a rally from England to Mongolia, for Drew Gurian, it was the other items that would ensure the trip would go as smoothly as it could. From in-car entertainment, to reliable communications (and the necessary power to keep them all charged up), the gear was as much about keeping the passengers running as it was the vehicle. Of course, a tow rope can always come in handy from time to time...

### 1. Communications

**Delorme inReach – £359; 213g (<http://amzn.to/2nluv7c>)**

The one piece of gear that proved more important than any other. Phone reception was non-existent in many places, and even road maps proved inaccurate. The Delorme let us know exactly where we were, enabled us to send texts via satellite, and got us help when needed.

### 2. Radio

**BaoFeng UV-5R 2-Way Radios – £99; 204g (<http://amzn.to/2nyRhJA>)**

Though not the most user-friendly layout for an amateur radio user, these proved to be really helpful for communicating between vehicles. Battery life was great, and when used with a magnetic rooftop antenna, they provided impressive range.

### 3. Digital storage

**SanDisk 64GB MicroSDXC – £29.99; 0.5g (<http://amzn.to/2nyGqzc>)**

Whether you're using a GoPro or other action camera, get yourself a couple of high capacity SD cards. The price has dropped on memory so much there's no need to worry about running out of space. Two of these could keep our GoPro shooting time-lapses all day for a week.

### 4. Rope

**AA 3.5 Tonne Tow Rope – £11.99; 640g (<http://amzn.to/2nlscBe>)**

Though we didn't expect to use this much, it ended up being a lifesaver on several occasions. I'm embarrassed to say just how many times Rosi and Jane had to tow us, but without it, we would have been in much bigger trouble.

### 5. Music player

**Apple 128GB iPod – £379; 88g (<http://amzn.to/2nyHxPs>)**

As great as it is to soak in all the nature your eyes can see, 53 days in a car is a very long time. We loaded these up with tons of music and just as many podcasts.

#### 6. Device charger

**Anker PowerCore 15600mAh Portable Power Bank – £55; 368g**  
(<http://amzn.to/2nQkStX>)

These things take a while to charge up, but once they're full you can charge a smartphone or just about any other small piece of tech for days at a time. They're not the lightest pieces of kit, but if you need power, they're a great option.

#### 7. Solar power

**Anker 21W 2-Port USB Solar Charger – £50; 416g** (<http://amzn.to/2nyRD2I>)

Another great option for charging your tech, but even as big as it is, it works best with a portable battery like the Anker Power Bank above. Solar of this size is extremely slow to charge phones so is best used to keep juice running into a power bank, which you can then trickle charge your tech from.

#### 8. Multi-tool

**Leatherman Wave – £130; 249g** (<http://amzn.to/2mDECjp>)

You never know when you'll need pliers, a screwdriver or a can opener, and these multi-tools are perfect to help get you out of trouble. I try to carry two of these on any trip – which is great, because sometimes Russian customs like to steal them (and iPods, for the record).

#### 9. Shoes

**Keen Men's Clearwater CNX – £75; 255g (each)** (<http://amzn.to/2nyWaSQ>)

Keens are funny looking shoes, but I own a few pairs, and these are perfect for hot weather. They're totally breathable, great as water shoes, have a solid foot bed and a strong toe box making them a good fit for summer hikes as well.

#### 10. Jacket

**North Face Men's Redpoint Optimus – £170; 600g** (<http://amzn.to/2nltf45>)

One of the best outdoor gear buys I've ever made. It's warm enough to wear as an outer layer in the winter, but compresses into a tiny ball and zips up into the internal pocket. It's the perfect jacket to throw in your bag on a long trip, knowing that you have all possible climates covered.

#### DON'T FORGET

... Luci Inflatable Solar Lights. Throw them on the dashboard or your backpack for an afternoon, and you have a few of these ready to go whenever you need light. Perfect for when you need to do a fast repair or cook a quick meal.

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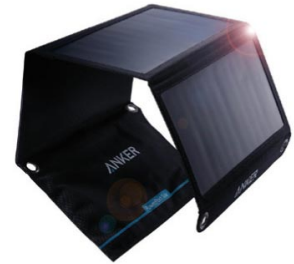
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