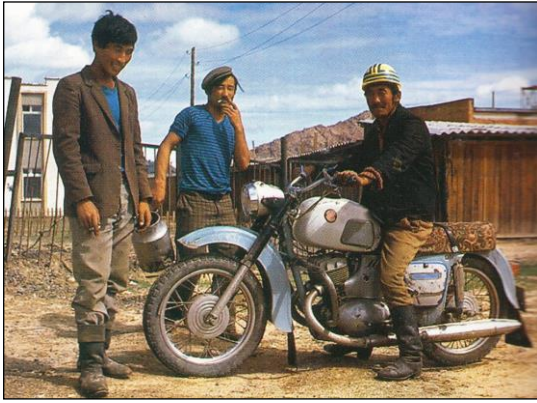


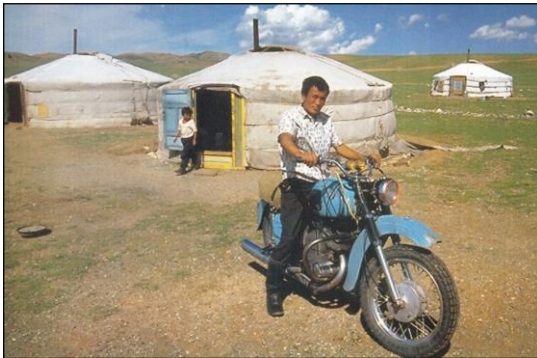
Planeta Country

Ian Robinson was the official photographer on Raleigh International's recent (1994) expedition to Mongolia led by Colonel John Blashford-Snell. A man with an interest in motorcycles, he noticed the impact the ever willing workhorse that the IZH Planeta is has made to Mongolian life. These days Mongolians buy Chinese but then



Ever since Chinggis Khan's marauding cavalry armies created the biggest empire the world has ever seen, conquering Asia from the snows of Siberia to the sands of Arabia, Mongolia has been known as the land of the horse. But there are signs that this is changing as motorcycles enter more and more into daily life, often presenting bizarre sights like two men with a fridge on the pillion, or a live sheep clutched between riders, en route to a celebratory feast.

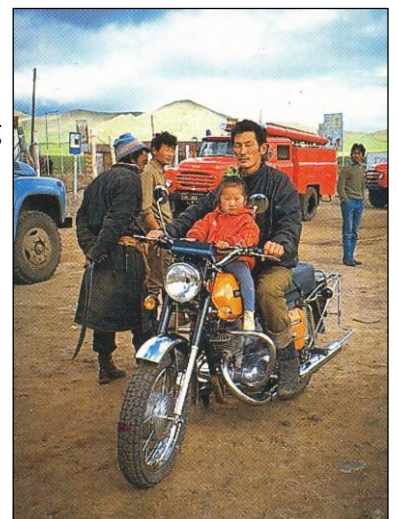
Thirty two hours across China from Beijing, with camels and the Gobi desert still imprinted on one's mind, the trans Siberian railway spirals down from verdant mountain slopes towards a sombre, depressive looking capital. Another vodka bottle smashes on the track, announcing the happy homecoming of celebrating Mongolian passengers.



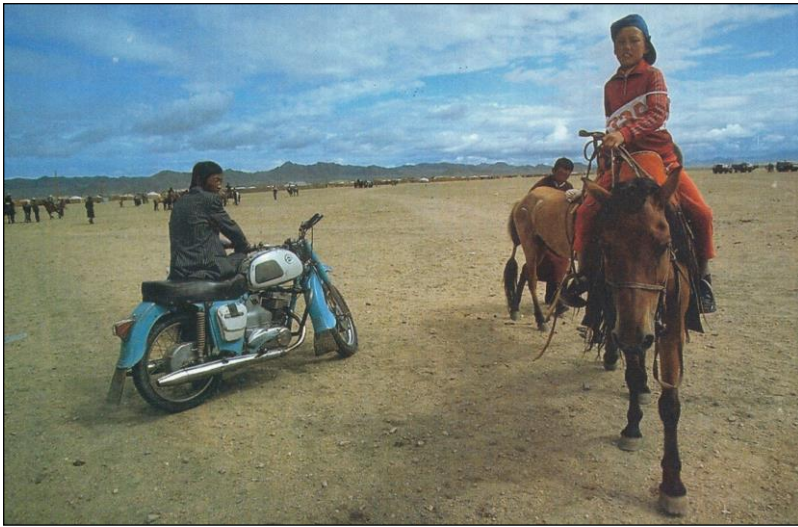
Sixty years ago Ulaan Baatar was known as "felt city", a reference the palisaded gers, nomads circular tents, many of which are still inhabited in the northern suburbs. Today the city is an Orwellian sprawl of half a million liberated people, the recent departure of communism has left an air of tranquillity and ease over the concrete and granite metropolis, despite its unimaginative East European architecture and legless beggars on main Peace Avenue. Smiles and traditional Mongolian tunics are once again visible on the busy downtown thoroughfares.

Orange and white trolley busses trundle down the tree lined streets, as unnoticed as the cows that graze the sparse verges. On the other side, horses stand tethered to telegraph poles, loyally awaiting owners who are browsing the six floors of the city's only department store. Inside is everything a Mongolian could possibly need, fur hats, refrigerators, camel hair blankets, sugar frosted flakes, even whole gers and, up on the fourth floor, a single motorcycle, the Mongolian horse of the 20th century. Standing among the ironmongery and the leather coats was a shiny red Jawa 350, carrying a price tag of 100,000 togrogs, new, which translates to around US\$350, the only other currency readily accepted, or about a 13th of the price of a Russian truck.

Across the city, beyond its industrial greyness, is the very popular black market, once out of bounds to foreigners. If cars weren't so scarce in Mongolia it would have been a car boot sale. Here, sharp eyed entrepreneurs were making profit and, in a quiet corner, interest was keen

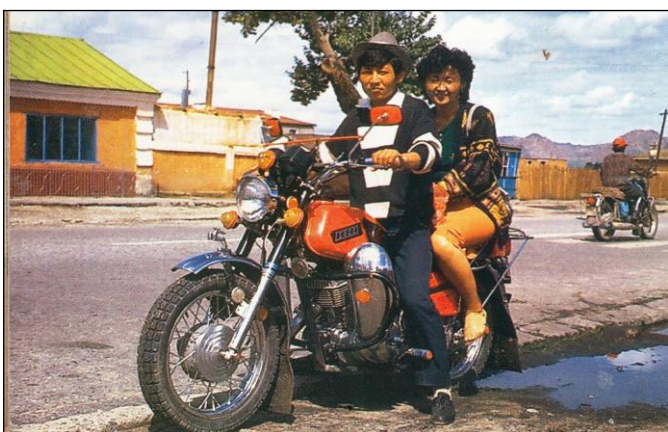


in hard to come by motorcycle bits and a few smart looking machines. Looming above in the overcast sky, abandoned Soviet cranes still hung over unfinished apartment blocks. With the collapse of communism parts for bikes also dried up when the Russians pulled out three years ago.



Bargaining was in earnest and some good deals were to be had, at least for locals. A Czech bike suddenly rocketed to \$3,000 when I showed interest! Where everything except poverty is in short supply second hand is definitely the name of the game. I watched a set of tyres fetch \$15 apiece. Elsewhere desperate owners clustered round displays of used batteries, springs, spark plugs and headlights, indeed anything that couldn't easily be replaced by just a piece of wire or a bent nail.

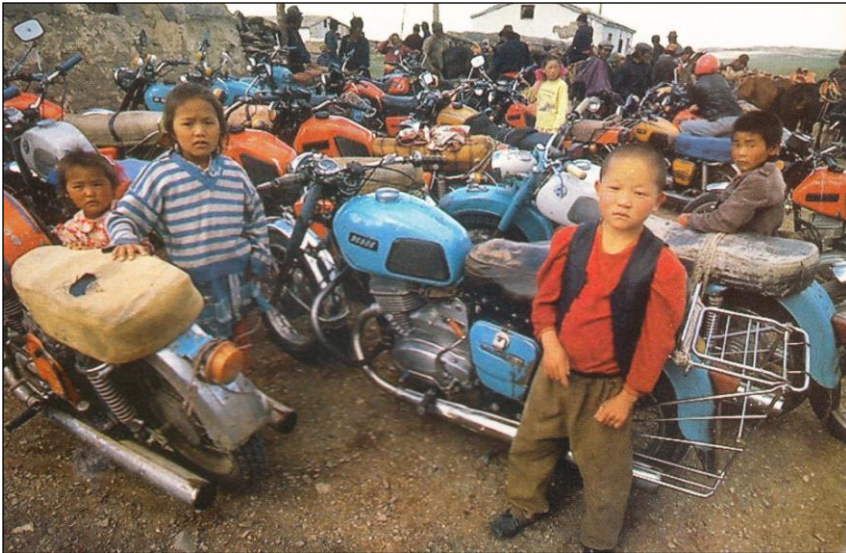
Shortages of Russian fuel are also causing considerable disruption to everyday life, and not only for Mongolian bikers. Heating of apartment blocks is becoming increasingly expensive, to the extent that the government is encouraging a return to the warm and cheap tent dwellings of the past. And, when fuel restrictions haven't suspended the service, flying with the national airline, MIAT, is an interesting experience. Like a crowd trying to jam into the NEC on the last day of the Bike Show, anxious passengers crowded the steps of the ageing Antonov 24 turboprop. Even a ticket didn't seem guarantee a seat, and some flew in with the luggage. Once on board, questionable safety procedures lost all relevance when the seatbelt broke loose in my hand. Surprisingly, after a tow to the runway. Like raucous Harley the big engines coughed smokily into life and were airborne. Before long, as frost formed around me feet in the unheated cabin, I was gazing earthwards at remote clusters of nomad's gers, round white tents that resembled aspirins on a pool table. Hours later, we made a bumpy gravel strip landing in West Mongolia that Evel Kneival would have been proud of.



The untidy settlement of Hovd has been spilled beneath range of sheltering hills. Tarmac is a rare commodity in the town that civilisation forgot. With drastic restrictions at the archaic coal fired power station, electricity and water never seemed to be on together, even for the few that were connected. For many, toilet is an odorous pit in the yard. Horses outnumber jeeps on the cracked concrete main street. Russian motorcycles are beginning to outnumber horses. A family of five and a milk churn is not an

uncommon sight on one two wheeled machine, and everybody ignores the red light unless a policeman is standing around.

Despite the sparseness in the few shops, life seems to tick over satisfactorily at an unhurried pace, though there never seemed to be enough people around to constitute a busy day. At the hotel the menu was mutton stew, which the waiter had memorised. Between hot days, when it wasn't raining, vicious penetrating dust storms blackened the sky over Hovd, as if in punishment for its ugliness.

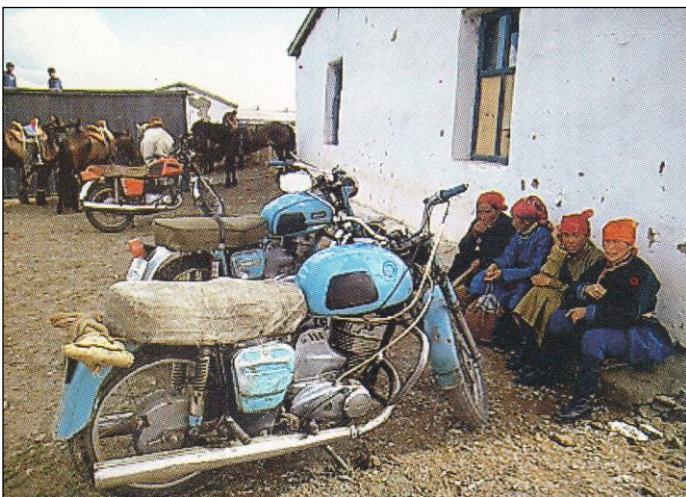


In total contrast the green valleys of the west provide rich summer grazing for the herds of the nomadic Mongols. Playful yak calves frolic irresponsibly in the sunshine and every springy riverbank, speckled with wild orchids and purple iris, hosts a community of tents, with hobbled mounts grazing nearby and often a bike or two parked outside. As one ascends into the lush valleys as many as 25 gers may be scattered over one area, curds drying on the roofs and pillars of smoke climbing from stovepipe

chimneys. At dawn and dusk, women would be milking regimented lines of goats and yaks, even camels, assisted by any children who weren't off collecting dung pats for fuel.

Always on the distant skyline the snow-capped peaks of Taban Bogd punctuate Mongolia's border with China and Russia, home of the rarely seen snow leopard. Wolves are also around and occasionally attack livestock at night.

When a family moves to seek better pasture it is usually by camel train or Russian truck. An entire ger and all its contents can be packed aboard these capable beasts. With their powerful ungainly strides (They can kick in 360 degrees) they are nonchalant and condescending, as if they know that they are more reliable than any man made vehicle. Unlike a truck, they don't need to be parked into the wind after each torturous incline, to allow radiators to cool.



Apart from gers and far flung towns, there is little to sustain and protect the traveller over Mongolia's vast open spaces. In the far west, road signs are as rare as functioning wells, with landmarks more likely to be a bleached camel skeleton, ancient standing stones or a shaman's cairn, regaled with superstitious paraphernalia. Clearly defined bronze age burial mounds are also a regular feature on the hills and plains. Roads themselves are often little more than a dusty rutted rumour following a lonely string of telegraph poles to infinity, frequently the only reliable form of navigation. Timeworn tracks

pattern the far sides of hills, disappearing over passes linking unpeopled valleys with yet more breathtaking vistas. Some are green and lush, where spinning wheels are all too easily entrapped in black peaty mud. Others are semi-arid, with grass struggling to gain purchase on the rock strewn plain where a traffic hazard is likely to be no more than a dead horse. In some valleys there is two or three feet of unmelted ice still lingering as late as May.

Personal encounters are fairly infrequent on the empty highways. Our truck rolled to a standstill by a

southbound gasoline truck that was returning with rare Russian fuel. Baggage and a live sheep were tied to the top. As the drivers exchanged snuff a whole family spilled from the congested cab. Two hardy bikers in caps, long coats and riding boots joined the meeting. Soon we were all sharing a churn of goat yogurt on the windswept pass.

Moving on, the motorcycles were barely out of sight when our driver wrenched on the brake halfway up a first gear incline. I watched in puzzled amusement as he leaped stealthily from the cab, grabbing a rifle and fluffy yak's tail on a stick as he went. Waving it hypnotically, he disappeared over the brow in a stooped run, hoping to mesmerise a suspicious marmot long enough to get within shooting range. Thousands are caught this way for their meat and fur. He returned smiling but empty handed, this one got away.

