

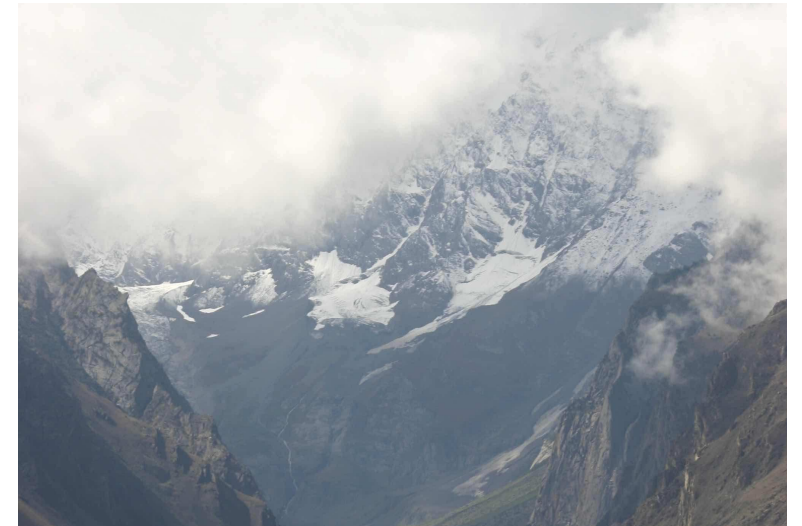
They were delighted. I think they felt ostracised by the tourist scene as no one will go near the place at the moment. From one escort police vehicle with two armed guards we now move to four fully kitted police and army vehicles, one in front and three behind, as we head to the first of six checkpoints we have to go through. Everyone is wearing a flak jacket except us, but on we go anyway. We finally reach the high street and stop. People from all around come over to welcome us and say hello. And no, they were not all trying to sell us something! Once again the friendliness of the crowd was fabulous and we were really pleased we had made the effort to enter and say hello.

Since arriving in Pakistan there has been heavy press coverage which has been at a fevered pitch since our visit to the Prime Minister. Everyone knows we are here, and our itinerary, which is why we have this massive escort. The visit to this town makes it all worthwhile and we left there feeling that we had done our bit for the rally. No one else was subsequently allowed near the town.

Thirty minutes further up the KKH and we are stopped by our police escort for tea. We thought this strange until we found ourselves right under Rakaposhi with views of the mountain soaring above us. Furthermore, the senior officer informed us that the road was blocked ahead and would not be cleared for thirty minutes. This was a typical rock fall brought about by rain the night before.

When we had finished tea we moved on until we reached the fall. By now a tractor with a blade was at work. Although he was now stuck in the slurry that makes up the mud mountains close to the road. We brewed up, opened a Fortnum's Gamekeepers Fruit Cake and awaited the clearance of the road ahead. At one point I took our shovel up to see if I could help but was politely told it was too small! After a further two hours we are back on our way having felt we had more truly experienced the enormity of the KKH building process.

At Karimabad we go 'off piste', deciding to miss the tourist board hotel and stay in the



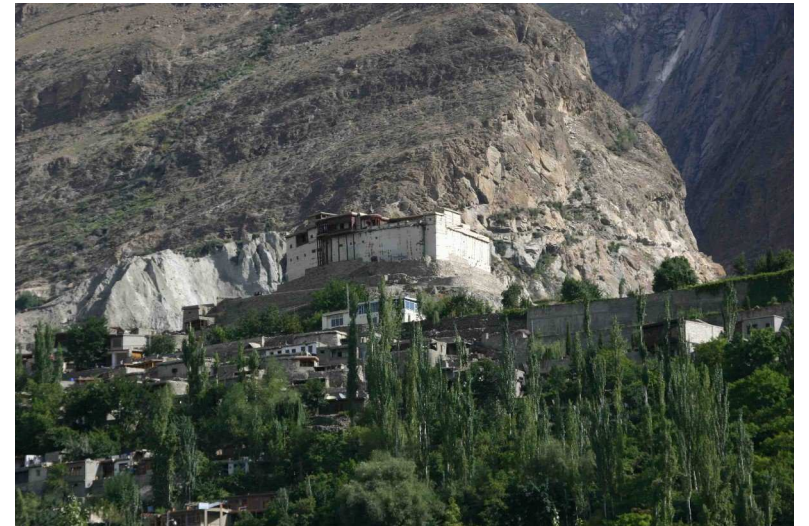


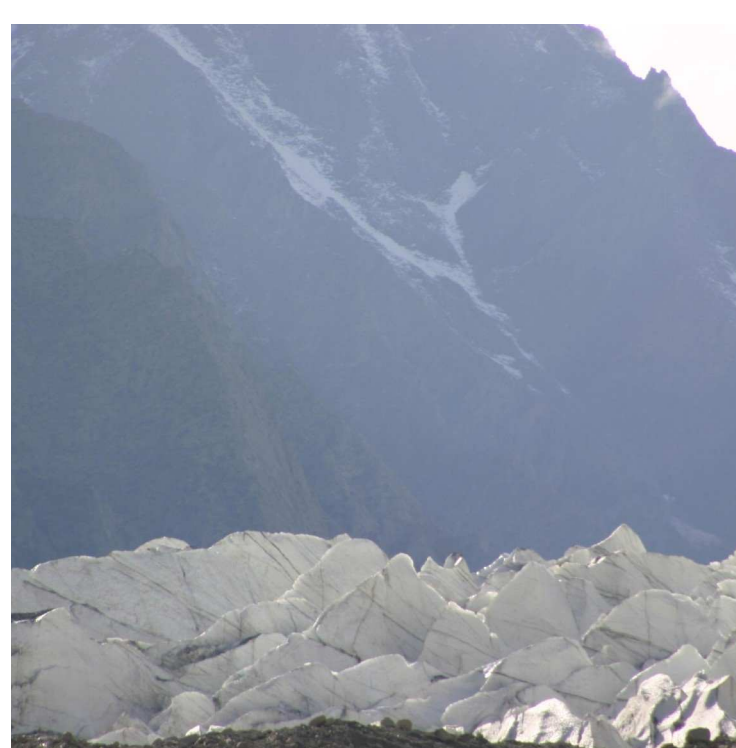
Darbar, a much nicer establishment. We dine with the Governor and Major General for the region before getting a great night's sleep ready for the exciting drive the next day.

Up we get to see the mountains right in front of us, with Rakaposhi at 24,000 feet just to our right. What a spectacular view and we are only at 10,000 feet. We head off up into the town above us to see the Baltic Fort and get some awe inspiring pictures of the Hunza valley. What a great start to the day. However, when we go to start the Merc it just will not fire up. The night before we had struggled up the almost vertical drive of the hotel and completely flooded the air filter with petrol, as well as sooted up the spark plugs. The engine is running far too rich at this altitude so we have now been forced to sort ourselves out, lean the mixture and clean the plugs etc. After 45 mins we are up and running and off to Gulmit just 35 kilometres away.

Having checked into the Marco Polo hotel (not to be confused with the five star one in Singapore), we dump our bags and head off further up the KKH to see if we can spot anything interesting nearby. Well - we are zooming round a corner when we come head on to the Passu Glacier. What a sight! We stop to take photos before heading down to the point closest to it. There is a hotel here and we drive up to see what is what. The owner comes rushing out, no guests these days, and is delighted when we ask whether he can take us closer to the Glacier. Off we go through thorn bushes and over rough ground until we are within an hour's trek of the leading edge. Here we are on the banks of the lake which is at its base and fed from its melt. Fantastic photo opportunity for us, and we would have liked to go further but darkness was due in three hours and we would have been caught out in it.

Reluctantly we return to the hotel for tea before heading further up to Khyber (not the Pass one) to see a Black Glacier, one that has a lot of scree on top of it. This is not as exciting but does lead us to meet the people of the town, most of whom speak English. The Aga Khan is the patron here and he insists all children are educated to a high standard. We find young teenagers who speak our language really very well. We





hand out cards, caps and sweets before heading back to the hotel. Tomorrow is the big one.

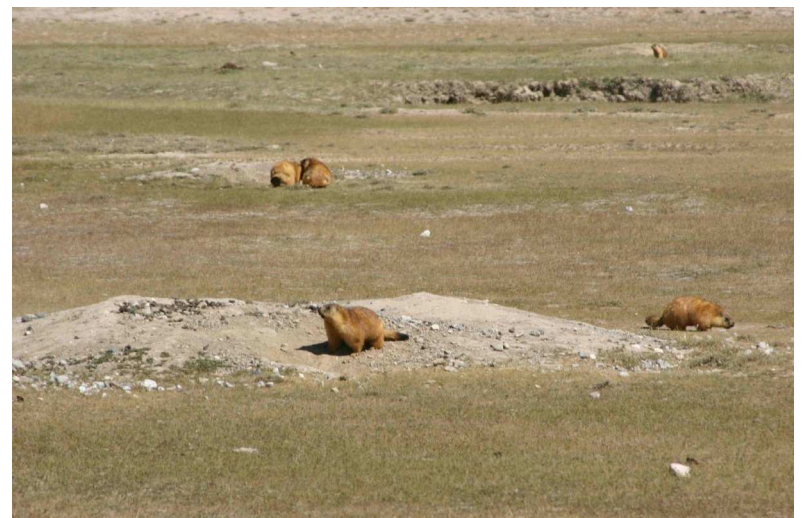
Dawn was not broken as we set off for the Knunjerat Pass and our transit into China. We go from 10,000 feet to near 16,000 feet today and all of the group are very excited. Chris and I opted not to take Diomox, as we hate the side effects, but the others have and are getting tingly fingers, amongst other things. Car is all set and we are off.

The road on the Pakistan side is pretty good and we make great progress to about 14,000 feet before the car seems to die away at low revs. Realising this we put pedal to the metal and scream up the last ascent in 2nd at 4000 RPM scattering our fellow rallyists as we pass. We screech to a halt at the top of the pass when confronted with a weapon carrying Chinese soldier at 15,700 feet.

We've made it. What a trip! The scenery cannot be described, and as Chris said "this is what I came for, it is awesome". Here we are on the Top of the World standing on an imaginary line with a Pakistani Captain and a Chinese soldier. Extraordinary! If you want an adventure come to the KKH, and you will not be disappointed.

After a brief respite, we head down the hill into China. Although the border is here, the actual formalities are carried out at our night stop in Taxkorgan. First however, our passports are checked at a small border post before we head off across the plains and down into China. Everywhere we look there are peaks in the distance towering over the grassy plain. Golden marmots the size of munjac are grazing and chasing one another around. Our first dromedary camel appears a little further on, and then we are scampering down the hills past glacier after glacier to the border post at Taxkorgan.

It takes 5 hours to clear formalities and there is a 3 hour time change here as Beijing insists the whole of China be on GMT +8. This means it is light at 0900 and dark at 2300 hereabouts. Needless to say the locals ignore the edict and have their own informal time of GMT +6.





Either way we arrive at the hotel late and immensely tired. The roads this side of the KKH are appalling. Well... not so much the roads exactly but the billion road works where you are taken off the road into rubble or deep sand. We are lucky, the Mercedes has airbags in its springs and we have pumped these up to maximum to give us clearance. We can get over most of the road edges; sharp lips every few thousand of metres and scamper across the water courses with their rocky bottoms and a foot or two of water. Others aren't so lucky and most cars are stuck at some point on the journey and have to be rescued. This is mainly in the sand sections; one of these in particular was a kilometre long and very deep for our cars. The Merc hit it running with the engine screaming in first at 5000 revs. We plough through - neither turning or changing gear just to maintain momentum, and keep it going as we scream through the deepest bits. We make it. Few else do, and 4x4s spend the afternoon pulling them out.

We do have an incident though. On one of the sand sections we scream up behind a Hyundai 4x4 driven by a local who is not worried about getting stuck. We can see nothing, blinding sand all over us but we keep going, eyes screwed up to try and see him before we collide. Suddenly the dust clears and we are heading full tilt for the new road, I keep going, bad mistake, the road is just laid and sticky. As I put a wheel a foot into it the locals are screaming at us. We stop and back off down the slope pursued by several angry Urghers. One of them grabs a rock and stands over the bonnet so we cannot move. The others crowd around us and make it clear we are not to move. At this point we do not understand what the fuss is about. The rock wielder continues to scream and gesticulate whilst we try to calm the situation. Another man comes over, opens my door and pulls at my jacket. I have no choice but to get out. He leads me forcibly up the slope to see where my tire print has scuffed the new road. Now we understand but what does he expect us to do about it? A man with a shovel appears and I begin to think he wants me to repair the damage but this does not seem to be the case. Time for money we think. I reach into my pocket and extract a USD 50 note. Passing this to the foreman, people seem to be calming down. After a hasty discussion



as to whether a month's salary was adequate compensation for 10 minutes repair work, I am released and we return swiftly to the car. We get out of there and back into the sand breathing an enormous sigh of relief.

Our first meal in China at Taxkorgan is great, with good food and good beer. After a nights rest we carry on down the mountains to Kashgar, the largest city in this part of China. We pass through a red sandstone pass which is prone to rock falls, and ,sure enough, we run straight into one that has just occurred. A bulldozer arrives very swiftly to clear the road and after only a thirty minute wait we are on our way again. The Chinese side of the mountains is not the same as in Pakistan, and not as awe-inspiring. However it is very colourful and unique in its own way. By the time we reach Kashgar we feel we have been incredibly lucky to experience the KKH and the Himalayas.

This is my second Rally visit to Kashgar. We were here in 2000 on 'Round the World', and by heavens it has changed. Beer with labels on it, a selection of fine Chinese wine, tourists, mobile phones and cars. Staggering how China has grown in just five years. Roads the same though, bloody awful! Not really true. There's been a big change there too; with no more walking tractors just little four wheel ones.

This last week has been unbelievable. Chris and I cannot believe the incredible vistas we have experienced, or the friendliness of the people both in Pakistan, the Northern Area and the Urghers of Xinxiang province. A truly great few days. We rest in Kashgar for another day

Kashgar has changed considerably in the last five years, even the hotel has built two tower blocks next to the bit we stayed in back in 2000. The transformation is extraordinary. There are now boutique shops where there used to be just a Bazaar. Everyone has mobile phones, mopeds and designer clothes. The town must have doubled in size and is now full of tall buildings and wide streets. I expected a change, but not this much. The road we spent days on before is now finished and is a fine



smooth blacktop stretching for a thousand miles to Lanzhou.

As we pass the spot where Chris Dunkley's Bentley was photographed ploughing through deep sand and half the London to Peking cars got stuck, we are doing 85 mph. The scenery is the same, mile after mile of desert with the odd town dotted in between and many more fuel stops along the way.

We pass several oases where cotton is grown, and a sample of which we picked up whilst having a close encounter with a horse and cart full of the stuff. Fruit is also grown in these areas, but seems a bit poor.

Arriving in Aksu, we are once again surprised by the changes. Clearly China's latest 'Great Leap Forwards' is more successful than the disaster under Chairman Mao. One cannot see this country reverting to a central economy; it has gone too far towards capitalism.

Not much to photograph on this leg so far, just endless desert and masses of Poplars lining the main road through each town. There is nowhere to turn off unless you wish to cross the Taklimakan desert to meet the insurgents on the other side. Yes, China does have its share of fundamentalist terrorists, but they tend to keep to the south side of the Taklimakan Desert. London to Pekingers may remember the assassination of the Mayor of Hami the day we passed through. We are going there again and it's on the north side!

We pass through Korla and on to a rest stop at Turfan: the second lowest point on Earth after the Dead Sea. The driving has been relatively easy with the only real concern being the locals who seem to have no idea of distance when it comes to launching themselves across the road. Two minor incidences between members of the rally and children have made us all very weary of passing through villages at anything other than a snail's pace.



Besides having to weld up the left boot hinge in Kashgar, the car has been performing well. We have now significantly reduced the rich mixture setting and she is running better than ever. It has always been rich but recently this has been causing some problems. However with the new spark plugs and leaner mix we are running much more smoothly. We had a minor burn out of wiring in the boot which has lead us to rewire one loom there and left us with no fuel gauge unless the lights are turned on. We cannot find the cause of this yet, but keep looking.

We are looking forward to reaching Xian where we hope to meet up with Pat Healey from Swires and some of his biker friends. In the meantime we trash on across the Taklimakan and then the Gobi desert to the start of the Great Wall.

Turfan too is not as we remember it. The last five years has seen a boom. There was still the original part of the town but now it is several times larger. The hotels on this trip are all proving to be far better than five years ago although they are still pretty poor compared with the UK. The food however has been excellent. We have been using our 'Point It' book for days now with a major degree of success. If you are travelling to far away places, this little picture book is a must. (see Amazon.com)

We now have the group favourites written out in Chinese so we can ensure we get the same dishes. Chilli Beef, Sweet and Sour anything, Prawns, Egg Fried Rice and Broccoli. Beer is great wherever we go, but the wine still dreadful, well at least I think so.

Turfan is famous for its underground water tunnels which come from the mountains 500 kilometres away. We went to see these, but unfortunately the locals have turned them into a tourist trap and it was a nightmare visit. However, we did manage to service the car, as well as help Mike Barnes in the Porsche with his. He is having carburettor problems that have been going on for days, and indeed continue as I write this report. Most of the cars are fine though. A few have suffered from finger poking





including one of the Healey's that reconnected its battery back to front and took 24 hours to realise his mistake ! Oops! The most determined driver is Colin in the E-Type; this car has been a nightmare. Having put second hand torsion bars on the front suspension it has been dragging its sump guard since Turkey. This has meant that it has two inches of ground clearance and has to be nursed over every bump. It is not unusual for Colin and his navigator, Ian to arrive in six to eight hours after the rest of us - having had to nurse the car all day. Unfortunately, it is a classic example of restoration done by mechanics that do not realise what an 18,000 mile classic rally does to a car. Most restorers are used to people wanting to use their classic car for an occasional day out. Interestingly, the Aston Martin has been well prepared and is giving little trouble. But not surprising when you learn that the restorer looks after Ralph Jones' DB5, the most rallied Aston I have ever heard of.

Anyway, I wax lyrical about the cars as this part of the trip is deadly boring: first through the Taklimakan Desert, and then skirting the Gobi.

After Turfan we stay in Hami, unremarkable, and then Jiayuguan. The first of the two days included 200 kilometres of 'off' as we call it... ie no road! However, with the air bags in the Mercedes springs we can jack the car up 4 inches or so and then cruise over most of the sand, rocks, gravel and bed rock that we encountered that day. The E Type took about twenty hours to our six! Between Turfan and Hami we pass the half way mark of this rally, about 8,750 miles. Fantastic!

Jiayugaun was famous for being the first sighting of the Great Wall. Indeed the First Fire Tower is still intact and unspoilt; however the same cannot be said for the first fort. The archaeology here has been ruined by the Chinese and the whole site turned into a theme park. When we came five years ago it was just a car park, some wall and a bit of fort. Now it looks like a set for Lawrence of Arabia. Wrecked !

Moving swiftly on we passed through Wuwei, also unremarkable before heading south through the Qilian Shan mountains towards Lanzhou. It is while passing this town



that we finally move off the route of the London to Peking Rally and head southeast for Xian. The mountains are extremely pretty and we pass through a 9,500 pass where the locals are heavily farming wheat and maize. Unusual we feel for such an altitude.

For the last few days we have been on the brand new expressways that China has been building for the last few years. These are generally fast and smooth with regular petrol stations. However as we approach Pingliang we leave the expressway and travel through the countryside through farmland, valleys and passes. The scenery here is spectacular with terraced farms in all directions, large forts on top of each hillside. I am not sure if these relate to the Great Wall, or are for another purpose.

Farming here is largely done manually, with the help of donkeys or oxen to plough and harrow. However, the plague of walking tractors that used to exist in China and caused 50% of all motoring accidents have largely disappeared to be replaced by a small four wheeled tractor of about 18 horsepower. These are slightly faster than a walking tractor but still give you a hell of a fright when they appear out of the ditch just in front of the car.

The people are amazingly happy. When we stop, we are soon surrounded by chattering excited locals all of whom seem to know 'Hello, how are you', and 'bye bye'. Getting a petrol pump attendant to take a two Yuan tip (10 pence) is almost impossible, and we are beginning to wonder whether it is a pride thing or just unheard of. Either way, we only pass this way once in life and like to spread a little happiness where we can.

After a long days drive, 650 km, we arrive in Pingliang. We decide to go to Kong Tong Shan, famous for its Taoist Monastery and Pagodas. These are perched atop a number of steep hills towering over the surrounding landscape. Approached by a new six lane carriageway we eventually find the bottom of the hill climb to the monastery. Ignoring 'No Entry' signs we blast up the hill until stopped by guards who insist we pay 120 Yuan (£9) for entry. They then wave us on. Well what a drive! It was a near vertical climb three miles up twisty roads. Chris is driving in first at 4000 RPM and

