

Guzzi Overland update

We left Kevin and Karen Browne as they departed Aktau in Kazakhstan, heading east via Uzbekistan. Read on . . .

June 2010, Bad luck in Kazakhstan

We were doing really well until we left Aktau headed for Uzbekistan. The road is notoriously bad, mostly dirt and sand but we were doing OK until trying to avoid several big holes we ended up riding along a nasty loose slope and I had no choice but to go down as I could feel I was losing grip. At the bottom was the mother of all holes that knocked the wind out of us. I felt something break when we hit the bottom. Releasing the clutch confirmed the fact that we had no drive. I suspected we had broken a driveshaft – a big problem considering we were in the middle of the Kazak steppe, a arid scrubby desert about 250 km from anywhere and the temperature in the sun was in the high 40s.

We knew that we had to get out of there and fast. There are a lot of trucks on that road and luckily the next one that came along was a flatbed artic with ramps on the back. We winched the bike onto the back – a scary process as the bed was about 5 feet high and the ramps steep with only 3 inch wide metal beams to try to keep the tyres on. The bike then had the beating from hell as it travelled another 250 km on rutted potholed dirt roads. We are currently in Beyneu having spent several days repairing the damage and hopefully tomorrow we will be ready for a test ride. But a lot more besides has happened since – crooked taxi drivers and Kazak bureaucracy have conspired to make it a hell of a week.

June 27, Beynau

The ride in the lorry was rough for us but the poor Guzzi took the brunt. A couple of times we had to stop to tighten the straps and eventually we left her on her side leaning on the panniers. We know we lost stuff as it bounced along hopefully not too much.

**"I received your letter yesterday,
about the day the driveshaft broke ... " ***
** to the tune of Desolation Row (apologies to Bob Dylan)*

Lucky for us we had a contact in Beynau through Horizons Unlimited, a travellers' website, so we knew there was a workshop (Loysha's). Arriving, our problems weren't over – the lorry driver had overtightened the ratchet straps on the handlebars which were rubber mounted, this caused them to strip their threads and move. The straps had also been chafing all the intercom and other wiring and now the winch didn't work. The reason the bike was lying on its side was the force had caused the side stand to bend and for some reason we had no steering, no worries when you're 5ft up on a flat bed. Lucky we had we negotiated the fee with the lorry driver and paid up or it might have doubled. Five of us manhandled her into Victor's workshop. Looking her over, Victor thought we had had an accident as the damage looked so bad. He opened his workshop to us and gave up his room – what a star. We collapsed for an hour or so then went to assess the damage.

Along with fixing the drive shaft which had sheared, the lack of steering was due to a bolt wedged on one side so that was OK. The handlebars had stripped all their threads so we would have to find some longer ones and hope it holds. The intercom leads had been severed in three places along with GPS and other wires; possibly all fixable. The centre stand and side stand needed welding along with other bits of the framework to hold boxes on. That was enough to be going on with.

Realising we would now have to register our visas the next day we scored a lift into town only to find the local police don't do it. It was Aktau or Atrau both of which were 460km away back on the road we had travelled or in the opposite direction (to Atrau). Victor made it clear we would be in deep trouble with a hefty fine, \$1,000, possibly jail and organised a minibus to take us to Atrau that night and said if we turned up first thing in the morning we should only get a small fine.

July 4, Paperwork, bent taxi drivers and nice people

It felt alien and strange being reliant on others and being so far away from the Guzzi as we needed to do so many repairs. It seemed such a waste of time and money for one stamp on our visa. Having with our driver negotiated a fee of 3,000 tenge which we thought was for both of us it turns out it's each, so we duly pay up another 3,000 this leaves us short as I had deliberately only bought the bare minimum in both money and clothes leaving the rest of our stuff at Loysha's. We leave at 8.30pm for the five hour drive to Atrau. Half way we change minibuses and drivers arriving at Atrau 2.30

Kevin in Victor's workshop





a.m. We have a contact to phone who was supposed to sort us sleeping arrangements, Mike turns up a young lad with limited English. We have no money and will only kip for four hours or so before we are up again so I rashly say we will kip anywhere. He takes us to his dad's lorry yard where we are shown the back of a container to share with what turns out to be a smashing Uzbekistan driver. At now 3 a.m and still knackered from the early starts this looks bliss but it seems Atrou is plagued by mosquitoes and horse flies and we are sitting ducks.

A fairly sleepless night later we awake and my face is already looking like a teenager with severe acne due to the amount of bites. To make matters worse we are now informed it is Saturday and we can't register our visas till Monday. Stuck in the goods yard we befriend the Uzbekistan who is a star and makes us tea, shares his breakfast and later when he returns from a job makes us a hearty chicken stew. Kev helps him change a tyre as he got a puncture. We would happily stay here again if it wasn't for the horseflies as my eyelid has now swollen to epic proportions. I need antihistamine; something I have back at Loysha's but not here.

To cut a long story short we hung around the next day as well hugely frustrated as we could have been using this time to fix the Guzzi. A hotel receptionist called her English speaking friend who helped us find some antihistamine, by now I look half Kazakhstan as my eye is half shut as it's so swollen and I'm wearing my sunglasses indoors.

Monday dawns and we arrange a taxi who takes us to the wrong place; a bit of queuing later we get another taxi and roll up to the desk hand over our paperwork, it is met with lots of exclaiming and you are over your five days. A lady in the queue says we will need an interpreter to sort it out and she will arrange one. Ten minutes later he turns up but by now it's 12 noon and the visa office shuts for lunch. We are then embroiled in over four hours of paper trails, taxi rides to banks to pay the fines, powercuts so off to another bank, back to fill in more forms. Both Kev and I have to write in our handwriting what the translator wrote. We then play the waiting power game for over an hour before they finally stamp it at 7 p.m.

We decided to try to get back to Beyneu that night

as it's costing us a fortune staying here and we don't want to travel in the heat of the day. Negotiating a deal with a lad from the large crowd around us we relax having reassured ourselves we are on the right road. We are skeptical and hide excess money incase of a more money routine. All is well until we reach the half way point where he asks for petrol money. Luckily we have lots of small notes so only give him half the fare insisting he will get the rest at Beyneu. He starts to drive out of town then after a phone call does a u turn and heads back. I fling the door open which has the desired effect and he stops. After ten frustrating minutes we think we understand he has another fare to collect so we let him return to the last town. It turns out he is trying to negotiate with another taxi driver to take us the rest of the way. I disappear off to find a loo on returning I find Kev embroiled with both taxi drivers. Luckily we have been deposited outside a truckers' hotel, so we cut our losses, get out the car and leave them arguing amongst themselves. We have struck lucky – it's cheap as chips, has a café and we are given clean sheets, we have a room with four beds to ourselves. On chatting to the truckers in the café none are heading our way but they reckon we should get a lift in the morning.

We catch a lift with a nice trucky to the next town but then hang around for ages before a taxi offers to take us the rest of the way. Fee agreed, we pay half for his petrol he then does the usual of turning round back to town. The flinging open door trick works again and this time we don't fall for any nonsense but insist on Beyneu. About midday we are reunited with the Guzz and head for a well earned nap.

July 4, Reunited with the Guzz

It's about 3 p.m. Tuesday; we have lost over three days so we crack on and spend long days in the workshop. It has been such a relief to come 'home' and we feel much more relaxed, that is until 9.00pm when the first minibus driver turns up and starts ranting that we haven't paid the second 3,000 tenge, about half-hour later he disappears leaving us in peace. Next day it's almost a repeat of yesterday; work on bike during the day irate minibus driver in late evening. The satisfying thing about the language barrier is that we were able to tell the



Temporary home at Loysa's

taxi driver exactly what we thought of him without getting hit because he didn't understand a word. Kev made full use of this second time around and although it didn't translate, the meaning was obviously clear because we never saw him again.

Our bedding arrangement here is a raised platform, covered with a carpet and on to this you place covered lengths of foam to your desired softness. The dunny started off good by Kazak standards. It, like all dunnys, was situated outside the yard a good walk away. It had no door but an angled entrance enough to preserve your modesty, a wooden floor with a convenient cut out and for a while was swept clear of debris! This included discarded water bottles used to cleanse. I still used toilet paper having not got my head round the water cleansing method – it seems too complicated. The only water available is in a holding tank in the yard delivered by a tanker. The café was run well if you ignored the kittens everywhere and no hot water. The yard itself was like a graveyard for old coaches, lorries and the odd cars but the whole place was full of character and we loved it. Kev's test ride was declared a success and he reckons another day of tweaking and we will back on the road!

July 5, Two Wheels Again

What joy to be back under our own steam and independent again. With all the kerfuffle of the last week we had time to do some major thinking. We'd seen on the news the Kyrgyzstan/Uzbekistan border of Osh had riots, fighting, gun fire etc this was the one we were heading for, we thought to miss out Kyrgyzstan and apply for a second entry to Uzbekistan only by the time we were reunited with the Guzz our Uzbekistan visa only had three days left to run. With no room for the unexpected and a hard three days ride we would only just make Tashkent to apply for an extension so prudence prevailed and we are riding around the entire length and breadth of Kazakhstan in order to obtain our Mongolian visa which used to be at Almaty but may have been moved to Astana. We were recommended by an army lad in Beynau not to head out on the straightest route there as this went past some sensitive borders where more fighting was occurring. We have been back on the road over a week, free camping two

Petrol Station madness

nights and finding cheap accomadation the third in order to wash clothes ourselves etc. As we are heading north it has become noticable cooler it now resembles a hot british summertime – before this it has been silly hot. The kind of heat where by 8 a.m. you feel as though you have been out all day. When you don the bike clothing after half an hour's riding the salt has leached out of your body and left pretty patterns all over your clothing (it's a myth women don't sweat – I have salt lines to prove it). The air is so hot it's like being slowly roasted. By 2pm you're so drained from the heat you and most of the population find a tree, river or anywhere with shade and flump until at least 5.30 p.m. when you can continue again. We are almost at Astana hoping the embassy has moved here. If not, another 1,400km to Almaty only to almost return here again for the Russian border.

July 5, Thank you

We just want to say a big thank you to all who comment on our blogs – it's great to know what you all think; it cheers us up no end so please keep them coming. We are still enjoying our adventures; we knew there would be tougher bits but the good bits far outway anything we've encountered so far. As Ted Simon said, it's the interruptions that make the journey.

Kazakhstan is growing on us – the actual countryside is much the same everywhere – dry dusty plains. In the north, slightly more trees and water but it has been the people that make it, the attitude when we show up on the bike anywhere. We have christened one “petrol station madness” – this ranges from enthusiastic questions to the entire work force gathered for a photo shoot and at one we were asked to sit in chairs at the entrance for what turned out to be a tea break with biscuits!

The question on everyones lips is “Accuda, accuda” which means ‘where are you from’? Big smiles and thumbs up is the norm. We have stopped thinking something is falling off when we hear tooting as they



Astana street scene

just want to say hello. One car went by twice before motioning us to pull over. One lad insisted on giving Kev his watch and wouldn't take no for an answer, putting it in Kev's pocket. Another occurred in Astana, the capital city, queuing for the lights to change a family insisted on handing over their lunch out of the car window which turned to be very tasty vegetable cornish pasties, all just to say welcome to our city.

Some have been longer more meaningful encounters such as with the Octobe 4x4xterra club – a nicer bunch you couldn't wish to meet. A chance encounter at an automotive spares (Kev can't keep away from anything remotely mechanical) led to being taken to their club workshop where we changed the oil and did a few minor repairs. We also took the opportunity to get the side stand bracket rewelded as it was splitting.

Valerey the 15 year old daughter of one, is going on an exchange trip to London then ending up with a family in Bournemouth; she was delighted to practice her English. I would love her encounters in England to be as good as ours were here.

Last night we arrived in Astana found a cheap motel on the outskirts, we went down to the restaurant and engaged in a game of charades with the waitress as the menu was all in Kazakhstan. After flapping my arms and clucking and Kev using his fingers for horns and mooing much hilarity later we could hear them laughing in the kitchen when they told the chef we ended up with a lovely meal each, the best in a long time.

We will be in town for Astana day tomorrow, a national holiday to celebrate the town's birthday. The president will be here and music and dancing in the streets sounds good to us.

July 8th

Kazakhstan has been a country of extremes, extreme temperatures, extreme frustration and extreme kindness. The temperature has cooled a little now; I think the hot weather in the UK has probably come across Europe from here. Our frustration is partly that we cannot get our Mongolian visa in Astana and we will have to travel



to Almaty 1,500km in the wrong direction and back into the heat only to return this way to enter Russia. We were told by several people to check that the embassy hadn't moved to Astana as many have recently. When we first came here we found the embassy area and asked around. We were told by a policeman that the Mongolian embassy opened on the 8th July and that we should come back then. We went back this morning to where we had been shown and there was a promising looking crowd of people and a long wait. Whilst in the queue I happened to ask a lady that I heard speaking English 'Is this the Mongolian embassy?'

I am glad that I checked because it turned out that it was the new Russian embassy and the Mongolian one is still in Almaty. Ho Hum.

This said we have grown to love Kazakhstan despite the fact that its beaurocracy can be infuriating at times – its people are amongst the kindest we have met. We have been given food, hospitality and help from complete strangers who ask nothing in return.

We met Alexander in the street a couple of days ago and since then he has introduced us to his family and friends, given us a guided tour of the city and treated us to dinner in his restaurant all because of a chance meeting when he saw the bike parked up and came to have a look. He also let us use his laptop to organise our pictures and copy the contents of our mobiles to DVD so we can send them home, so we should be hopefully be able to add some video to the site once its edited.

Ciao, Kev and Karen

