

Tiffany's travelogue

What started out as a pretty ambitious ride has turned into an even bigger journey for GS rider Tiffany Coates, who set off from England in May with the intention of riding all the way to Mongolia. However, once she arrived there – via Belgium, Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikstan, Kygyrstan, Kazakhstan and Russia – she decided to just keep going...

Tiffany looked at her map and noticed that Mongolia is not all that far from the Pacific Ocean and so rode across Siberia to get to Vladivostock. Then she took a ferry to Japan and travelled around this amazing country before shipping Thelma – her trusty 18-year-old R 80 GS – across the Pacific Ocean to the United States. While she waited for Thelma to arrive, Tiffany borrowed a motorcycle to ride across Mexico to Guatemala. She also found the time for an interview with BMW Motorrad about her Mongolian Mayhem trip.



It must feel strange to be in a busy metropolis after having been in the middle of nowhere for so many days during the last six months?

It's always a period of major adjustment when entering any city – all the traffic that suddenly appears, the sounds that assail me from every direction, and trying to work out which turnings to take only to find that they are one-way streets that I can't go up. My arrival in LA was a bigger shock than usual as I feel I have gone from one extreme to another, having spent six months experiencing the lack of traffic and wide-open spaces of the 'Stans, Mongolia and Siberia. I am now in one of the world's biggest, vibrant and most modern cities. There seem to be people and vehicles everywhere.

How did you find the Gobi Desert

The Gobi Desert was a real turning point for me as a rider. I had always considered Thelma [her R 80 GS] to be too heavy for me to handle on sand. I had struggled across the Namib, Sahara, Thar and Atacama deserts in the past, so I arrived at the edge of the mighty Gobi feeling nervous about riding my fully-loaded 300Kg (660lb) bike across the sand. By the time I left a week later, I had cracked the Holy Grail of desert riding – finding myself confidently gliding across the sand at 60mph, turning by using slight shifts of my body weight and what's more thoroughly enjoying the experience. I just wish there had been someone to share it with.

How scary was it to get completely lost in the Gobi – one of the world's most desolate areas – with fuel running out?

In Mongolia there is no concept of being lost – routes are taken according to the direction one wants to travel, as there are no roads. I was confident of the route but got a bit carried away with enjoying the sand riding and didn't notice when I strayed off the track. Eventually I stopped and realised I was in an unfamiliar bit of the desert. The ger (yurt) dwellers that I asked for help merely pointed me in a direction and said it was good. I used my compass and the sun to try and stay on that bearing, though it is unnerving to be riding across 'nothingness' with no road or even tyre tracks to follow and just hope you are going the right way.



Then what happened?

I ran out of petrol and switched to 'reserve' but still had not found my way to the main track. I had just 30 miles (45 km) of fuel left and things were feeling a bit tense, as there was no sign of anybody and not even a sheep in sight. This was the point when I felt uneasy. I left Thelma at the foot of a hill and climbed to the top, searching the horizon and looking for some sign of life. I spotted something in the distance that was reflecting the sun's rays, took a rough bearing and scrambled back down the hill to Thelma. I rode off in that direction and after about 15 minutes of tense riding was relieved to find power lines strung across the desert.

So I guess the only option was to follow them?

I just had to hope they were the ones leading to Mandalgovi – the only town between me and half a million square miles of nothingness. There was a rough track alongside the power line, and after another few minutes I almost screamed with relief when I saw a kilometre marker, which confirmed that I was on the correct track. Then the reserve tank ran dry and I could go no further.

Then what happened?

I was left with no choice, but to put up my tent and wait for a vehicle to pass. Despite this being the only route across the Gobi, it was still 18 hours before anyone came past and I was able to hitch a lift to town to get petrol, and hitch back again. Did Siberia live up to its fearsome reputation?

Definitely, it's a vast place and not for the nervous rider with its remote, empty roads in very poor condition and lack of fuel stops. Not to mention the extreme cold I had to ride through.

What were your impressions of Mongolia as a 'westerner'?

Mongolia was like a blank canvas – no roads, towns or even people for much of the country, just wide open spaces with the irresistible invitation to point my motorbike in any direction and just ride and ride. The ger dwellers were always hospitable and friendly while the local bike riders on their Urals and small Chinese bikes were inevitably fascinated by the big GS.



I liked the way you changed your mind about the route and ended up going that much further – are you glad you're still on the road?

Definitely - I can't imagine being at home (I should have got back two months ago) and to think I would have missed the ride through Siberia and reaching Vladivostock, which is such a milestone, not to mention the cool notion of arriving in Japan by ferry. And now the prospect of a journey from the Pacific to the Atlantic to look forward to...

Which countries made the most impression on you?

Japan for its extremely friendly people and the volcanic landscapes with hot springs. Kyrgyzstan and its stunning scenery of mountains and crystal clear lakes, as well as the unrivalled off-roading opportunities (there are no fences) which meant it has definitely been the highlight for this trans-continental journey. It is also a very remote country to reach so it's going to be a long time before it changes.

Was it nice to have some company on the bike from time to time?

I actually prefer to have someone to travel with me, even though it means the bike will be harder to handle – particularly in the extremely rough conditions I encountered on this trip. But not many people have the time, money or inclination to travel in the same

way that I do, and I can be fussy about who accompanies me. One of the main plusses in having company is having someone around to share the unique experiences, such as golden eagles swooping in close for a good look at us at 3,000 metres, the stunning sunsets on the Caspian Sea and the beautiful stars in the sky when camping out in the desert. Also I like to chat!



What were the really scary moments on the trip?

There were several, including the deep and fast-flowing river crossing close to the Afghan border where there was a waterfall drop off just inches from the wheels; my crash in Mongolia, and the road across the mountain pass that was covered in a 60cm thick slab of ice in Kyrgyzstan. However, the hairiest moment was probably the soldiers who held us up at gunpoint in Tajikistan. They had grabbed hold of the bike, were pointing their AK 47s directly at us and were shouting at us, but they got nothing from us.

How did you cope with being a vegetarian in some of these countries where meat is king?

It has been tough. I wasn't able to get vegetarian meals at all and so would have to make do with what was on offer, picking out the lumps of gristly meat from the food that was served up and eating what was left in the dish whether it was noodles, rice or a few bits of unidentifiable vegetables. In Siberia I survived on mashed potato three times a day. However, when I'm camping out I cook for myself and always carry a good supply of food.

How did you update your travel Blog when you were on the road?

I don't carry any computer equipment with me, partly because I've seen too many people with broken laptops and I knew I would be on extremely rough terrain throughout this journey. Also, having valuable items in your luggage makes you act differently about your stuff, making it harder to leave the bike parked up either in towns

or in obscure places while setting off on foot to explore. Fortunately, every country has internet cafes and generally they are easy to find, so I didn't have many problems updating the website and blog. I think that most of the people who read my blogs are aware of the type of journeys I undertake and if there is no word from me for a few days they assume I must be in an even more remote place than usual!

How does it compare to your earlier trips, now being able to communicate with friends and family from just about anywhere in the world?

The Internet has made a massive difference; family and friends used to wait for letters and postcards, and now they can follow my blogs and emails. Previously, to get news from home I used to have to rely on letters being sent to 'poste restante' (general delivery) at the capital cities on my trips. These letters would often take several weeks to arrive and could sit there for a few weeks more until I arrived in town to pick them up. So news was sporadic and usually quite old by the time I got it. It's also great to know that a wider audience can be reached as more and more people follow my exploits and get in touch from all over the world to let me know how much they are enjoying reading about what I am doing.



It sounds like Japan made a big impression on you, but it's not your obvious motorcycle destination...

That's true, however there are a lot of bike riders in Japan who give a warm welcome to all bike travellers and help them out whenever they can. The roads are kept in good repair, which was a relief after the pot-holed ride through Siberia, and it's got a varied landscape so the routes winding through the mountains made for great riding.

The bike sounds like it's taken a battering, is it holding up ok now?

As always after a long, hard journey there are small repairs that need to be undertaken but Thelma is an absolute star – after every fall and accident, I just turn the key and she always starts up. The R 80 GS is an extremely well constructed bike that has stood up

well through all the extremes of desert, mud, rivers and mountains where I have taken it.

What is the total mileage for the trip so far?

Unfortunately the accident in Mongolia meant that the speedo cable snapped and so I don't have an accurate figure, but I know I have definitely covered more than 17,000 miles so far (28,000 kilometres) on this journey.

And what's the current total mileage for Thelma?

She's becoming the Grand Old Lady of motorbike travel as she has now clocked up 163,000 miles (265,000 kilometres). I think she deserves a long service and good conduct medal for that!

To follow the remainder of Tiffany's journey online, please visit her website, which can be found at www.tiffanystravels.co.uk.