



# The Tiger Rally 2008

Kuala Lumpur to Hanoi in a vintage Bentley

Paul Markland





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The author lives in Salcombe, Devon and compiles Blog books of his adventures in a 1936 Derby Bentley.







## The Run Up

I thought I would take the opportunity to get this travelogue going whilst my wife Myra was still basking in the Thai sunshine and I was hiding indoors trying to avoid sunburn. Part of the deal to entice Myra to navigate was that we would have 6 days in Phuket before the rally commenced. Having flown over here and ensconced ourselves in a fabulous ‘Spa Pool Villa’ at the Banyan Tree Hotel, a life of sheer luxury began in earnest.

We first came to Phuket 20 years ago when it was a fairly quiet and beautiful place. It is still beautiful but a lot more crowded now with hundreds of resorts and thousands of holiday homes. The friendliness of the people has not changed but perhaps has lost some of the sincerity that existed in 1980 when they would place a garland of beautiful orchids around your neck. Today it is a wristband of small orchids and you have to do the placing. However the Thai smile and demure attitude of both male and female inhabitants still exists and it is a delightful place to visit.

We ventured out from the Hotel only twice, once for Myra to go shopping for ‘copies’ in Patong, the liveliest destination for youngsters in the world if one of the least pleasant for a grumpy old man who prefers Harrods to the night market. However, it brought back wonderful memories of Charles as a ten year old being draped with a snake and Ayesha going boggled eyed over a Thai Boxer we saw at the ring there. I do wonder whether you could still be draped with a snake here or whether that would be a breach of Health and Safety as it undoubtedly would be in the UK. I think you would be fine, I saw no sign of any political correctness and absolutely no sign of Health and Safety.

The Kai Tai’s of Patong, boys dressed as girls, brought back memories of my first trip to Singapore whilst at sea and my friend Richard Ellis trying to get me to take a stunning ‘girl’ home to the ship. This was a tradition in the Merchant Navy, getting a cadet to mistake one of these transvestites for a girl. I can assure you it is easily done. They are usually tall and gorgeous, the former along with the size of their feet being the only outwardly obvious way of telling. Many a young Cadet and AB have found out only after returning to the ship. Anyway Myra and I have not seen any of these ladies for years but there were quite a few in Patong. Young travelling readers beware!

This brings me to the only unpleasantness of the week. I decided to hire a boat and a dive master for a day so I could get out and see how the marine life had fared since I dived here in the 80’s. The fish were much the same but the traffic underwater was unbelievable. Having cleverly avoided divers all day by going to the wrong site at the wrong time on our third dive we not only jumped into other divers, I actually joined up with one pair and left my dive master with a very pretty female diver.

However the sad bit was about to occur and I only mention it as it reminded me of how careful we will need to be over the next month driving in this and other unsophisticated, traffic-wise, country. On the return from the diving we came across a road accident between two ‘Hondas’ (50cc Motorbikes). It was obviously a bad one as







a stream of blood was crossing the road and a man was lying in it near his bike. It took a lot of insistence to get my driver to stop and I had to run back 50 metres to reach the scene. There were plenty of spectators but only one person doing anything useful. He had his hand pressed into the guy's neck trying to stop the blood from a punctured artery. By the time I reached him it was obvious this was a bad one and things did not look good. However, the victim was just about breathing and we managed to get him in the recovery position but that was it, 'Wot to do?'.

I rarely feel at a loss but I can honestly say that besides monitoring his pulse I could not think of anything else to do. He had no helmet, which might have saved him, and no other injuries I could see but it seemed unlikely he could survive. Eventually an ambulance arrived and the medics came over, took one look at the situation, and put on their rubber gloves. Where are they when you need them? This sort of thing has happened twice to me in a decade and on both occasions I was without gloves. Should one just be a spectator or do you risk it? Much as I wish I had gloves I think it is a very PC thing to do to leave someone bleeding to death because of a lack of them. Either way, the ambulance men did don gloves and once they had taken over I slipped away. Whilst my driver was pouring water over my hands several Thais came over and said thanks for helping, I was really moved by this even if I felt like a spare groom at a wedding.

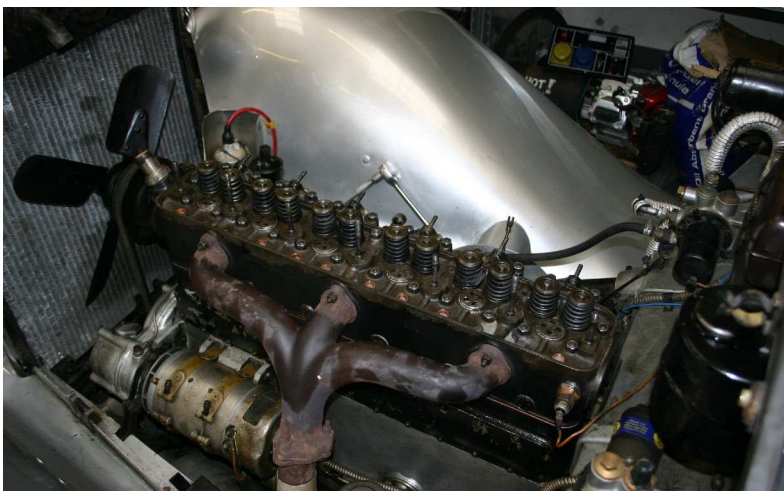
Anyway three things come out of this; firstly my medical crash kit will be in pole position in the car for the rally, secondly the rubber gloves will be on top! And thirdly tell your offsprings to wear helmets when in Thailand, 11 people die a DAY on mopeds! As I am afraid our victim did.

Well back to the lighter side of travel. We leave the Banyan Tree by air tomorrow and fly to Kuala Lumpur to collect the car and get it ready for the start. I have bought a new set of rear indicators with me as they got damaged trailing the car up to Felixstowe for the shipping to Malaysia and I need to tighten the cylinder head down before we start.

The reason I need to do the cylinder head is that 10 days before the car went on the ship I discovered that it was not running very well, in fact not very well at all. After a harrowing hour with Alan Jeffries, aka Enginetuner, we discovered that the head gasket had blown between two and three and we had zero compression on either cylinder, 'Bugger!'.

Luckily we had the spare head gasket and were able to remove the head at his workshop and replace the gasket. Luck stayed with us as on close inspection we also found that the valves were not seating properly and needed grinding out. Alan's team was able to skim the head, regrind the valves and re-assembly the whole unit in 36 hours. We were going to replace all 31 of the head studs but when the set arrived, costing some £690 from Fiennes, we discovered that we could only replace 5 of which we had been sent only the central one. Luckily Fiennes refunded the money on returning the studs and we made some new ones for the specific studs we needed.

Great amusement then ensued as Bentley insists that an engineer should never use a



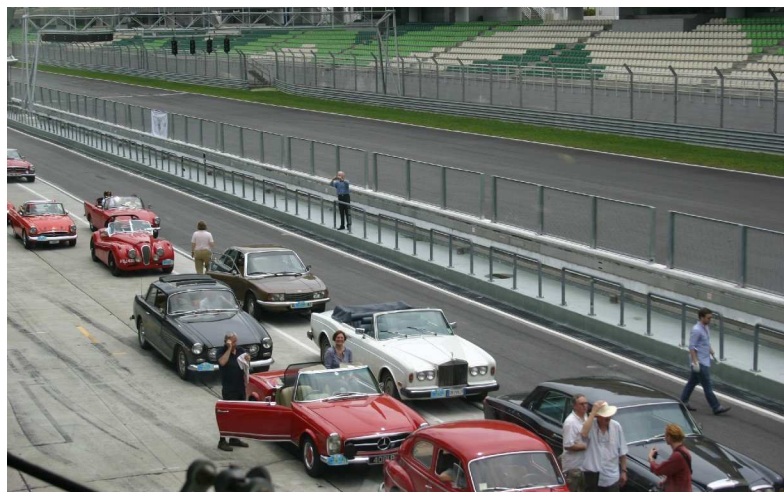




torque wrench. As every modern car in the world has its head torqued down, Alan and his Subaru friends thought this hilarious and even published the relevant document on the Subaru Car Club website. A box spanner and six inch bar is all that is needed.

By the time the car left the UK we had ‘tightened’ down the head three times but this has to continue for several hundred road miles and hence I have the daunting task of doing this probably 3 times during the early days of the rally. As many of my seafaring friends know I was never an Engineer.

After a terrific week in Phuket we flew down to Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia to stay under the Petronas Towers in the Mandarin Oriental hotel. The day after arrival we collected the cars from the Sepang Formula 1 track where they had arrived in containers, two by two. The Bentley started first time as one might expect and off we went back to the city 80 kilometres away. Narrowly avoided running out of petrol when it became apparent that ‘let’s stop at the first petrol station’ turned out to be forty miles away. I was not the only one in trouble. Some poor bastard ran out within sight of the petrol station. Anyway I, Fenhalls in his Mercedes Pagoda and Moffatt in his S1 Bentley all made it.



First thing the next day was up at 0530 to get to work on tightening the cylinder head before the heat really set in as the car was bivouacked in the Oriental underground car park. This went well, one and a half hours start to finish. I also had to find a way of blocking engine heat from coming up through the floor from which I had suffered on the drive back into KL the previous day. I cut up an Ecoflow document case that fitted perfectly around the brake and gear stick as a gator and kept out the heat. A quick polish and the car was ready for the off.

In the meantime Myra along with certain other ladies had got the low down on where to shop from Christine Ashall in England and were off looking for plastic macs and other useful accoutrements. Yes, it has been raining most afternoons since we landed in Thailand, the usual 4 p.m. rain that wets everything but stops as suddenly as it starts. As putting the Bentley roof up and down is such a hassle we will just weather the storm as they say with our cheap plastic ponchos on.



## Off we Go

The start – Sunday 2nd March 2008 – We head off in convoy from the hotel to the KL Tower, fourth tallest tower in the world. We are to be flagged off from the base of this tower. Impressive as it was a trip to the top yielded little more than a couple of good photos of KL from the air. However it was a good place to start from and the cars were lined up and flagged off by some dignitary or other. No idea who he was.

We shot off out of KL with Myra getting the hang of the road book as we swept past other cars and onto the open road. By goodness it’s hot, roof down hats and sunscreen on, but still so hot. Anyway car performing well as we race towards Pankor Laut Island near Ipoh. We were supposed to be staying in the Cameron Highlands for the first night but some cock up with the bookings means that we are now having two nights on the





resort island instead. Gosh! It's hard this rallying.

Uneventful day except that the Dynamo has decided to stop charging. We ignored it as I think it is a dry fuse and I need a quiet, preferably cool, hour to sort it out. We have our trusty Snap On Powerpack with us so unless we are forced to drive in the dark we can manage for a day or two.

Pangkor Laut is very pretty, 25 mins from the mainland on a speedboat. We were in a room elevated on stilts out at sea. Very pleasant spot surrounded by fish, Iguana's (monitor Lizards), Macaw's, Miner birds and monkeys. We were warned that the monkeys come into the rooms if you do not lock the door but I have not heard of this happening to anyone.

There are some magnificent cars on this rally, a beautiful Phantom One Rolls Royce, three other Derby Bentley's one which is a very original version unlike my special, and couple of fabulous Lagonda's.



This is definitely more of a drive than a rally but the organisers seem to be effective and efficient if a little laid back. John Brigden announced the other day that we need some sort of special permit from the Cambodian tourist ministry in order to bring the cars into Siem Reap from Thailand. I have had to ask Sam Cledwyn, our Indochina Starfish Foundation volunteer in Phnom Penh to try and sort this out and the deadline is looming if we are to enter on time in 12 days. As usual these things take time and the Ministry of Tourism would like 20 days to process the request. I am staying as relaxed as John about it on the basis it is not my job to worry about these things and anyway, knowing the Far East it will all resolve itself in time.

From Pangkor Laut we drove North to Penang and an overnight stay at the Eastern and Oriental hotel then on over the border to Trang in Thailand. This is the first place we have been where the aftermath of the Tsunami in 2005 is still noticeably. The bridge to the resort was down and the beachfront trashed. All through Thailand we now see Tsunami Evacuation Routes and safety areas. A lot has been done to prepare the local people for a similar event in the future. Many of the villages are still only a few feet above sea level and without clear routes to get away from the water, a further event would cause a major loss of life.

The roads we are on are no longer motorways and we are getting to see more and more of the local scenery. Much as we loved the Malay people I think we find the very friendly nature of the Thai's make Thailand our favourite country of the two.

### **The Bridge over the River Kwai**

The drive around Phang Nga bay to Phuket is wonderful, although the traffic is a nightmare, 'Hon Da's' (50cc Motorbikes) are everywhere and it is a devil of a job predicting which way they are going to zig or zag when you least expect it.

We have another easy break in Phuket before heading on to the River Kwai and the





famous bridge. The car is behaving itself so far; I have hotwired the dynamo solving that problem and tightened the head down a second time. Myra is having a good time taking people shopping at every stop.

A much more interesting few days after a rather bland start to the rally through Malaysia. The drive from Phuket north to Tusita was uneventful but interesting. There is a much larger Muslim influence on the west coast of the Thai peninsula than we realised. Most of the small villages have a Mosque and there are a few ladies in veils etc. The drive over the central highlands was delightful and a lot cooler than down on the coast. As we emerged on the east side of the peninsula the religion becomes more Buddhist and the traditional temples are in every village.

We arrived at the Tusita resort only to find that the place was infested with Mosquitoes. After a brief lunch with the strangest Caesar salad I have ever eaten, we along with a Norwegian couple and our friends the Moffatts decided to drive north to the resort town of Hau Hin. This should have been a simple, fast three hours up the motorway but turned out to be a four and a half hour battle against torrential rain and zero visibility. It was so bad we had to stop in a garage for a time, as Myra and I were soaked and unable to see through the windscreen.

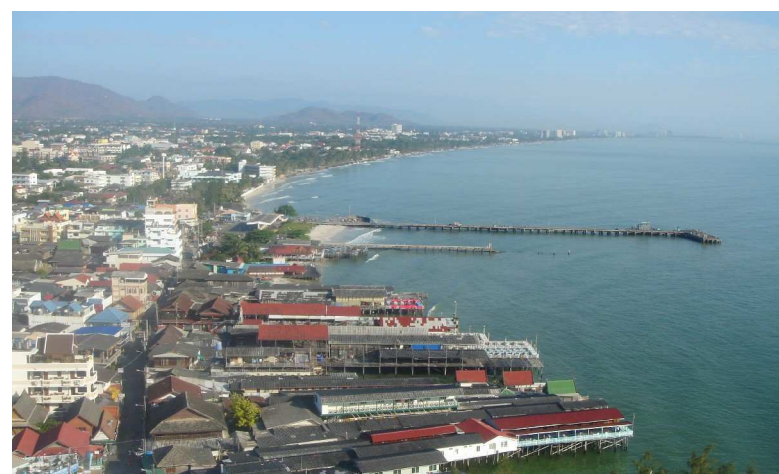
Eventually the rain stopped and we motored into Hua Hin at 10 p.m. to be greeted by a packed resort just like Phuket. We spotted the Hilton from afar and worked our way through the dense traffic to its gates. The management were really pleased to see the cars, not sure about us, wet and muddy, but found us rooms and we settled into a few beers.

Moffatt has been having a small leak from his gearbox cooler and we decided to look at this before setting off north to the river Kwai. Just as well that we did as he had lost 2 of the 7 litres that the sump holds. It took less time to nip up the connections than we expected and we rejoined the motorway for the three hour drive to Kamchanaburi.

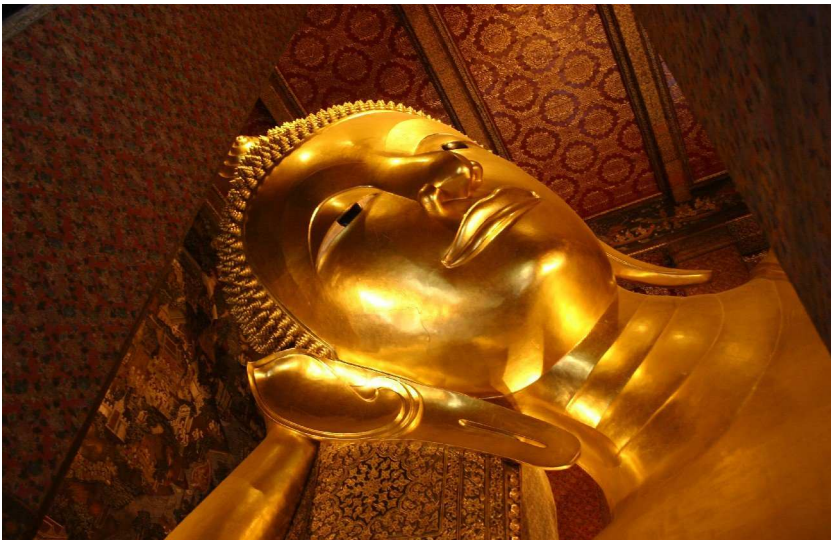
Car number 21 driven by Nick Channing was also caught in a downpour and he hit such a large puddle of water on the motorway that it got up under his rear skirt and pulled the back off the Lagonda. It was a horrible disaster and has made a complete mess of the back of the car. He was forced to lash up the back, throw out some of the less important bits and then press on north with a droopy bottom.

Kamchanaburi is famous for only one thing; it is the site of the actual bridge over the river Kwai built by prisoners of war in the Second World War. The locals have turned the entire place into a three ringed circus and quite frankly we wished we had skipped the stop and gone straight onto Bangkok. The bridge was teeming with tourists and both ends were immersed in bazaars and cheap restaurants. Don't bother would be my advice to anyone contemplating a visit.

The following day was the drive into Bangkok. In 2005 it took me four hours to find my way to a hotel in the centre of the city. This time we are determined to do better. Setting off at 0600 we dashed to the outskirts following the road book. As usual this let











us down just as we were getting into the heavy traffic. We managed to sort out the directions for a time and were within 5 kilometres of the Peninsula Hotel when we suddenly got completely lost. I stopped at a traffic lights and Myra hopped out and jumped into a passing taxi, much to the driver's surprise. Unlike the hotel last time, the Peninsula is well known and he was off like a shot with me following. Poor old Bentley almost expired in the last 500 metres, we were stop start every 5 metres for 40 mins and I had a hell of a job stopping fuel vaporisation killing the engine completely. A local could see how hot and stressed I was getting and pulled up alongside and offered me a bottle of water. It was really kind and I drank the lot in one go. He was most amused and spent the rest of the drive ensuring no one pushed in between the Bentley and Myra's taxi. We made it with minutes to spare; the Bentley had just about thrown its hand in. As I drove it up onto the forecourt of the hotel it was spluttering and banging like an old tractor.

Bangkok was fun as always. We went off in the obligatory Long Tailed Boat for a zoom around the waterways and a visit to the Royal Barge museum and Myra's favourite Buddha, the Reclining Buddha at Wat Po.



### The Louis Vuitton Luggage Affair

Departing Bangkok for Siem Reap in Cambodia was always going to be fun but when the third Tulip (Road Book Direction) proved to be wrong it made getting out of the city a much greater ordeal than necessary. Cursing the rally organiser the whole way we eventually got on the correct road and put pedal to the metal for the border. Again the route book tried to send us off in the wrong direction but Myra spotted the error and we managed to stay on track with the help of other rally cars also pounding for the border.

The Thai side was fairly uneventful but the Cambodian immigration moved at a snail's pace. So much so that we asked the Immigration Office for special VIP treatment that consisted of being taken to the front of the queue for a small fee. That got things moving and we were soon in Cambodia on the worse road we have seen yet. We changed some dollars into Riel, 825,000 real for USD 200 and bought some drinks before heading off on the hellish dirt track that passes for a road between the border and Siem Reap.



The Bentley faired really well with its high ground clearance and big wheels but we were the lucky ones. Several old cars sustained under body damage as well as punctures and suspension damage. We stopped at a small town where every shop is sculpting Buddha's from local rock. They were fantastic and we could have bought a really big one if it had not weighed a tonne. Anyway we came away with a very beautiful specimen for our daughter that did not collapse the car's rear suspension.

The Phantom is a wonderful car owned by a very wealthy couple who not only wear designer clothing but house it in custom made suitcases that fit into a custom made Rolls Royce luggage box on the back of the car. Firstly I must apologise to them for the following but it has had most of us in hysterics.



Alistair Caldwell of McLaren fame spotted the Phantom arriving in Siem Reap with two luggage straps dragging behind it. He instantly realised that 1. The luggage box complete had fallen off the car and that 2. The owners were not aware it had gone. Good grief he says, shouting to the driver, but when one is driving a Phantom one tends to ignore the local riff raff and they drove on.

Anyway the story goes that a family of five have moved into the luggage box and suitcases somewhere in northern Cambodia and that the trillion dollars of original Gucci can be bought in the local bazaar where it is being sold as copies. Should not laugh but it is hysterical. NO trace of box, bags or designer clothing has thus far been found.

So we are all here at Siem Reap. Our lot along with 20,000 other tourists are up at the temples. Myra and I have had a quiet morning, washing and inspecting the car, no damage I can see, thank heavens, refuelling and generally titivating.

Next morning most of the group are off at day break to see the temples at Angkor Wat, unfortunately at this time thousands of other people have the same idea. We, on the other hand, know that if you go in the evening after the tourists have returned to their hotels and before the gates are shut, you tend to get the temples all to yourself. So Myra and I take the Bentley up to Angkor at dusk and get in just in time. It gives us the opportunity to take some great photos of one another with the Bentley and temples in the background.

We then race back to Raffles in time for the cocktails before we all head back out to the temples for a son et lumière dinner with local dances and entertainers. A great night had by all and very well organised by our hotel.

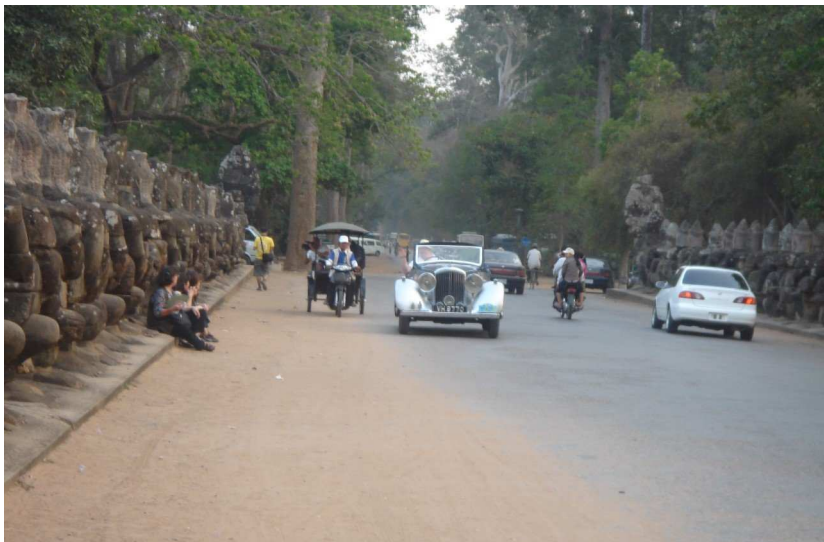
We departed Siem Reap for Phnom Penh on a much better road than that we entered Cambodia on. Happy smiling locals stopped to gaze in awe at the car as we travelled east and then south. An early problem forced us to stop and change the coil as the car was behaving oddly but once I had done this the engine ran smoothly most of the way to the city. However as we approached and hit heavy traffic I found that we were once again spluttering and banging a lot. Kept going to the hotel as I felt trying to sort the problem out with 100 people all leaning over my shoulders was just not going to work.

The road is full of people on bicycles and Hon Das. It becomes second nature to weave along the road keeping an eye out for Hon Das suddenly entering from the left; they NEVER look behind them so it is very disconcerting when they suddenly swoop in from the side of the road at half our speed. These plus people coming straight towards us on our side of the road are perhaps the scariest moments but concentration is absolute when driving through towns and villages.

Safely at Raffles we check that all is prepared for the following day's visit of 50 children from our charity centre to see the cars. Raffles have arranged to shut off the car park and allocated one of the gardens for the kids to have drink, snacks and meet the car teams. 18 cars have joined us in arriving in Phnom Penh a day early to meet the











children and visit our charity. The kids are coming direct from their football practice that takes place from 0600 to 0800 each Saturday due to the heat in the middle of the day.

We arrange sponsorship of football teams from people all over the world allowing them to pick the teams name and colours in return for their support. We now have almost 1,000 children in 18 squads being trained all over Cambodia by local FIFA trained coaches. Our centre has one of these squads and is called 'The Flying Tigers'.

On Saturday the children all arrive prompt at 0900 to see the cars; they are all smartly turned out in their football gear and love the cookies Raffles have provided for them. Between the 18 cars all the kids are given a ride around the block and a chance to look at the vehicles close up. At 1000 we all embarked in minibuses and travelled to our school at Boeng Salang on the edge of the city. The children put on a play for us about working on the streets collecting garbage and the dangers they experience. It was brilliant and was followed by a dance revue.



In the evening I had arranged a river trip for the entire rally on the Tonge Le and Mekong rivers. No one fell in although a few people had to be helped off the boat and into the FCC Hotel for dinner.

### Good Morning Vietnam

Our drive onto Vietnam was relatively uneventful except for the long wait at the border whilst the Vietnamese formed a convoy to take us to Saigon. Needless to say and as many of our readers are well aware we do not do convoys. The result of which was that we arrived in Saigon 2 hours before anyone else having dodged the tourist board and other officials as we zoomed into the city.

Well, Saigon has changed a bit since we were last there in 1995; in fact it is hard to believe the size to which it has grown. The core centre seems much the same although many of the old buildings have been torn down and high rises put in their place. The Floating Hotel has gone but Q Bar and the Rex hotel have not changed, in fact the Rex was still playing the 1970's music it played during the fall of Saigon. I think some of the same journalists are still living there.



Couldn't get over excited about Saigon and was happy when the rally moved on out into the countryside on the way to Da Lat. Car is running well now and we are up and out early, nearly first on the road as we speed off to our next pit stop or destination. The drive to Da Lat was very pleasant although driving in Vietnam is not easy. The same driving rules for Hondas exist here as in Cambodia although they are more aggressive. Lorries and Buses here who find themselves on the wrong side of the road whilst overtaking do NOT pull in when they see you. Just flash their lights as if to say 'I am here, what you going to do about it?' Only recourse is to leave the road and slide through the dust and sand on the edges. Luckily there is not usually a steep so these 'offs' are survivable.







The countryside in Cambodia and again here in Southern Vietnam is very bare at present, the heart of the dry season means the paddies are all dusty and empty of life.

The road up to Da Lat, which is at 1,525 metres (5,000 ft), is suitably twisty and slow going. However it is a pretty run and with every 30 metres (100 ft) the temperature drops a fraction. After three weeks in constant sweltering heat it is lovely to feel the difference the altitude makes.

The vegetation is much lusher as we ascend and there is a lot of tea growing and flower nurseries, at last we start to see the lush greenness we have been missing since central Thailand.

By the time we reach Da Lat the temperature is beautiful and our hotel, which is superb, has no need of air conditioning.

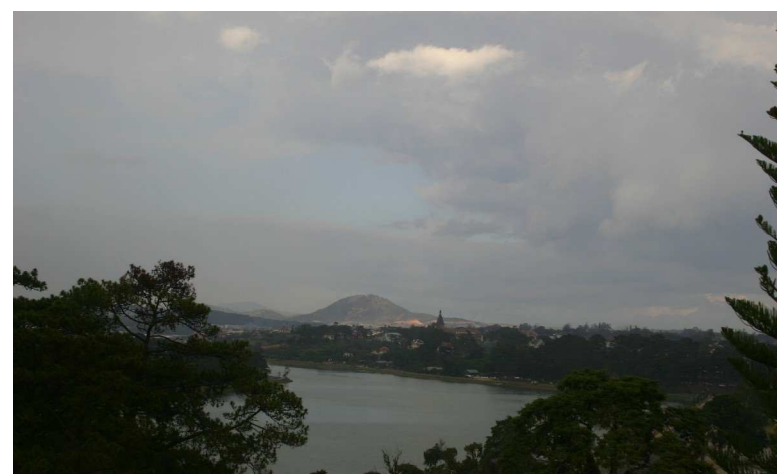
After an overnight stop in Da Lat we have a terrific drive back down the mountain to sea level on a narrow road that is extremely scenic and quiet. We stopped in a couple of villages to take photos along the 75 kilometre descent. We then rejoined the main 1A highway to Hanoi for the trip up the coast to Nga Trang. This town is memorable for me as I once flew in here before they revamped the airfield and in those days it was known as the most dangerous approach in the world. More ex Russian airliners have crashed here than just about anywhere. By car it was a lot less nerve racking.

We were to stay at a Six Senses Resort but the rally organiser mucked up the booking and we ended up in a Disney World like dump called the Vin Pearl. As it rained most of the time we were there no one was sorry to leave and head North for Hoi An, a world heritage site.

The drive was pretty awful, hours of trying to avoid motorcyclists and lorries. If you lose concentration for a second you are likely to wipe out some imbecile with a death wish on a Hon Da. However, we make it to the resort in Hoi An, a Leading Hotel of the World no less, but one designed by a master of the impractical. By the time we left everyone had fallen over in the middle of the night getting around their bedroom that was on a number of levels. Hoi An itself was a great little town with lots of atmosphere and brightly coloured shops and restaurants. It is already a Mecca for backpackers so will probably be ruined in a few years, but for now it was a good place for supper and a wander through the numerous shops and tailors.

Nothing much to report on the car front, the roads are pretty good and, except for the heat there are no real impediments to keeping the cars in good condition.

After Hoi An, a quick hop to Hue to see the Emperors Palace, quite frankly a 10 minute culture tour although someone managed to find something to do there for 3 hours. The trip we took on the Perfumed River was fun although like the Fragrant Harbour in Hongkong it was not quite the perfume one would ideally hope for. Well worth the visit, an interesting town full of old French architecture and monuments to the war





including a museum of Imperialist American Weapons and Tanks.

### Ho Chi Ming Trail

On on we go north towards Hanoi with a stopover in Vinh prior to crossing the mountains and the Ho Chi Minh trail into Laos. Vinh was probably a better town than we had time to see; the hotel was reminiscent of the Bang Dang that as a Swire visitor to Hanoi I stayed in 18 years ago. Full of mosquitoes, whores and road noise.

The trip up to Laos and over the border was fantastic, long but brilliant. The mountains are green and stunning, the villages full of happy children and pot bellied pigs, the road smooth but lumpy and the traffic modest but scary, big lorries and buses. The border was much simpler than we had expected, our Laos agent had the formalities prepared before then and we sailed through although those that arrived at the crack of dawn had to wait for the agent who didn't arrive until after breakfast.

Once in Laos we swept up and down the mountains and valleys to the banks of the Mekong River. The whole experience was fantastic and a highlight of this rally in our opinion. The weather deteriorated in places with a light drizzle and cooler temperatures, most welcome I must say. Myra took hundreds of photos of children animals, houses, petrol stations, views etc all the way.

By the time we reached the Mekong we were ready for a break in Vientiane at our old hotel, the Don Chan Palace. Chris Simons and I stayed here on the London to Sydney in 2005 so memories swept in as we drove through the town and up to this, completely out of place, monstrosity on the banks of the Mekong.

Vientiane has progressed in 2 years; I reckon there are 10 times as many Hon Da's as there were and reduction of a similar number of bicycles. However, very few cars still and that is a relief when you are tired and trying to find your hotel.

A quick whiz around Vientiane that evening followed by a great supper, French with Tattinger, in the Sitta Palace Hotel set us up for the drive to Luang Prabang through the central mountains of Laos.

Off we go on the only south/north road in Laos to LP, reversing the journey we did in 2005. The mountains are fantastic and once again the trip is hailed as the ultimate day of the rally so far. There are not enough adjectives to describe the serene views, friendly people and fantastic life of the mountain inhabitants. It is a great day.

We have a puncture on the way as well as a section of exhaust pipe falling off. Luckily we heard the latter and Alistair Caldwell caught up with us just as I was contemplating changing the wheel. Not a big deal, and we are soon on our way but we have swapped cars with Alistair for the next section. He takes the Bentley and we get in the Rolls Royce Silver Cloud Mark 3 for a couple of hours. Air Conditioned splendour that whooshes through the countryside with effortless ease. Only problem is Myra is









violently carsick. So bad I have to stop three times before finally swapping cars so that she can continue in the Bentley. I loved the Rolls and, needless to say Alistair loved the Bentley, so much so that he gave me a list of things wrong with it when we swapped cars back again. Everything from main bearings to king pins need attention. But it is a Bentley and as strong as an ox so we will not be worrying about these small issues until we are safely back at home in the garage. I think he was just trying to cover up the fact my car is far more fun than his and does not have a sick making roll.

We arrived in Luang Prabang in one piece, with exhaust pipe and punctured tyre on board. Having dropped Myra at the Hotel I went off in search of a tyre repair shop and a garage to wash the car. Funnily enough I end up back at the garage where two years ago Mike Barnes rebuilt the exhaust system on his Porsche. The garage is as it was, and the owner even remembered us all from that trip. With the tyre repaired, exhaust pipe in place and car washed inside and out, I finally get to the hotel in time for supper out at the Tum Tum Cheung restaurant in LP. Great night with lots of Beer Lao.

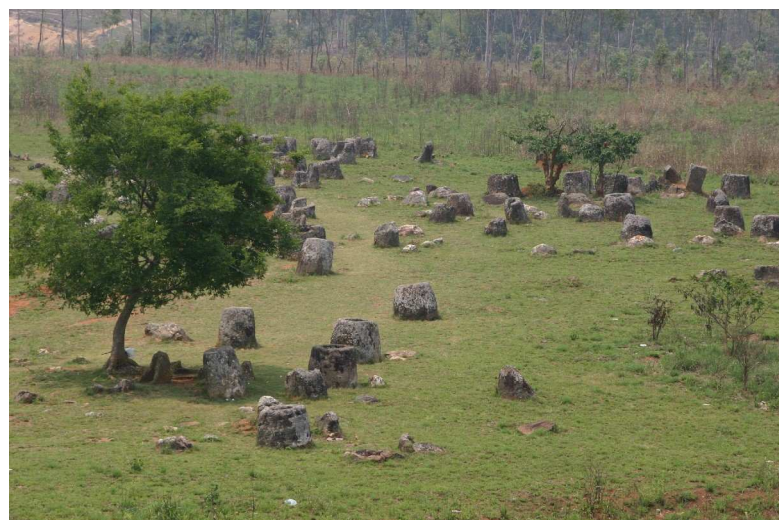
I have taken at least half the tread off my 'new' Dunlop tires on the back of the Bentley. This is caused by a bit too much over steer on the mountain bends which ensures we do not get in the way of the oncoming lorry in the centre of the road but does mean that the rear end slithered sideways a bit too often for the good of the tread. I have changed the front for back in LP in the hope we will make it to Hanoi with some tread still left on. I am fairly certain we will. This gave me the opportunity to reset the brakes and inspect the undercarriage. The roads in Laos are deceptive, and they are doing more damage to the cars than one realises. For instance my fuel guard has snapped one of its brackets that are substantial. It is not a problem but does illustrate how much stress we are putting the cars under.

### The Plain of Jars

We retrace our steps south towards Vientiane for 1435 kilometres before turning to the east towards the Plain of Jars and Vietnam.

The Jars are of unknown origin and believed to be 2,000 years old although no one has properly dated them. They consist of many large urns dotted around a few hilltops, miles from anywhere on a plateau in the Laos mountains. The area was heavily bombed by the Americans in the Vietnam War and is hugely dangerous due to unexploded cluster bombs and other mines. The craters where large bombs landed can be clearly seen and we have to walk down marked tracks that have been thoroughly swept for UXO's. The jars themselves are remarkable only in that they are a mystery, they are made of granite, stand up to 6 feet tall and are spread all over the place. None have lids but many are extremely well preserved.

From the Plain of Jars we have one of our most adventurous days driving. We head deeper into the mountains to the Vietnam border where we spend 40 minutes going through the usual formalities and collect our temporary number plates. From here it is down the mountain to the sea. Unfortunately the road disappears regularly as we descend where landslides have brought down the hillside and blocked the roads.









Contractors are now pushing the excess slope away with diggers; we are twice kept waiting whilst large boulders come hurtling down the slope in front of us. Added to this there are numerous 'offs', where the road just disappears and one hits an enormous bump or rut.

It is a long day's drive but the scenery and adventure makes it perhaps the most interesting day of the rally. We drive along a section of the Ho Chi Minh trail that is no longer a mud track but a passable road.

I have been paying for fuel through Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos using USD, always giving a little extra so that the operator could see he was getting a good deal. However, today I came unstuck when, having filled the tank of course, I presented the owner with USD and was told that no way was he going to take these. There ensued a 10 minute debate with numerous opinions from local passers all leading to me being put on the back of a Hon Da and precariously wobbling down the street to the richest guy in town who also changes money. We arrive, just, and I find the man concerned has the best shop but sells Hon Das, is a jewellery merchant and has a massive safe. Without any trouble he gives me a great rate and we wobble back up to the petrol station. By now my host has realised that the deal I had initially proposed was much better than the Dong equivalent and is looking a little disappointed. Not wanting to be mealy mouthed about it I gave him an extra 100,000 Dong (7 USD) anyway and we parted company with a happy handshake.

### Oh No! - its the 1A

Continuing on we finally reach the 1A HCM to Hanoi road and from there to a new resort on the coast at a funny place called Sam Son. As the following day was the last for this rally, I thought it time to wash the car and sort out the bags. The poor old Bentley has taken more of a pounding than I had expected and one of the front spot lights has lost its trim along with part of the radiator grill being shaken off. The brakes are completely duff now and the tires almost bald from all the lurching around mountain curves. Additionally, the last foot of exhaust pipe has fallen off again and I think we have a Big End knocking. Oh and on top of all that we sprung a leak from the radiator within miles of the Plain of Jars and I had to stop in a village and use their teeth washing water to top us the radiator along with some Radweld and two bottles of Cold Lemon Tea.

Plenty for Chris George and Alun Jeffery to get their teeth into when we get home.

Last day brought the worst traffic we have had so far and it was a Sunday. Not only did I have some Hon Da bounce off the rear wing but also we had seen nothing like the volume of lunatics on the road all of whom seemed to have a death wish. At one point we are going along at about 50 in a long line of hooting traffic behind a bus with a continuous stream of even noisier lorries hooting as they come the other way. When, out of a side turning comes a Hon Da at 40 KPH straight across the traffic missing the bus by a millimetre and the lorries by a few more millimetres before careering off the carriageway down a lane on the opposite side. Unbelievable and almost indescribable.





By the time we reached the container depot I was a wreck and Myra was hoarse from screaming. It was a great relief to put the car in the container and know that the driving was over.

It has been a great rally with a fun route, not enough adventure for me but then we knew it was going to be pretty tame. Seeing the children in Phnom Penh was a particular highlight along with Da Lat and the fabulous Laos mountainside. South East Asia has changed enormously since the 1970's when I sailed to many of the ports with Shell Tankers. However, the people are as driven now as they were then and this bodes well for the future of the region.

Cambodia is obviously especially important to Myra and I because of our involvement in the Indochina Starfish Foundation based there. It was an honour to introduce some fellow rallyists to our work in the region and my thanks to them for the significant donations they made to the ISF.

















