17 countries.
10,000 miles.
A road rally.
A marathon.
One excellent adventure.
Mongol Rally adventurers get ready to have their passports checked at the Uzbekistan border. For more, see page 30.
Planes, trains, automobiles, and how I found myself running in a Mongolian marathon

Here's a plan: Get an old car, start up the engine in England, and drive in a rally to Mongolia. Don't forget to raise money for charity and meet interesting people.

Story and photography by Scott Brills

Day breaks for Alzheimer's families

Rotarians develop a program for patients and caregivers.

Photography by Monika Lozinska-Lee

Text by Eve Neiger

The sound of virtue

Short-term ethical behavior may feel good in the moment, but will it matter?

By Joe Queenan

Illustration by Guy Billout

Rotary stories

Radical politics disrupted his childhood, then Rotary helped shape his future.

By Jason Grotto

Illustration by Josh Cochran

Disaster relief and recovery

Quick response is important, but recovery is critical.
When Senior Editor Jenny Llakmani read about Rotarian SCOTT BRILLS' plan to participate in the Mongol Rally with his friend Collin Otto, she was intrigued. Brills, who is technology chair for District 6380 (Ontario, Canada; Michigan, USA), intended to blog about the adventure and raise money for charity. He did both. It was quite a trip, but maybe not his only one: He's considering a journey from the Arctic Circle to Tierra del Fuego, Argentina.

Graphic designer JOSH COCHRAN was honored in February by the Society of Illustrators for his Sleepwalker illustration from the book Medical Marvels. Cochran was also lauded as one of Print magazine's 20 Under 30 New Visual Artists in 2009. His work has appeared in the New York Times Book Review and Texas Monthly. His illustration of Chesa Boudin for "Road Scholar" accompanies this month's installment of Rotary Stories by Jason Grotto.


MARK RICHARDS' photographs have appeared in many magazines, including Time, Newsweek, Smithsonian, People, BusinessWeek, and Forbes. Last month, he photographed our story about San Quentin prison. Richards' other work includes a seven-state assignment on childhood obesity. He has been honored in the Communication Arts Photography Annual and in American Photography. In this issue, Richards shoots mountaineer Royal Robbins for Up Front.
PLANES, TRAINS, AUTOMOBILES, AND HOW I FOUND MYSELF RUNNING IN A MONGOLIAN MARATHON

LAST SUMMER, A YOUNG ROTARIAN from Michigan, USA, set out to drive a 2001 Chevy Metro with 140,000 miles on it from England to Mongolia. The Mongol Rally – equal parts charity fundraiser and lunatic odyssey – was dreamed up by two bored Englishmen and held for the first time in 2004 with six cars. In 2009, more than 400 teams took part. Ralliers can choose their own route from England to the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar, but their cars must have an engine no larger than 1.2 liters – and no GPS. Getting lost is more or less the point. (The cars that make it to Mongolia are donated to charity.)

"You are supposed to be on an adventure, not in a nursery class, so if the sky does fall on your head, prop it up with a windscreen wiper and carry on," the rally website reads. "If you’re worried, stay at home."

It was a siren call that Scott Brills couldn’t resist. Brills, a member of the Rotary Club of West Bloomfield, and his friend Collin Otto took the team name Hardly Working and raised $1,650 for Mercy Corps Mongolia, one of the rally’s official charities. Brills, then 26, and Otto, 25, then
collected an additional $7,000 to help build and outfit a kindergarten in Mongolia, a joint project of Bills' club and the Rotary Club of Bayanzurkh 100 in Ulaanbaatar.

It all began on a racetrack in England.

18 July
Heading out of the 2009 Mongol Rally launch party at the Goodwood Motor Circuit, we got lost immediately. After driving around in circles with Rubik's Cube, another American team, we found our way to the docks at Dover and were the last car allowed on the ferry. (Rubik's Cube missed it by about a minute.) Ninety minutes later, we were driving off the ship and into France. We swung through Belgium and the Netherlands on our way to Munich, Germany. There, we met up with our friends Jarrett and Kristi, who were coming with us to the rally's second official launch at Klenová Castle in the Czech Republic.

After taking the "scenic route" through eastern Germany and the Czech Republic (thanks, Google Maps), we arrived at the campsite by mid-afternoon. The Czech-Out Party went on until 4:30 a.m., but we crashed around 2 a.m., surrounded by those who apparently didn't need to rest at all.

The next day, we detoured north to Prague, where we partook in a few rounds at a beer garden overlooking the city. In the morning, after saying goodbye to Jarrett and Kristi, we stopped in Kutná Hora to see the Sedlec Ossuary, a.k.a. the bone church – everything in the chapel, from the altar to the chandelier, is made of human bones – then continued on to Budapest.

24 July
We entered Romania as the sun was rising over the hills and traveled through the villages of the Carpathian Mountains, sharing the road with horse-drawn carts. After 20 hours with little sleep or food, we arrived at the Moldovan border. It was only a mile from there to the Ukrainian border, but to get through Moldova we needed a carte verte, which is basically car insurance. Luckily, this was available for purchase just up the road.

One of the border guards directed me to leave Collin with
them, as insurance that I would come back. We all had a laugh out of this as I mimicked that I would just run off and leave him there, no problem. A few hundred yards up the road was a shack where five old women left off playing cards to take my personal details and the equivalent of $30, then hand me a couple of slips of paper.

We completed our 1-mile tour of Moldova and arrived at the Ukrainian border. We handed over our passports and registration and got our passports back, complete with a Ukrainian entry stamp. There was just one problem: Our car couldn’t accompany us into the country.

It turned out that all cars registered in this part of the world have a card that allows them to be driven through other countries. The commander called us into his office. "This is problem," he stated. I showed him the title and registration. "How can I tell this not copy?" He had a point. It looked like anyone could have printed either the title or the registration on a home computer. I reiterated that it was real and that in the United States this was as valid as the car passport is in Europe.

Next problem: There’s no front license plate on the car. I explained that Michigan doesn’t issue front plates. "In Ukraine, only gangsters have no front plate," Duly noted.

"Do you have your bill of sale?" he asked. "Yes." "Do you have the shipping papers with you?" he asked. "Yes." "What are you doing with the car?" "We’re driving to Mongolia and donating the car to charity," we replied. "You’re leaving it in Mongolia? That’s not possible."

Seeing that the commander was adamant, I told him that if he didn’t want us to leave the car in Mongolia, we would drive it back to the United Kingdom after the race and ship it back to America from there. This seemed to assuage his concerns, and eventually we got good news: We could go. Now we just had to wait for our paperwork.

We waited. And waited some more. We noticed people going home for the day, to be replaced with new staff. The commander had passed our case along to the incoming officer. Time to start all over again.
We spent nine hours at the Ukrainian border, filling out forms and then standing at the back of the line again and again while mosquitoes and flies ate us alive. I really didn't think they were going to let our car through, but in the end the new commander called us inside and handed us our passports and car papers. It was midnight.

**25 July**

We expected to do the 185 miles to Odessa in about three hours. We also expected signs, and roads that didn't look like they had been blasted to pieces during some recent conflict. On that first stretch, I could only think one thing: The Ukrainians must really not care about anyone getting in or out of Moldova.

We spent 27 July – my 27th birthday – on the beach in Odessa. We knew it would be the first and last beach we’d encounter. The next day, we tried to attend the Rotary Club of Odessa’s meeting but found that there wasn’t one scheduled for that week. This would be the last time our visit to a city coincided with the day of a Rotary club meeting until Mongolia. We headed out around 5 p.m.

In Ukraine, freeways don’t go around cities as much as through them. We got lost almost every time we hit a major city, circling city streets and trying to find where the highway started up again. This was even harder to do in the dark.

At a stop to get directions and fill up, we noticed gas gushing out from under the car as the attendant filled the tank. Closer inspection revealed that rust had eaten through the metal hose that connects the gas nozzle input and the
gas tank. We were able to grab it through the wheel well and hold it up while putting gas in, but we couldn't do much to fix it at the time. We left it as it was, hoping that it wouldn't end up falling off entirely.

After 38 hours of driving, we arrived in Volgograd (formerly known as Stalingrad). We didn't have much time to explore, as we wanted to be on our way to Kazakhstan, but we couldn't miss *The Motherland Calls* (Rodina-Mat' Zovyot!), a giant statue that looms over the city. We marveled at the size of it and at the memorials to those who died in the Battle of Stalingrad.

After a detour south to Kalmykia, the only Buddhist republic on the European continent, we headed for the Kazakh border, where the customs guy asked us where we were from. I told him Detroit, and he said, “Oooh, gangster city. Eminem! Respect!” I then made the mistake of driving the car out of customs before our papers were stamped properly. “You broke a big law – this is serious,” the guard said. After asking what we could do to make the problem go away, we bargained him down from $50 to $28 and handed it over.

**31 July**

In Kazakhstan, we noticed a change. People were waving at us, saying hello, and exhibiting an all-around friendliness that had been somewhat lacking up to that point. We also started seeing camels roaming around.

We were in a convoy with several other teams, one of which needed to get a hole in the exhaust welded up. Collin and I decided...
that now would be a good time to fix our little problem as well. While we were getting the repairs done, an endless stream of people came out to us, curious about where we were from and what we were doing.

In the early evening, we reached Beyneu, the last outpost of civilization before a long stretch of desert road. The sun was already setting, and it was evident that we wouldn’t make the border that night, so we found a place to camp.

At the Uzbek border the next day, I had just finished the car import paperwork when I noticed Collin standing outside of the border zone. He had just been rejected entry.

Although our visas were the same, the border personnel had noticed that Collin’s didn’t start until the next day. What could we do? Say goodbye to our convoy and wait there in no man’s land.

The border zone was filled with the skeletons of stripped cars and buses and with a number of other people also waiting around. Cows and camels picked at the heaps of rubbish. It was close to 100 degrees, so we took our camping chairs out of the car and set them up in the husk of an old van. A scruffy-looking bus driver came over and motioned for us to join him and his friends for dinner. The five guys were sitting on mats and blankets beside the bus. I went to the car to grab a bottle of vodka, and we drank shots from teacups. Dinner was thin soup with bits of meat and potato and rock-hard scraps of naan bread, which we dipped into the soup until they became soft enough to chew. We sat around conversing in a mixture of Russian, Uzbek, English, and body language until everyone decided to call it a night. When the border opened at 9 a.m., we thanked everyone and said our goodbyes.

The bleak desert landscape of Uzbekistan had little more than isolated outposts of humanity and a few empty industrial centers next to dried-up lake beds to interrupt the monotony. We camped again, then struck out through the broad Kyzylkum Desert. We were soaked in sweat and covered in sand by the time we reached Bukhara. Pulling into the first roundabout, we caught up with the Alchemists, a team from England. Collin and Mark set off to find the hotel while Ramsey and I enjoyed a couple of Uzbek beers in an outdoor plaza.

Later, at the Komil B&B, we met Charlotte, an archeologist from the University of Michigan, and Greg, a 24-year-old Londoner on a 16-month solo bike ride from the UK to Australia. After our first shower in days, we dined on the terrace of the nearby Minzifa Restaurant, where I tried some of the local specialty, plov (rice mixed with meat and vegetables). At a nightclub, we met up with Danish and Irish teams. Collin wasn’t feeling well and left early, but the rest of us hung out until 3 a.m.

The next morning, Collin was in bad shape. He had a fever, stomach problems, chills — probably caused by brushing his teeth with tap water the previous night. I left him to sleep it off and did some sightseeing with Greg. We ran into rally teams from all over and stopped to chat with them.

It would have been nice to have had more time in Bukhara, with its old streets and historical sites, but we had to press on to catch up with the Alchemists.
Statistics

**DURATION:** 52 days to Mongolia, and 14 days in Mongolia.

**COUNTRIES VISITED:** 17.

**FAVORITE PARTS:** The Romanian countryside; the beaches of Odessa, Ukraine; the old city of Bukhara, Uzbekistan; the mountains of Tajikistan; the friendly people in Khorog, Tajikistan; and the wide-open expanses of Mongolia.

**LEAST FAVORITE PART:** Ukraine. It was hard to get into the country, and we even had to bribe our way out.

**Bribes Demanded:** $185. ($100 from an off-duty policeman who stopped us for speeding at 2 a.m. in Ukraine, $15 from a young guard stationed at the Ukrainian/Russian border, $50 from the English-speaking guard at the Russian/Kazakh border, and $20 for not having a front license plate at a checkpoint outside of Khorog.)

**Bribes Paid:** $43. (We gave $15 in singles to a young guard at the Ukrainian/Russian border, who then stuffed it in his pocket, and a border guard with impeccable English took us for $28 after I drove into Kazakhstan without getting a form stamped.)

**MILES TRAVELED:** About 10,000 (including 6,000 by car).

**TIRES BLOWN:** 0. Thank you, beautiful (and expensive) Michelin tires!

**FAVORITE FOOD:** Plov, the Central Asian version of fried rice with mutton and vegetables. The best was at the Aga Khan’s Serena Hotel in Khorog.

**TIMES WE GOT SICK:** 1. Collin was incapacitated for a day while in Bukhara but was back to normal again after a day of sitting in bed.

**NEW FRIENDS MADE:** Innumerable.

**FAVORITE MEMORY:** The evening we spent stranded in the no man’s land between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, sharing dinner and vodka with a group of truckers who then let us sleep in their bus.

**TOTAL RAISED FOR CHARITY:** Almost $9,000.
sights, but after lunch the next day, with Collin feeling better, we said our goodbyes. By evening, we were in Samarkand. From the main square we heard music, which turned out to be coming from a huge wedding. A couple of other rally teams were standing at the gates, and it wasn't long before one of the revelers invited all of us to join them. We ate, drank, and swapped stories.

9 August
Across the Tajik border, the worst roads we'd seen yet took us up into the foothills of the Pamir mountain range, which abuts the western Himalayas. I was at the wheel when we hit a large bump. We pulled over and saw a huge dent in our catalytic converter. This made the car noisier and sent exhaust fumes into the cabin at times. We drove even more cautiously as we passed through villages perched on the mountainsides.

Heavy truck traffic made driving frightening, especially on the narrow mountain passes. Eventually it was pitch black out, and the road still kept going up and up. Dodging trucks and potholes and clearing blind curves the entire way, we finally made it to the summit of the mountain, 10,990 feet up. Some other vehicles were stopped at the side of the road, and we got out to stretch. Two guys in a Lexus SUV asked if we were on our way to Khojand. No, we said, Dushanbe. We were heading the wrong way.

It was late, so we settled in for a few restless hours of sleep in the car. In the morning, we retraced our route to where we'd taken the wrong road. The new one wasn't
any better, but the surrounding scenery was spectacular.

After finally arriving in Dushanbe, we ate at what must be Central Asia's only Ecuadorian restaurant. We started talking to a guy who turned out to be the part-time U.S. ambassador to Tajikistan. We had a great conversation about Tajikistan and his travels and work around the world.

The next day, we drove higher and higher into the mountains. We spent the night in Kalaikhum, then skirted the mountains on a narrow road directly across the Panj River from Afghanistan. It was amazing that this was the same Afghanistan that we had been hearing so much about for the past eight years. We were told that people on both sides of the river share a common language (Shughni) and religion (Ismaili Islam). We were close enough to have a short conversation with a guy on the other side. I say short because I had no idea what he was asking me.

We had to stop a couple of times because the engine kept overheating. The problem was a leak in the hose that went from the radiator to the engine. There was also a disturbing clacking noise coming from our left front wheel, which we figured was a loose brake component. It took about eight hours to get to Khorog.

15 August

Tucked between the mountains of Afghanistan and Tajikistan, at the confluence of the Gunt and Panj rivers, is Khorog. Khorog is the capital of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast – the Pamir Mountain region of Tajikistan. It’s also the location of a campus of the University of Central Asia and home to one of the most educated, English-capable populations in the region.

Getting into the city before dark for once, we were stopped by a policeman, who pointed to the front of the car. Ah – another cop wondering about our lack of a front plate. I explained for the thousandth time that in Michigan we only have one license plate, but he kept pointing. He wasn’t pointing to the missing plate but rather to a big puddle that had gushed from our car as we were about to make a turn. Our radiator hose had finally burst. We thanked him and got out the duct tape.

We checked into the Pamir Lodge, run by a local Pakistani professor. The price was right ($6 a night), and the staff, including the professor’s son and wife, was very friendly. At dinner, we met a team from Aberdeen along with a local kid, Imomdad, who had been helping the Scots.

The next day, Imomdad helped us find a mechanic. The shop was just a field with a bunch of cars in it, with a pit dug into the ground for under-chassis inspections. The mechanic fixed our brake noise, which was caused by a loose control arm. As for the radiator, we would have to get a new hose. After searching all over town, we found one that resembled what we needed but was too big. We bought it just in case but decided to use our Rescue Tape (one of our sponsors) to fix the old hose. By the time we set out on the Pamir Highway, it was already after 3 p.m.

The Pamir Highway winds from southern Tajikistan to Osh,
Kyrgyzstan, through some of the highest-elevation passes traversable by vehicle — up to 15,272 feet. We’d been looking forward to this the entire trip.

Before long, a strange sound started coming from underneath the car, but we didn’t stop until the engine started to lose power. It also appeared that we had lost second gear. Opening the hood, we saw that the Rescue Tape had melted right off of the hose and onto the engine block. The plastic hood to the side of the engine was also melting. We thought that the rally was over for us right then.

After the engine had cooled, we cut away the remnants of the hose and got out the one we had purchased. It was not only larger than we needed but bent the wrong way. Still, we achieved a pretty tight seal by using four screw clamps to attach it. We were back in business.

The scenery got progressively more dramatic as we climbed through the valleys and up into the Pamir Mountains, but the road was pretty rough — large rocks, huge dips and ruts, and lots of bumps. I noticed that we were losing some steering control on our left front tire.

About 100 miles outside Khorog we had ascended a steep pass when I tried to get by a couple of semis. I revved up and got about halfway past the first truck when a horrible noise started coming from our right front tire. I pulled over. It looked like the body had cracked in a heavily rusted place near the steering linkage. We got back into the car, started it, and put it in gear. Nothing. Reverse. Nothing. We had lost our transmission as well. Not good, not good.
We were almost 10,000 feet up in the mountains, and it was getting dark. We flagged down a car, threw in our most needed gear, and drove off, leaving the car on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere. The driver, whose name was Valler, took us to a plain-looking house, where we found a group of truck drivers crowded into a room having dinner. Valler explained the situation to them while we had a bite to eat.

Through basic Russian and hand gestures, we found out that getting our car towed would be an expensive proposition. If we wanted to be towed to Osh, the next large town, it would cost at least $500. It wouldn’t be much less to be towed back to Khorog. A few of the guys wondered whether we would be interested in selling the car. Because we were in such a bind, I threw out a price of $1,000. Two of them were interested. Should have gone higher.

We decided to get it towed back to Khorog, and the next morning the same mechanic who had fixed the brake noise offered to repair it for $200. But Collin and I didn’t think it was prudent to continue on with the car, even if we got it fixed. While it was on the truck, we had looked at the underside, and the damage was extensive. Valler’s brother still wanted to buy it. He had a deal for $1,000.

The death of the car spelled the end of the official rally for us, but we weren’t ready for the adventure to be over. We still wanted to make it to Mongolia any way we could. The Mongol Rally website notes that only about half the teams are expected to make it to Ulaanbaatar, and that “if you get
to the finish line without some good stories to tell, then the Mongol Rally has failed its mission.” So, on to plan B.

Imomdad invited us to stay at his family’s house. He showed us family photo albums, including one of his father’s service in the USSR tank corps during the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s, while his mother made a large spread for dinner. After a few vodka shots, Imomdad, his father, Collin, and I went off to the local bathhouse, where we relaxed in the extremely hot sauna until we were barely able to move. In the morning, we said thanks and goodbye to Imomdad and his family. His uncle was taking passengers to Dushanbe in his 4x4. Along the way, we saw Greg pedaling his bike up a mountain and stopped to chat with him for a few minutes.

20 August

Ah, yes, Hotel Dushanbe: You can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave.

That’s how we felt, coming back to the same hotel in the same city where we’d been the week before. We had to get out of the country before our visas expired in four days. We hoped to get a flight to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

We went to the airport and inquired about tickets. There was nothing available to Bishkek before our visas ran out. We checked from Dushanbe to any city in Kyrgyzstan. Nope. Khojand, Tajikistan, to any city in Kyrgyzstan? Nothing. Dushanbe to Almaty, Kazakhstan? Yes, on Monday evening, just before our visas ran out.

Over the next two days, we chilled out. I went to the post office to send home a couple of heavy packages, including my tent, sleeping mat, and camping stove. An older lady was staffing the international window, and I could tell by the look she gave me that she knew I was going to be trouble. I spent the next two hours filling out postage forms in quintuplicate, itemizing everything. She decided what was OK to send and what wasn’t; oddly, she said I couldn’t send a deck of playing cards or the car insurance paperwork from Moldova. She finished up the process by tearing strips of cloth off a large roll, going into the back room, machine-sewing them together to fit the exact measurements of my belongings, inserting my items, sewing the packages closed by hand, and then dabbing big spots of hot wax all over the top of each and stamping them multiple times with an official iron seal. Tajik postal services — welcome to the year 1900! It took a while, but she was laughing in the end (maybe because of the ridiculous $250 I paid for postage). I asked how long it would take, and she replied that it would be about two months.

24 August

Dushanbe International Airport is the largest, busiest airport in the country. The entire thing consists of a ticket lobby, one metal detector, and a large waiting room. Our flight to Almaty was aboard a small, 1960s-era Soviet prop plane.

We were running out of money and time. The train to Russia and then the Trans-Siberian Express seemed like the best way to get to Ulaanbaatar, but first we had to extend our Russian visas, which expired in two days.
On Tuesday, we got to the embassy in Almaty to find it closed for lunch. We waited at a restaurant and brewery called Ultra's, where we had some of the best beer since Europe. Back at the embassy, an employee told us that we could not extend our current visas—we would have to purchase new ones. We’d need to get our forms filled out, visa pictures taken, passport and visa copies made, and any tickets purchased before applying. So we could get all of that done and come back the next day, Wednesday? No, the earliest we could come back would be Friday morning; they would be closed for the next few days.

The next stop was the train station, where we inquired about tickets from Almaty to Novosibirsk, Russia, and from there to Ulaanbaatar. The next train with available seats was leaving on 5 September, but there was a flight to Novosibirsk on the morning of the 4th, and the Trans-Siberian Express left from there that same night.

Collin weighed his options and with a heavy heart chose to go back home. He wanted to reach Mongolia, but things were getting too complicated, and the money had run out a long time ago. He booked a flight back to London, where he would stay for a few days with our friend Dave before heading stateside. His flight was also on the 4th, so in the meantime, we would be able to visit Kyrgyzstan.

29 August
The next day, we found a man to drive us the four hours to Bishkek. Also making the trip was a cute girl who greeted us in English. Aika worked at a bank in Almaty but had studied in Kyrgyzstan and was going to visit friends there. She and our driver, Alic, made excellent traveling companions. In Bishkek, Aika and Alic kindly bought us a cup of khlep, a drink made from fermented plants that tastes like salty-sour beer, and then we grabbed dinner with Alic at a local cafe. The next night, we went to the Zeppelin Bar to see a Kazakh cover band do pretty good renditions of classics such as “Billie Jean” and “Smoke on the Water.”

Kyrgyzstan celebrated its 18th independence day on 31 August. There was tug-of-war, arm wrestling, and Kyrgyz-style wrestling in the park, and musical performances on a stage in the center of the city. We wandered around all day, stopping at food stands whenever we got hungry and sitting down at a cafe for drinks once we were thoroughly exhausted. After the fireworks ended, we joined the city’s younger generations in revelry at the Bacardi Lounge until the wee hours of the morning.

On Thursday, we took a taxi back to Almaty. Collin and I said our goodbyes and hopped on our respective flights.

4 September
As I walked up to my train at the Novosibirsk station, Mongolian women selling Chinese clothes were hanging out of the windows and walking up and down the platform. I found my compartment, a four-berther with boxes of clothing and mannequins strewn all over the place. A middle-aged Mongolian woman rushed in and quickly got things in order.

The Trans-Siberian Express is often romanticized. I had imagined
comfy compartments and a grand dining car with huge windows where people would sit and play card games while drinking vodka and enjoying the view. Nope. Even with a second-class ticket that costs hundreds of dollars, you are four to a compartment. There is no running water; you need bottled water to drink, brush your teeth, and wash up. Heating is come and go. Hot water is usually available for tea and ramen, if your car’s attendants have been vigilant in keeping the stove fire stoked.

I heard French coming from the next compartment. A woman about my age was traveling to Ulaanbaatar and then Beijing with her aunt. They invited me into their cabin, and we talked about our trips. They were both named Marie, and they were from the northeast part of France, near Metz.

At Ulan-Ude, I met my new bunkmate: a giant Mongolian guy who stumbled into the compartment looking a bit worse for wear and smelling of alcohol. He smiled and waved and then continued on down the hall. Over the next few hours, he wobbled back and forth between compartments, finally passing out on the berth next to mine, arms askew, shirt exposing quite the paunch, and snoring loudly enough to be heard in adjoining compartments. It was quite a funny sight. It would have been funnier if he hadn’t been in my compartment. The two Maries took pity on me and invited me to stay in their compartment for the night.

The third evening, we pulled into our last stop in Russia. We handed over our passports and were confined to quarters while the police searched every cabin for contraband. After a night of restless sleep, we arrived at Ulaanbaatar Station, and I said goodbye to the friends I had made.

7 September
Brigitte Cummings is a charter member of the Bayanzurkh 100 club, which my Rotary club had partnered with to help build a kindergarten in rural Mongolia. Munich-born Brigitte lived in Hong Kong before moving to Ulaanbaatar 12 years ago and opening up Helmut Sachers Cafe, a German cafe and bakery.

Over soup and a sandwich, I filled her in on my journey, and she told me about Mongolia. We also met a couple of guys who had finished the rally a few days earlier and stopped in for a bite to eat. (Of the 400-plus teams that started out, more than 100 made it to Mongolia for the finish line party on 15 August, four weeks after the launch, and teams continued to trickle in for several weeks after that.)

The next few days were filled with meeting people, eating out, and exploring the city. One night, Brigitte arranged for a group of visiting medical volunteers to have dinner with Khamba Lama Damdinsuren Natsagdorj – one of the most revered Buddhist lamas in the country and a friend of the Dalai Lama – and I got to tag along. He talked about traditional Mongolian and Tibetan healing techniques and medicines.

During the rally, Brigitte had e-mailed me about the Gobi Marathon, which she planned to take part in. I decided to do it too.

11 September
On Friday morning, we headed out of the city in a Russian minibus. As far as the eye could see were low grassy hills and the huge expanse
of cloudless sky. No people, no dwellings, no traffic—nothing but the occasional hawk overhead. We continued on and on, through the unchanging landscape, until after nightfall. The next day was more of the same. For lunch, we set up a table in the middle of nowhere and had a picnic of sausage, bread, and pickles. Finally, we arrived at our camp near the Flaming Cliffs of Bayanzag. There was already a contingent of marathoners there, and I shared a ger, or yurt, with an American who worked as a casino dealer in Macau, an Australian working in Ulaanbaatar at a nongovernmental organization, and an older German man who had come to run his 180th marathon.

Over dinner—a heaping portion of spaghetti and meatballs—the organizer, Joachim, told us what to expect. Five of us were running the full 26.2-mile marathon: my roommate, a German woman named Eda, and me. Everyone else was doing the half marathon, or the “fun walk.” I kept getting stares of disbelief when I told people that I was doing my first marathon in the Gobi with no training and no proper equipment. But this was going to be a fine end to an excellent trip.

After a big breakfast, we got into our race gear (which for me consisted of my normal clothing and hiking shoes), slathered on sunscreen, and did a bit of stretching. The organizers set up a start banner between the two minibuses, Joachim gave the starting signal, and we were off.

I ran alongside the others for the first mile or so but then began to fall behind, going at a slow jog with only Eda behind me. Before long, the three in front were out of sight, and Eda had caught up to me with her slow but methodical pace. At the first major fork in the road, the two of us were at a loss. There was no indication of which way to go. We went right for a while, then reconsidered and trekked across the open sand toward the left fork. Still no sign of trail markers. Joachim had said that no one had ever gotten lost doing this marathon—would we be the first?

We decided to head back to the branch we had initially chosen. Our water was getting low, and we had seen no trace of people, vehicles, or trail markers for the past hour or more. I was pretty tired, but Eda was having no evident trouble keeping up her pace, and after half an hour she was far ahead. We kept on under the harsh sun until I came to the realization that there were no footprints anywhere along our path. Eda, apparently having the same revelation, had turned back in my direction.

We had been off-trail for over two hours. We saw a ger in the distance and decided to ask for directions. I stuck my head inside and said sain bainuu (hello) to an older couple and a young woman with an infant. I did my best to explain that we were lost and needed a ride on their motorcycle in the direction of Bayanzag. They invited us inside and gave us some aruul and suutei tsai—dried cheese curd and salty milk tea. We downed everything out of politeness, and then the man led us outside. Eda decided to continue on foot with the knowledge that I would send a minibus to pick her up once I located the others.

I held on for dear life as we sped across the rocky steppe toward Bayanzag. At the checkpoint,
Joachim told me they'd already sent a vehicle to search for us. Eventually, I saw it heading our way. Eda, saved from the clutches of the Gobi, lost no time in hopping out of the minibus and getting back on the trail. I hurriedly got up out of the folding chair I had been resting in and started running in the same direction.

It was a mistake for me to have sat for so long in the ger, on the motorbike, and in that chair. My legs were protesting any further exertion. It was obvious that I would be the last to finish. At the next checkpoint, they were taking down the tables. "How much longer to the finish line?" I asked. "Only about 6 kilometers — you can see it up on the plateau from here." It didn't make sense. Less than 4 miles. Had I missed something? Then I noticed the tire tracks leading up a hill in the distance. "Isn't there supposed to be another loop here?" I inquired. "No, no, not for you. You just go straight to the finish." They were trying to hurry me along. "No way, guys," I told them. "If I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it right."

The last thing I had to tackle was a flat expanse of desert leading up to the famous Flaming Cliffs. I could just make out the finish line atop the plateau, about 5 miles away. My legs were like Jell-O, and every step was painful. I made it to the incline leading up to the plateau, then worked my way alongside the cliff. I was almost there.

It was almost 6 p.m. I had been running since before 10 a.m. I thought for sure everyone would have been back at the camp by now. But as I got closer, I could see people cheering me on. Several ran out to accompany me in. My legs started to wobble and then cramp up horribly, but somehow I made it, and everyone crowded around to congratulate me and take photos. I had done it!

We took a different route back to Ulaanbaatar, stopping at Gobi Gurvansaikhan National Park and a Buddhist monastery. We visited the giant ger housing the Buddha statue, talked with a junior monk about the history of the place, and were invited inside the head monk's house by his mother for sweets. Her son, she said, was in a ger out back, meditating. He had been there for over two years. One of the apprentices brought him food and water every day, which he would slip in so as not to disturb the monk. I believe she said he was going to be in there for another three years.

Back in Ulaanbaatar, I hung out with new friends and saw traditional Mongolian theater and throat singing. On Friday, I gave a talk to the Bayanzurkh 100 Club. It's a small club, but it has been instrumental in many humanitarian efforts.

My last night in Mongolia, I treated Brigitte to dinner and visited the Grand Khaan bar for parting drinks with friends. I still hadn't packed but was too tired to bother. I figured that I'd just set my alarm early, take a shower, and pack before Brigitte's driver came to pick me up at 5:30 a.m. But when I woke up and looked at my phone, it was 5:15. In classic blunder fashion, I had set my alarm for 4:30 p.m. I bolted up and started to get my things together. No time for a shower — I could already hear the driver pulling up outside. Twenty minutes later, I said goodbye to Brigitte and was on my way to the airport.
PICK YOUR CAR WISELY.
If it has a lot of rust on the underside, don’t take it.

ACT CONFIDENT, BUT PLAY STUPID when someone is trying to get a bribe out of you. It may take a while, but eventually they’re going to give up.

PACK A FOLDING CAMPING TABLE. Better than eating off your dirty car.

DON’T FORGET THE SUNSCREEN on your driving arm.

BRING AMERICAN CIGARETTES. Border guards always ask for them, and it doesn’t hurt to make friends and speed things along. They have the same brands in Central Asia, but the American ones are much preferred.

GET GOOD TIRES. You don’t want to have to find the right size tires in some junkyard in the middle of Kazakhstan.

TRY NOT TO BE THE FIRST one over a river crossing. Let someone else go first, and learn from that person’s mistakes.

DON’T THINK THAT EVERY PERSON you meet is trying to scam you, as a few teams we encountered did. Most people we met were very nice.

BRING TRASH BAGS and remove any garbage that you create. Yes, it is a huge pain, and yes, it is hard to find places to throw it away, and yes, it does tend to get smelly after a while, but that’s no excuse to just throw your garbage on the ground. I don’t care if no one is around, or if the place is already littered with refuse – don’t do it. We went through a few additional garbage bags ourselves just cleaning up trash that fellow ralliers left in their wake.

BRING A SPARE KEY. Or two. Collin and I were constantly leaving our keys inside the car or misplacing them among our belongings. Getting locked out of your car in the middle of the desert would be a real bummer.