

the Ride of a Lifetime

53 days. 11 countries. 11,200 miles.
On a 13-year-old motorcycle.
Welcome to the insanity that is the Mongol Rally.

In the great tradition of *Breaking Away*, one young man from Bloomington takes off on the ride of his life, transforming himself in the process. Only this time, the man is 25-year-old Michael Waterford, his bike has an engine, and he needs to cover vast distances with little more than the clothes on his back.



by Michael Waterford
AS TOLD TO Elisabeth Andrews



(right) Braving the Russian Caucasus Mountains.
(inset) Michael Waterford by the Black Sea on the road out of Turkey.
Photographs taken by the participants.



At the Czechout Party, the night Michael and Alex (center left and right) met Daniele (far left) and Jonah (far right).

It started with a Facebook message from my friend Alex: “What are you doing this summer? Do you want to drive motorcycles to Mongolia?” My response: “Heck yes!”

A

t the time, I was working for a ski resort in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. After graduating from Edgewood High School in 2004, I studied tourism management at Purdue University and worked for a short time in Germany before my job in Jackson Hole. I had traveled quite a bit around Europe and New Zealand, but nothing half so adventurous as what Alex was proposing.

He had signed up for the Mongol Rally, an automobile “race” across Eastern Europe and part of Central Asia characterized by the most ill-equipped vehicles imaginable. The rally rules stipulate a maximum engine size of 1.2 liters—most modern cars are two or three times that powerful—so the point, essentially, is to drive through some of the remotest parts of the planet on what the official rally site describes

as “tiny granny-mobiles.” (The only exceptions to the engine size restrictions are for those who wish to race in used emergency vehicles, which are later auctioned off for charity.)

We, however, took the concept one step further. Instead of having at least some sort of roof over our heads, Alex and I decided to purchase German motorbikes—technically, mopeds—that maxed out at 35 miles per hour.

I mean, why not? I was 25 years old, bored with my job, and sitting on some extra cash. I figured life’s too short not to ride a miniature motorcycle to Mongolia.

In preparation for the trip, I moved back to Bloomington to spend a month with my friends and family. Both my parents had a good little weep when I told them what I was doing. At the time, I was confused by their distress. The whole thing sounded like nothing but fun to me. Later on, when I saw how incredibly unsafe it all was and how close we came to dying, I understood how they must have felt.

The rally is really little more than a starting point and a finish line, with some 300 teams of two to four people coaxing piece-of-crap vehicles from the “Czechout” point west of Prague to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. There is no route and no support system. The organizers, a group of British nuts called The Adventurists, explain it this way on their website: “It’s about getting out into the world and discovering it for yourself, so we resolutely refuse to give you a route or detailed information about what to expect.” Alex and I decided to go south, crossing through Turkey, Georgia, and Russia to reach our final destination.

To qualify for the rally, entrants need to raise 1,000 British pounds (about \$1,500) for charity. The funds support two Central Asian charities: the Christina Noble Children’s Foundation and the Central Asia Institute, both dedicated to improving the lives of children, especially girls, in impoverished and vulnerable situations. I hit up everyone I knew in Bloomington, asking people to pledge a penny for every mile we went. So many of them came forward with \$10 here and \$100 there that we scraped together the money.

GERMANY

On June 28, 2011, I flew to Munich to meet up with Alex, where he was working on a farm. I arrived while he was out and wandered, jet-lagged, into a barn where I found an old

mattress. After crashing to sleep, I woke up to see Alex standing over me with the goofiest grin on his face.

“Hey, man,” he said. “Welcome to the party.”

We had three weeks to familiarize ourselves with our bikes and make our way to Klenová in the Czech Republic. My steed was a 1998 Suzuki DR 125, which looks like a mountain bike that’s been eaten by a pizza delivery scooter. Alex’s was even smaller. The bikes had excellent fuel economy, but our tiny tanks could last only about 250 miles before running dry.

We had no idea what we were doing. Our practice run to Braunschweig, Germany, which was about the distance from Evansville to Indianapolis, took us two full days. We had to avoid both highways and hills, and with all my camping gear and my 6’ 3” bulk, I weighed considerably more than the bike I was riding on.

CZECH REPUBLIC

The rally began on July 25 in Klenová with the best party I’ve ever attended. All the participants gathered at a castle to drink and dance and psych themselves up. It wasn’t at all the crowd I thought it would be—I expected a bunch of ignorant kids like myself, but most of the participants were much older, like a 70-year-old Frenchman traveling on his own, and an Aussie in his 60s with his 40-something nephew. It was thrilling to discover that people this wild exist all over the world.

Everyone was in a state of glee and excitement and anxiousness, trying to fathom what they were undertaking. They all enjoyed coming up and laughing at our bikes. We hadn’t realized until then how much better equipped the car drivers would be—they had chairs in their trunks and everything, whereas we would be ground-sitters for the entire trip.

Luckily, though, we met two other motorbiking maniacs with even smaller engines than ours. Daniele, 24, was an international man of mystery with citizenship in the U.K., Switzerland, and Italy, and Jonah, 24, was from London. They were both dressed in tuxedos, perched on the tiniest Honda scooters money can buy. Alex and I were overcome with admiration, and the inspiration for us to suit up in dapper coats and ties.

“Oh my God,” I said to them, “I like your style.” They became our traveling companions for most of the journey.

I had my first reality check leaving the party. I don’t know why this happened, but on the way to the campsite, a large man walked

up and punched me in the face. I immediately crumpled to the ground and put my hands up, and when he realized I wasn't going to fight him, he left me alone. It was a wake-up call that made me realize I wasn't in Bloomington anymore.

AUSTRIA

The next morning, despite crippling hangovers, we began our 14-hour ride to Vienna. We arrived at 11 pm, dirty and hairy and tired and sore. I felt like a blight on the high-class city, sitting on the sidewalk next to my bike with my clothes covered in hundreds of miles worth of dirt. Somehow, though, Daniele and his 007 connections managed to find us a free place to stay where we could wash ourselves and our clothes and rest while we tied up a few loose ends. We wouldn't sleep indoors again for nearly two weeks.

HUNGARY

It began to rain as we rolled into Hungary. We looked for a place to camp, and settled on a field near an abandoned house. Camping on the sly, rather than at designated grounds, was one way to keep our costs down.

I was the designated cook on the trip and would purchase a few items each day—some sausage, maybe some cheese, and some type of vegetable—to supplement the rice and ramen noodles I carried in my pack. It was a pretty dismal meal in Hungary as we sat on the muddy ground. We went to bed wet and woke up wet and got right back on the road.

ROMANIA

Still drenched, we made our way into Romania. Despite driving rain and bad traffic, we headed toward the Transfăgărășan, known as the greatest road in the world. It runs across the tallest sections of the Carpathian Mountains, and we decided it would be a great idea to ride our pattering scooters up its 6,600-foot ascents.

The weather cleared by the time we reached Transylvania, and we headed up the twisting road into pine forests and along the edges of cliffs. We had to stop frequently to cool our engines, but there were magnificent views left and right. We camped in the mountains looking toward Bulgaria. I felt pretty comfortable on that ride, thinking, "We're going to be all right."

BULGARIA

The joyride came to an end at the border of Bulgaria, where I was stopped and searched

by the guards. It took all afternoon for them to pick through my belongings. When we finally got through, we were rewarded with ghost towns. What had looked like major cities on the map turned out to be empty, decrepit shells of places that seemed to have been abandoned in the 1940s. Repeatedly, we pulled into gas stations to find them closed, unmanned, or out of fuel.

Daniele and Jonah soon ran out of gas, and we had to leave them by the side of the road while we searched for a working station. We had no GPS or communication devices—all our navigation relied on a map fastened to Daniele's handlebars. Our friends had no choice but to wait and hope we would return before getting lost or running out of gas ourselves.



We managed to find some and make it out of there, and were so excited to reach Turkey. After the terrible roads in Bulgaria, we thought the sky would open up and the angels would sing. That didn't exactly happen.

TURKEY

When we first entered Turkey, it was on the most beautiful four-lane black tarmac I'd ever seen, just as I'd imagined. But the road quickly devolved into a series of potholes that knocked out Jonah's muffler. Driving next to him, it was so loud it was like being inside the exhaust pipe of a Harley-Davidson. The bigger problem was the hole in his engine that was quickly leaking oil and filling with dirt.

We limped toward Istanbul, for the first time genuinely scared for our lives. The highway into the city was six "lanes" with no one obeying any order or speed limit. The four of us clumped together and barely made it into the cobbled streets of the Old Town.

Once we got there, though, our luck turned around. We found a hostel, and the owner turned out to be a motorcycle aficionado who knew just where to find help for Jonah. The next three days were an interlude of decadence, making up for the last 12 days' bleakness through rich food and rooftop parties. By the time we left Istanbul, there was a small crowd of people waving us goodbye.

We had to split up our group there, because Daniele and Jonah had mapped a different route out of Turkey and it was too late to change our travel visas. We exchanged parting gifts that we promised to carry until we were reunited. Alex and I got Daniele a plush deer and Jonah a 4-foot-tall mannequin of a Turkish dancer. They

LEFT:
One of the sturdier bridges Michael crossed on his adventure.

ABOVE, RIGHT:
The map strapped to Daniele's handlebars was the group's primary means of navigation. From left: Daniele, Mike's bike, Jonah, and Alex.

gave Alex a 5-by-6-foot flag of the likeness of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey. I received a mariachi guitar. Practically speaking, the last thing any of us needed was more junk to carry, but the comedy value more than made up for the inconvenience.

Driving out of Turkey toward Georgia was the most beautiful part of the trip, curving north along the edge of the Black Sea. I had to stop at one point just to soak it in. I thought about how people paid thousands of dollars to see the things we were seeing, when we were doing it dirt cheap and looking like some kind of insane hybrid of mountain men and bankers. We camped that night at what we called the Garden of Eden, a remote spot



on the steppe blanketed with hazelnuts and blackberries and apple trees.

GEORGIA

Alex was getting the flu. It didn't help that on our first night in Georgia, it rained all night and we nearly froze at our campsite. Worse yet, we ran into some young Georgian campers who insisted that we try their "Homemade Gypsy vodka." It was so bad I honestly thought I had been poisoned, except that they continued to drink it in giant swigs from old Mountain Dew bottles. Alex and I were immediately drunk, then ill. The next day, feeling like death, we dodged herds of cattle on the road until we crossed out of Georgia.

RUSSIA

Between Georgia and Russia is a demilitarized area, and the driving is beyond treacherous. The road passes through a series of unlit tunnels checkered with potholes, and switching from bright sunlight into complete darkness was sickeningly disorienting. I can't believe we didn't crash.

As we came down out of the Caucasus Mountains, we saw the Russian border, and pulled up behind a line of cars. The guard was yelling in Russian, and we tried to decipher his directions as we made it to the front of the line.

We must have misunderstood him, because he charged at us and lowered his gun.

Our hands flew up and Alex screamed the only Russian phrase he knew: "I don't speak

Russian! I don't speak Russian!" The guard continued charging until he was on top of me and grabbed my arm, pulling me backward off my bike. He marched me back several feet and pointed at a spot on the ground and then at my motorcycle. It turned out we were nearly killed for crossing an invisible line.

It took two weeks to get through Russia, and the monotony was in some ways the hardest part of the trip. The summer heat was searing us under our helmets and bulky motorcycle jackets, and Alex and I both had sinus infections. The strain on our relationship was inevitable. Simply negotiating our cruising speed became a conflict, because my bike was happier at a higher speed than his. The police pulled us over several times (for what

infractions I have no idea) and we had to bribe them to leave us alone. We were robbed at one campsite, waking up to find all our food had been stolen.

We learned to drink vodka, which I've always hated, because it was our only option for winding down.

At one point, in Volgograd, my bike chain was completely stretched out from carrying too much weight. We went all over the city, asking in a half-dozen mechanic shops whether anyone could help us, and each time being turned away. Finally, a man who looked every inch a gangster glared out from his beat-up Mercedes, and said, "Follow me."

We were terrified but desperate and tailed him as he sped in and out of back streets taking us who knows where. He pulled up in front of a junkyard with chained dogs barking and an armed man in a stand. There was no question in our minds that we were at a mafia chop shop.

Those mobsters turned out to be the nicest guys we met in Russia. They built me a new chain and took us shopping in their car

for new gloves and other items that needed replacing. Eventually they asked us what we did for a living and when we tentatively returned the question they proudly told us, "Oh, well, we run this town."

That wasn't the strangest acquaintance we made in Russia. When we got farther east, to Rubtsovsk, we struck up a conversation with a man named Yury who, it turns out, had driven through Mongolia. He offered advice on what to expect, and invited us to his house for tea so he could show us photos from his trip.

He treated us extremely well at the house—or rather, his wife did, though we barely saw her. As soon as we got there, food started coming out—fried eggs, fresh tomatoes, home-churned butter. Yury invited us to stay with him and gave us clothes to wear while his wife washed ours. He brought us out to the sauna he had built, and as we sat steaming he invited us to join him on the next day's hunting trip.

I was hesitant, but Alex told me, "These are the situations when we are supposed to say yes." The following afternoon we joined a line of vehicles filled with the town's mayor and other

local bigwigs. This was their regular weekend pastime: driving out into the wilderness of Siberia to drink vodka and shoot ducks.

After two hours on a dirt road we arrived at the hunting site, where a servant set up our tents and a spread of food that was obscene in its overabundance. We counted 13 different kinds of meat. Alex and I did our best to slow the rate at which vodka entered our systems, but despite turning down two-thirds of what we were offered we wound up as drunk as we have ever been.

The men woke us up at 4 am, three hours after we had gone to bed. I ran off into the woods and got sick, then came back and was handed a Kalashnikov rifle.

I didn't last long, because I'm left handed, so each time I fired, the empty shell would fly out and hit me in the forehead. After a few rounds the casings succeeded in splitting open my head. I said, "Ok, I'm done."

The Russians, unfortunately, were far from finished, and were back at the vodka straight away. Pretty soon I was feeling very uncomfortable about being in a dark woods in the middle of nowhere surrounded by armed and drunken strangers.

We needed to get to Kazakhstan to meet Daniele and Jonah, and Yury had promised we'd be done that day, but he only kept drinking and brushing me off. Finally, the mayor told him he needed to take us back, even though Yury was so wasted I'm sure he was blacked out.

If there is one thing I have absolutely no respect for, it's drunk driving. I tried to take Yury's keys, but he was not having it. I was getting more terrified every second, but the only thing I wanted less than to get in the car with him was to stay stranded.

I wound up climbing in the back while Alex took the passenger seat. Once we started moving, Alex did most of the steering as Yury was all but passed out. I was curled up in a ball with my eyes closed, and all I could think was, "I'm going to die here in the middle of Russia with a blacked-out drunk driver and my mother's going to hear about it and it's exactly the situation she tried to warn me about."

When we finally made it back to our bikes, I was so infuriated I was literally shaking. Alex tried to talk me down. "I don't know if I can get over it," I told him. "That ruined my trip."

"No Man's Land" between Russia and Mongolia.



(above) Outside a cave in Mongolia, from left: Alex, Daniele, Jonah, Michael, and their "Norwegian Dads," Øystein and Rune. (left) Riding through the Gobi Desert.

MONGOLIA

The Mongolian border, we discovered, only operates from 9 am to 4 pm. We arrived early in the evening and had to set up camp there on a concrete slab. While we waited, an argument broke out between a man in his car next to us and someone trying to sell him traveler's insurance. The salesman smashed all the driver's windows and the driver ran away for his life. We didn't sleep well.

Once we were through the border, though, we spotted a fire truck that could only be another Mongol Rally vehicle. The two men driving it, Rune and Øystein, were famous Norwegian comedians making a documentary of their trip. They camped with us that night, and from then on we were together nearly every day. We wound up calling them the Norwegian Dads, because they carried extra water and fuel for us and made the Mongolian leg so much safer than it otherwise would have been.

KAZAKHSTAN

Getting out of Russia was the low point of the journey, but entering Kazakhstan was an incredible high because we were reunited with our friends. It was such elation. We each had so many stories to share from our two and a half weeks apart. Being together again made us feel like it was all going to work out.

On the two-day journey to the Mongolian border, we stocked up on all the food we'd need to complete the rally. We found a campsite along a river and went to sleep in the highest of spirits. For the first time that summer, I truly believed we were equipped to make it through Mongolia.

That night we were robbed. Everything we'd purchased to prepare ourselves was gone. My optimism evaporated.





The next few minutes are hazy in my memory. I don't remember approaching the truck, but apparently I yelled, "He's still in there!" before jumping off my bike and running down.

The image of the driver is still bright in my mind. His legs were hanging out the window and the rest of him was curled into the only part of the cab that wasn't smashed. He was unconscious and covered in oil and blood. Alex took off to get help. I thought the man was dead, but I got in as far as I could and picked up his hand.

He squeezed it. I started to cry. It took all five of us to pull the man out. He slowly came to and proved that Mongolians are the toughest people on Earth, because what do you think he asked for as soon as he was conscious? A cigarette.

Alex returned with a truck full of locals, and when we left the man was waving to us from inside one of the concrete pipes.

THE FINISH

We had several more days left before reaching Ulaanbaatar, and our supplies were dwindling. We had to ration our water and food. The temperature started dipping and reached -4 degrees Fahrenheit one night. We slept in every scrap of clothing we had, including our helmets. The next morning our bikes looked like popsicles. We quickly scraped the ice off so we could keep moving.

At last, on September 16, the entrance to Ulaanbaatar came into view.

My reaction was not what I expected. As proud as I was of what we had accomplished, I wasn't ready to be done. I had grown accustomed to the camaraderie and the nomadic lifestyle. I didn't want to see it all end.

Once in the city, however, it was so cluttered and confusing and busy that when, after hours upon hours, we finally located the official finish line, I was absolutely ecstatic.

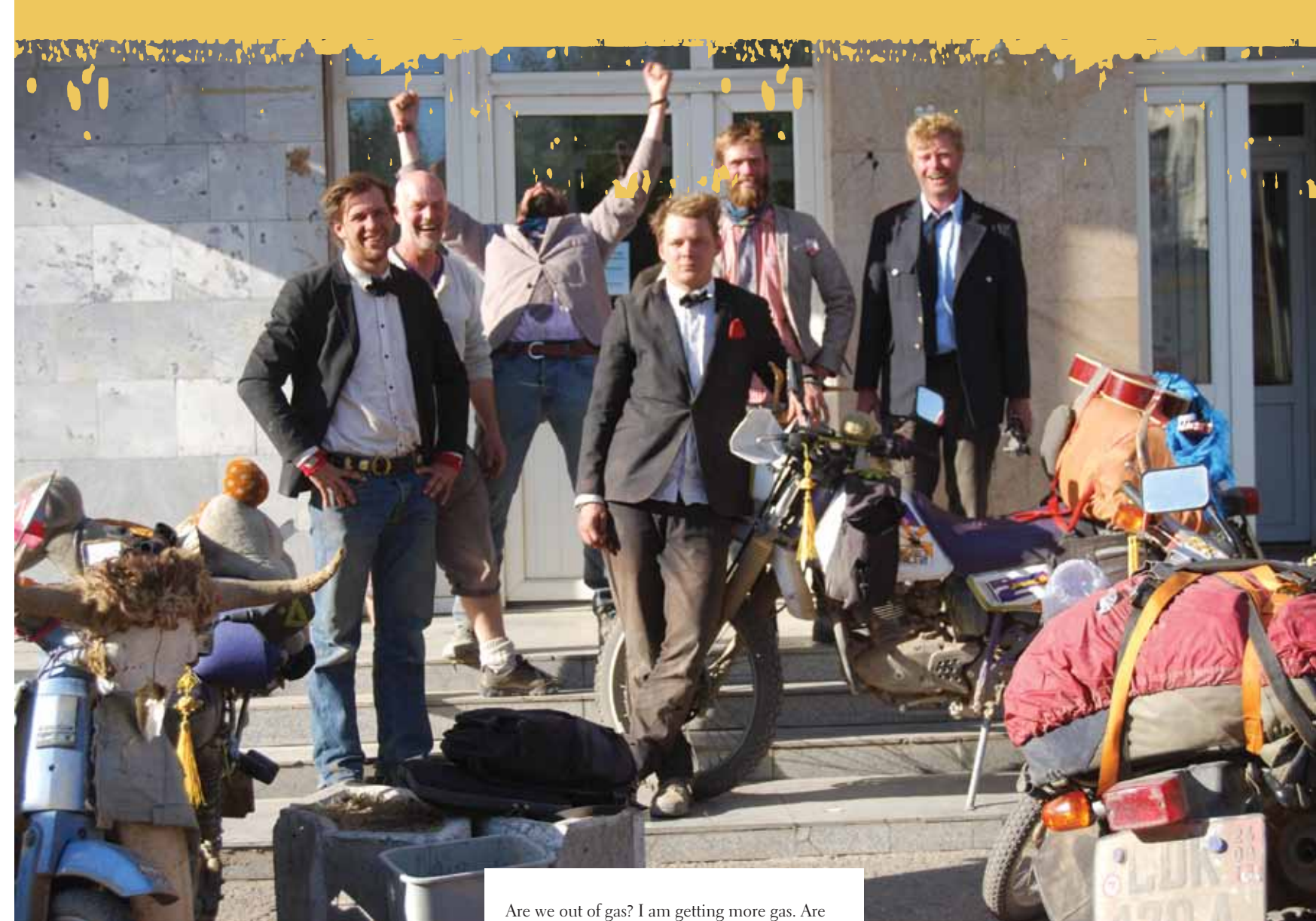
Seeing the Mongol Rally sign was beyond surreal. So many people thought we'd never make it out of Klenová on our little mopeds. And there we were, 11,200 miles later, in the capital city of Mongolia, still straddling our trusty steeds.

We stood around for four or five hours drinking beer and toasting one another. There were no other Westerners whatsoever. We were the last group to finish the race by far.

The group's first night in the Mongolian desert.

Children greeting the travelers in a small Mongolian town.

Michael crossing through a river in Mongolia—and becoming so wet he was in the beginning stages of hypothermia that night.



Michael (with arms raised) exults in his victory amid his traveling companions.

BLOOMINGTON

Before this trip, I think I'd been a bit sheltered and spoiled. I didn't have an appreciation for the ease of life in America, or the hardships of more difficult living conditions. The Mongol Rally gave me both—at the end of the journey, all I wanted was to get back to Bloomington and enjoy a Guinness at The Irish Lion and listen to music at The Bluebird.

At the same time, though, I learned that I have something I never thought I could possess: true grit. We would not have made it without the attitude that we would simply do whatever was required of us.

Are we out of gas? I am getting more gas. Are we in danger? I will get us to safety. Is someone going to die unless we untangle him from his wrecked vehicle? We're going to pull that man out and get help for him.

I recently checked our fundraising page and saw the most astonishing thing there. I don't know if it is a mistake, but it looks like we ended up raising more than \$40,000. We must

have an angel donor, because no one I talked to pledged that kind of money. It's an amazing thing to contemplate that this trip didn't just change my life—with that much support for the children's charities, it's going to make a world of difference to a lot of families in Central Asia.

So, knowing what I know now about how dangerous the Mongol Rally was and how many things out there could have killed me, would I do it again? Heck yes. Immediately. ✨



Scan this QR code to see more photos from Michael's trip online.

-OR-

go to: magbloom.com/mongolride



Clean-shaven Michael Waterford, back in Bloomington, chilling out at Bloomingfoods. Photo by James Kellar