



## LINGsCARS MONGOL RALLY 2006

James Rickwood-Dodsworth and Andy Wallace (both 19), from Newcastle and Gateshead cross Europe and take in Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the Mongol Rally 2006.



**We want to drive to Mongolia, but there's a crazy Chinese woman standing on top of our newly-purchased car, in Gateshead, yelling "Take photos!"**

Ling Valentine, owner of our major sponsor LINGsCARS.com had just finished filming her promotional video for her new-car leasing website and we were all exhausted. She had forced us to drive like rally madmen for her video, and the car smelt hot. As soon as Ling's boots abandoned our roof and hit the ground, we hit the road.



*James, Andy and Ling, in Gateshead*

Why did we choose a mental Chinese woman for a sponsor?

### **Goodbye Ling**

Earlier, Ling had provided our food as she had promised. Eight boxes of identical "Chicken soup flavour" sell-by-date this month, Chinese brand packet noodles had been thrown into our Fiat, along with 100 pairs of chopsticks and two boxes of Chinese tea bags. We stood there and watched, with our mouths open. We were expecting food, not dried chemicals. "Go!" Ling simply



*Loading the "food supplies" Ling provided*

yelled after provisioning us, then turned her back and marched off.



*Mending the exhaust in Kwik Fit, London*

We jumped straight back in the rubbish car we had bought, an R reg Fiat Seicento, and it took us 7 hours to reach London from Gateshead. The rally rules stipulate a “car less than 1000cc”, and when it was sitting and shining at the photo shoot, our black LINGsCARS Seicento had seemed a fine choice. That was before three breakdowns on the way to London; the radiator hose kept falling off the Seicento and eventually the engine

seized. We reached the hotel at 2am and it seemed as if our rally was over. We called Ling, to apologise. “You useless! Mend car! Send photos!” she shouted, and the phone hammered down.

### **Hello Toolkit**

The next day, we trekked 3 hours across London to Clapham to find a new radiator hose, under the threat of a Chinese chop-chop gang reprisal.

Later, with the stupid car fixed-up so it would drive, we rolled into the Mongol Rally car park feeling confident, the triumphal arrival of the LINGsCARS.com team. One of our other secondary sponsors, from Gloucester, (also a Fiat expert) heard our engine and diagnosed a dodgy exhaust gasket. Further inspection saw that it had rusted away. Ling had said, “no problem, all Fiats sound like that”. Oh yeah, right, Ling. We frantically called around garages



*In France, when the car still worked*

trying to find a place open where we could get onto a repair lift. We ended up in Kwik-Fit and boded the gasket. Racing out onto the M25, we made our Channel Tunnel train by 5 minutes and were in France by 8.30, and in 2nd place in the rally overall. We were on top of the world.

## France & Germany

France disappeared in a blur of tiredness and we blitzed through the night in Germany but we got lost in Cologne, and slept from 2-6am in the cramped car, awoken by German schoolkids laughing at us.

After a sausage breakfast (no noodles today!) we made Prague by the Sunday evening but were stopped in the city centre for driving down a one-way street the wrong way and not having our lights on. It wasn't even dark.

## Into Eastern Europe

We went to Krakow the next day, no drama – remarkably the car was singing along. This rally will be a piece of cake. Then on Tuesday went past Auschwitz and carried on to the Ukrainian border. We planned to stop at the border and cross in the morning but carried on too far by accident, got sucked into border traffic and eventually crossed at 2am. Three other teams were waiting there to cross, a Mini Scamp, a Fiesta and a Seat Marbella (slightly shabbier than our car) and we decided to convoy with them from now on. None of us have much faith in our motors.



*The convoy; Fiesta, Fiat, Scamp, Micra, Marbella*

## Ukraine

We drove for 3 hours covering 50 miles on awful Ukrainian roads. That night we slept folded in the car in a petrol station, to be woken up at 7am by a soldier shouting at us. Does he think we can speak Ukrainian? We didn't argue; we drove on.

The drive to Kiev took 9 hours to cover 350 miles. We saw gangs with AK47s but didn't get pulled by the police, probably because we were in a convoy of four cars. Other rally teams got emissions tested, were given speeding fines and even had their passports confiscated. Any excuse for the Ukrainian police to rake in some cash, we suspected.

Rolling into Kiev at about 5.30pm, on the main road into the city centre, the Mini Scamp broke down on an uphill, one-way street. After an hour of trying to fix it, we decided to give in and tried to bump start it downhill the wrong way





*Vodka and bread; no noodles in sight, Ling!*

down the street. Blocking the road, delaying a few dozen mafia Mercedes and several hundred Ladas heading into the city centre we started the car. The police just laughed at us this time, and we shared cigarettes with them, which were rough.

Our time in Kiev was spent sharing stories and fixing the Fiat Seicento. An Irish team had driven over the Ukrainian border last night by hiding behind a coach

with their lights off, but with no passport stamps they will be in trouble on the way out. Everyone loves the Irish; they never seem to have the same problems as most other nationalities do at borders. Ukraine was a nightmare with bad food, unfriendly locals and poor roads. We decided we were never going back there, ever.

## **Into Russia**

Leaving the Orange revolution behind we blasted through a little bit of Russia via Volgograd and towards Kazakhstan, the land of Borat. Russia was amazing. The Mini Scamp we were convoying with snapped its knicker-elastic suspension so we stopped in a truck stop and a mechanic made them a new part from scratch. To celebrate, we nailed four bottles of vodka and some sweet pastries with him before passing out and sleeping for whole day. I even passed out the next day, too, and Andy had to take over driving. I was experiencing the worst hangover in my life, fuelled by chicken chemical noodles.

## **Kazakhstan**

We crossed into Kazakhstan and it seemed like we were entering the asylum. People ran into the road and stopped us in every town, the police stared at us then tried to extort money and goods – Ling’s noodles were rejected - from us. The roads were so bad that the locals have formed their own dirt tracks by the side. The character Borat is just about spot-on, we all agreed.



*James and the car, cooling down*



*Ling suggests camels supplement noodle diet*

## Desert Travel

It was into desert, now, and we drove for four days straight in this vast country in temperatures of over 40 degrees. The Fiat had been overheating badly and blew a radiator hose so we bodged it up with a condom and silicone. The bonnet was unbolted and strapped on the roof to aid cooling, the brakes on the left hand side of the car were shot by now and the exhaust had blown (again). The vibration

damper on the driveshaft was so useless it sounded like we were in a tumble dryer. I think that this might all be standard Fiat Seicento, so no complaints. Later on that day we crashed into a sand dune lying across the road, ripping out the fuel lines and smashing the sump guard. Somehow the car still drove, although we are trying to find another radiator top hose from somewhere. The overheating is becoming a real problem. We decided not to phone Ling and tell her, despite her claim that "I give you support during trip!". We just couldn't face more parcels of noodles, or instructions to "Continue!".

Police and drunken passers-by have been a constant pain in the backside in Kazakhstan. We have been stopped for misdemeanours such as driving right-hand drive cars, speeding (even though the cop was on foot with no radar) and we were made to remove our spotlights as we looked like a police car, they said. How many police cars have a giant Chinese female head and "LINGsCARS" on the side? It took us four days of 6am to 9pm to drive 1200miles. We even dropped in at the Aral sea to have a look but it was boring and we ended up in an underage school disco that night before moving on to a nightclub, based in some guy's front room. Drunk again.

Under another vicious hangover, we were working on the car outside the atrocious Hotel Tema in Shymkent when the gardener approached us. We gestured to him that we need a new top hose. He didn't understand us, but we jumped in the back of his van anyway and set off on a tour of the city's auto parts stores. However, there were no spare parts for Fiats anywhere in the city, or anything that would fit. Lada and Mercedes parts seemed to be all they had in this part of Southern Kazakhstan.

## Auto Bazaar

So the gardener called up his father, a local taxi driver. We all piled into his taxi and set off for the auto-bazaar. The taxi soon started to cough and splutter and the driver coasted into a petrol station. Without cutting the ignition he handed the 5-year old petrol assistant the equivalent of five pence and the most miniscule amount of fuel dripped into his tank. English minicab drivers could learn a trick from this guy. We continued to the bazaar, a giant scrap

yard of a place and bought a number of odds and ends that we thought we could get to work on the Fiat. Getting back into the taxi, it wouldn't start - being on a hill and only having a tiny drop of fuel. The driver got out and with cigarette in one hand grabbed the fuel line with the other and squeezed petrol in the car, like he was milking a cow. He tried to start it numerous times but only succeeded to kill the battery, so we bump started it. He stalled it. So we bumped it again.

Back at the hotel, the Fiat was patched up with our second hand parts and we checked out. The hotel fleeced us by withholding our passports until we paid double. Out in the bombsite car park we careered around the guards who were demanding even more payment and drove off.



*James relaxing on the car in Bishkek*

### **Media Mongols**

By this stage, we had bumped into an American film crew so we thought that maybe we'd get on telly. Ling had made it quite clear that she expected publicity at any cost, and if we suffered injury or even death, or if there was the slightest sight of blood, we should get it on film. She imagined blood and guts on the 10 o'clock news on the BBC, with a leg hanging off one of us, and the car shouting "LINGsCARS" in the background.

Our ears were constantly filled with whoops and yelps from the American film crew. No wonder Americans drive the insurgents in Iraq crazy, we were going mad listening to their soundtrack.

On the road in the Fiat again and heading for Bishkek, chasing the TV crew in the desperate quest for publicity for Ling, we suffered a few problems. First of all our 'fix' on the top hose blew apart. We had to put the old cracked hose back onto the engine and limp on. By now it was dark and we were struggling to see the dust road as it twisted through the mountains in southern Kazakhstan. Although the road was perfectly smooth we managed to hit the only pothole for miles, a loud bang was heard and the car would no longer drive straight. We found that the front right spring had snapped and now the chunky off road tyre was rubbing in the arch. In pitch black we started to change all four tyres for the original, smaller set using the completely useless Fiat scissor jack and striking matches for light.

### **Tyred and Blind**

Whilst we were changing the third wheel, the jack slipped out from under the car and embedded itself in the fuel tank. This was hilarious, as we had to use matches to see the damage and to try to fix it. Andy grabbed a mallet and tried to smash the wedged jack out from under the car. I stood ready with a



bucket to catch the leaking fuel but by some small miracle the tank was not punctured, just dented. We drove on, using half a turn of lock to keep the car straight until we eventually parked the car in a Kasakh field and fell asleep.

The next day we drove on to Taraz to get the car fixed. A 12-year old apprentice at a small garage replaced our broken spring with a cut down, welded up Lada piece. Eight dollars and three hours later and we set off again for Kyrgyzstan. We had to wait in southern Kazakhstan because our visas for Kyrgyzstan don't start the next day, so we prepared for a midnight crossing. We agreed that it would help if we could pronounce the country. We updated Ling by phone and were greeted by "Who this is?"

This border was the easiest yet and we pushed our way to the front past the trucks and terrorists, showed our exotic British passports and carried on pushing until we were the whole way through.

### **Arriving in Bishkek**

It was a 30-mile drive to the capital Bishkek and we managed to get stopped 7 times by police. We sent a text to the rest of our (rather loose) convoy telling them that we had arrived and were filling ourselves in an English cafe called quite appropriately, 'Fatboys'. Five minutes later, one of the other team-members, Seth from "The Dukes" - an American team - appeared. I fell off my chair as he climbed out of a brand-new Audi Limousine. Over a beer, he filled in his story.



*Party time in Bishkek*

Apparently, whilst Andy and I were slumming it in Shymkent, they had arrived at the Hyatt to meet with The Dukes multinational Casino group sponsors. I tried to imagine Ling whisking us to the Hyatt in a limousine, but quickly realised a phone call home was not a good idea. More noodles would arrive by plane, and I would get a 5 second torrent of abuse, ending in "Continue".

## The High Life

The Casino sponsors had invited their rally team into the restaurant for complimentary drinks and food - totalling over \$500, before giving them three room keys, the manager apologising that they were 'only' King size deluxe rooms - another \$1000 on the house! The team had been further chilling in the Hyatt waiting for us to reach Bishkek, when an American ex-pat lady ran screaming towards them and asked them if they were the "Mongol Ralliers". She had been following them on their website and insisted they visit her at her restaurant that night. They got free food, lots of martinis and were then taken by the lady's driver (in the Audi limo) to a club where all the drinks were on the house. Naturally when Andy and I heard this we insisted on an introduction to this generous American woman.



*Kasakhs rushed to visit LINGsCARS.com*

We stormed over to the Hyatt for our free drinks and then followed the Audi back to the ex-pat lady's mansion where we were invited stay for the night. We dumped our bags and then got into the limo to be taken up to an exclusive restaurant up in the hills above Bishkek. Nice.

## Party Time

Next morning the Audi driver took The Dukes to the local auto bazaar to get



*Send A Cow got most of the cash raised*

FOUR new springs for their car. Luxury! To make up for our jealousy, we ignored the problems with the Fiat, relaxed in the house and used the pool at the Hyatt. That night we went to the driver's brother's restaurant and had another incredible and free meal. We were abducted to a nightclub where the girls were extremely friendly. There was a strip joint upstairs. I did not phone Ling. I didn't want to "Continue!"

It was sad to leave Bishkek in the circumstances. I had finally called someone sensible back home in the UK and they found a Fiat dealer in Almaty where we could get some parts to fix the Fiat properly – if that's ever possible with a Fiat.



It was 3pm when we entered Almaty so we raced around for 2 hours trying to find the repair place. My map work was particularly poor today so in the end in true rally spirit, we gave up. Driving out of the city I realised that I had been reading the map the wrong way around and that we had been heading south instead of north the whole time. Dope. The garage was in fact only a mile or so off the main ring road at the edge of the city, but everyone was angry that we had dragged the convoy around Almaty for 2 hours in 40 degree rush-hour temperatures, so with lassaiz-faire we headed off into the desert forgetting that we had little petrol.

Despite it being a proper desert, we found a small family run shack whose owner pumped what smelt like overpriced chicken stock into our cars. It was also bright pink. It reminded us of the soup from Ling's noodles. The cars ran. So did we...

### **Sick as Pigs**

The next morning we all awoke very poorly. The fine food we had eaten in Bishkek had obviously been too much for our systems, either that or the strippers had been carrying salmonella virus. This would not have been too much of a problem had we been in a country with toilets, water, food and medicine. However, we were in the desert, in a country we couldn't pronounce - the only relief being to walk over the horizon out of range of everyone else. So one by one we ran off clutching a diminishing bag of baby wipes, returning briefly to camp before running back again.



*Changing the Fiat's head gasket*

To compound this misery the mighty LINGsCARS Fiat would not start. In Almaty it had been running fine: no overheating, good idle, spring holding up - our confidence had gone up. We checked the oil to find that it was now mayonnaise. The head gasket had gone. So between 8am and 2pm, Andy (the expert with our six spanners and two hammers) changed the head

gasket in 45-degree heat while I ate tinned pineapples in the shade and fed dried chicken noodles to the scorpions.

### **Fiat Throws in the Towel**

Despite what Andy claimed was almost a complete engine change, the Seicento would not start, so the plugs, fuel pump, lambda sensor - basically every spare part that we had - was changed. This worked, we never found what cured it, and we carried on. Sixty miles later we stopped because car was overheating again, except this time it was not the radiator or hoses, the whole car seemed to be bubbling. We topped up the water and carried on. Soon after we had to stop again.

Water and oil were spraying out of the engine itself; the cylinder head had warped - it had not been the gasket after all. Without a bonnet over the engine (it was on the roof, remember), driving the car with rainbows of oil, steam and water spouting into the sunshine was surreal. It was like a mobile mixture of a Yellowstone geyser and a North Sea oil strike.

We limped on for the rest of the day, our heads out of the side windows so we could see where we were going, and we filled the Fiat up with oil and water every 20 miles. Then it sputtered out again, for the next 20 miles. We knew it was over. Andy and some guys from other teams, did some last ditch tinkering that night, and we got drunk.

The car started fine the next day but 50 seconds later died for good. A mixture of water and oil had now broken the fuel injector. The engine was a complete mess. We emptied our stuff, peeled off all the LINGsCARS stickers from the car and jumped in the back of "The Duke's" Nissan Micra. The last thing I needed was Ling yelling at me because she had been billed for dumping a car in outer Kazakhstan.



*James and Andy abandoning the Fiat after it self-destructs.  
They were too scared to phone Ling and break the news...*

## **Rest In Peace**

The Fiat officially died on Sunday 13 August 2006 after 5500 miles and just 5 days before we would eventually reach the finish. Out of respect, we left the remaining 150 packs of chicken noodles in the car. It was decided that since Charlie from The Dukes had to go home in two days we would be able to ride with Barry in the Micra the rest of the way to Mongolia.

We camped that night outside Karagunda, a town described by the Lonely Planet Guide as being a former gulag with an 80% HIV-Aids infection rate. However much we wanted to avoid such a place we had to venture into town the next day to see if we could find a spare clutch cable for the Seat Marbella. We vowed to avoid the strippers, here.

By 3pm we had found and fitted a VW Golf cable to the Seat and headed north to the Russian border (again). At about 10pm the Seat had to stop, as the Golf clutch cable was so thick that it had bent the clutch pedal out of

shape. We decided we would have to leave the two American teams while they got it fixed. Charlie had to be in Barnul by the next day so he could be on a flight home the day after that, so we chugged off in the Micra. We wondered if we should inform our Chinese sponsor that we had decamped into a Japanese car, but wisely decided against a phone call from hell.

We drove through the night to the Russian border and attempted to cross early the next morning. Ten hours later we were back in Russia having gone through another ordeal of post-communist paperwork, bribes, official stamps and more bribes. We reached the town of Barnul, Siberia that night and Charlie eventually managed to buy a plane ticket to for the following day.

### Chasing the Party

It was now late Tuesday night and we had to be at the finish by Friday to make the final party. A party is important, right? This meant driving over 2000 miles across Siberia on some pretty awful roads. A non-stop driving commitment would be needed as well as a competent car. Luckily, apart from breaking all four springs the Micra had behaved perfectly up to now. Why, oh why had we chosen a Fiat? Ling's thought was it would be a challenge as "Fiats often break down!". Right.



*Mending the Seat clutch cable*

Over the next 3 days we tore across Siberia, only ever stopping when we got lost or had another bad dose of diarrhoea or needed Red Bull. We were driving and sleeping in relay teams. By now we had grown sick and tired of Russia: the borders were a nightmare, the police were corrupt, the food was awful and none of the roads had signposts. Worst of all was that no Russian city had a ring road, this meant every time we came to a city we got horribly, horribly lost.

Eventually we reached the Mongolian border by 8am on Friday morning. We had driven just about constantly since Tuesday night to make it and were smelly, tired, starving and lacking any sense of humour.

The last thing we looked forward to was another nightmare border crossing. Entering Mongolia turned out to be just as bad as anywhere else, despite the fine assurances from the Mongolian Embassy in the UK.



## Into Mongolia

A whole lot of paperwork later we entered Mongolia at 2pm. Driving on the only paved road in Mongolia towards the finish at Ulan Bator we kept up a good pace. The land was barren, dotted with a few nomadic Ger settlements and despite the sun shining brightly it was surprisingly cold. I drove the car up to the sign welcoming us into Ulan Bator. Barry (the Micra's owner) drove the rest of the way to the finish. We rolled into Dave's Bar, the official finish in Ulan Bator, too tired to celebrate for the first thirty seconds. Until the complimentary beer gave us our ninety-eighth wind and the party began, again.

## Ling Wants Car Back



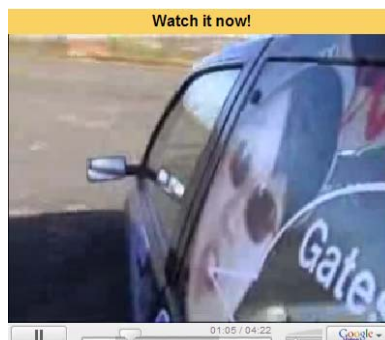
*Andy under the "Welcome to Ulan Bator" sign*

The rally lasted exactly 28 days; we covered over 8500 miles in two cars, lost over a stone and a half in weight between the two of us and were dirtier than we had ever been in our life. We raised £5,000 for charity (Send a Cow). Ling had said "If you can't take a joke, don't take a Fiat!", but she had made it all possible. A final phone call to Gateshead broke the camel's back. "Good! You finish, but where is car? Do you need more noodles? Send me story!"

Here it is.

Sorry about the car, Ling.

See the Mongol Rally [promotional video](#) on [LINGsCARS.com!](#)



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