

we just 'go for it'. I am convinced that the Mercedes will not make it, especially when we have to slow down on a corner to let a special minibus pass, but she keeps going, up and up until we are at the top! It is well worth it. The pagodas are magnificent and, although I cannot photograph them, we are looking straight into the sun, we can see maybe six perched on various mountain tops. A great visit, and we go down a lot easier than we came up!

The next morning we set off for Xian. We expect to meet Pat Healey from Swire's and some of his motorbike friends and have arranged for the rally to meet up at Xianyang, just short of Xian. The weather is poor, thick fog, and the roads a bit tricky, with dozens of villages with 'blind' pedestrians, walking tractors, and donkey and carts all over the road. However it is a short run and we get to Xianyang in one piece to be met by Pat and his wife, Hanyan. No sign of any bikers but by the time we have formed up six cars we have stopped all the traffic on the dual carriageway and are surrounded by a crowd of 100 or so locals. However this is just the start! We head off into town and suddenly come upon 100 plus bikers with a huge banner welcoming us to Xian. This is the start of the most amazing welcome I have ever had on a rally. Hundreds of people, cars, taxis, bikes are all stopped on the road as we are greeted.

After fifteen minutes of meeting people, handing out stickers and forming up, this enormous cavalcade sets off for our hotel. The roads are cleared, a police car manned by a friend of a biker joins us and the circus roars into town. It is staggering, and our group is delighted. People are waving, shouting 'Hello', taking pictures with their phones, and running alongside us.

As we arrive at the hotel, Pat has arranged lunch for forty, but a hundred and fifty people crowd into the function room. The hotel responds magnificently and everybody is fed. After welcoming speeches, Chris and I are presented with an enormous banner (40 feet long), signed by all the bikers. What a reception, words fail me, a situation rare indeed!



My friends are over the moon as we expected nothing like this. Eran from Israel, the only non Chinese member of the Xian Bike Club, has orchestrated the entire membership to join in the celebration.

A little known fact is that it is illegal to have a motor bike in excess of 199cc in China. Well we have just seen our first 199cc Ducati and BMW! How they do it is a mystery, but there were bikes as large as 1300cc in the group, including some of the latest Italian models!

Pat has also arranged a dinner for us at the old Communist Guest House which is now run by Sofitel. We have a typically British gathering in the gardens for drinks and canapés in the pouring rain. Yes you guessed it.. we are sat outside under sun shades in torrential rain with waiters escorted by helpers with umbrellas! But it was great, and the day just got better and better. After drinks, we head inside for Steak and Chips, Having been deprived for so long, we have the biggest available washed down with Haut-Bage Liberal by the bucket! Having drunk the hotel dry of this vintage, we move on to Richmond Hill Shiraz before collapsing with a cigar.

After supper we have the choice of the Cuba Bar in the hotel, 5 Star, or Pat's local pub, the Music Man, 1 Star. We go for the latter. It was fantastic, with a Chinese group playing a mixture of Chinese Pop, yes there is such a thing, and heavy Rock. The bar is packed and when the lead singer plays 'We can fly higher', a Chinese pop song to welcome us, the place lifts off with a hundred people all bouncing up and down with their hands in the air. Even David Moffatt, with his wobbly knees, joins in and we lift the roof. Then it's on to a local night club. It is unbelievable that in a Communist country such a decadent Western venue exists. What a night and by two am we head back to the hotel, absolutely exhausted, very merry and waxing lyrical about another highlight of the trip. THANK YOU PAT, THANK YOU ERAN and THANK YOU SWIRE BEVERAGES and the XIAN MOTORCYCLE CLUB !

Xian turned out to be a wonderful stop. Pat Healey and his friends made the entire rally





welcome and it was definitely one of the highlights of the trip. One particular visit must be mentioned. Pat's friend, Christian Eckmann, a conservator from Mainz Museum in Germany, has been working for some years on the Qin Emperor's tomb out at the Terracotta Warrior site. He invited five of us down to his laboratories to see never before exhibited archaeology from a pit in the tomb area, which is 68 square kilometres!

We were shown the conservation of a group of thirty eight life-size birds which were found decorating what was a stream 2000 years ago. These are very important as they are bronze, the first life-size birds found, and have a lacquer over the bronze of soot and egg yolk on which the feathers had been painted.

We were also shown silks found from under a Pagoda that fell down in a storm twenty years ago revealing an untouched tomb underneath. I could go on, but we saw other artefacts that I was not even allowed to photograph. A really interesting day. Ayesha, you missed out!

The next day it was off to some dump called Guangyuan further south in the province. The roads were tricky through the mountains, and unfortunately it rained or was foggy most of the way. The views would have been spectacular otherwise. From here we travelled on south to Ya'an, a pretty town on the banks of a large river. We had picked up a rattle on the way there, noticeable as the roof was up and we were on tarmac. We put the car on a ramp and found that the driver's front shock absorber had broken its top mounting. We were lucky we spotted this in time as it would have punched a hole through the wing if we had left it. This was soon welded up however. On further inspection we found we had torn the rear axle trailing arm halfway off the chassis. Whew, what a mess ! Not to worry, out with the MIG welder, two strengthening plates and £30 later we are all welded up again and fully operational.

The following day we travel to Xi Chang, the space centre of China. This was a fast uneventful day getting us to the hotel in time for a late lunch. The following day was



not to be so good.

We left Xi Chang to drive north west to the city of Li Jiang. It is known to Channel 4 watchers from 'Beyond the Clouds', which was a documentary about life in the mountains of China. The roads were known to be poor, but that was the understatement of the year. Within hours we were knee deep in mud and cobbled roads heading up into the mountains. We arrived at a diversion; the main road had disappeared sliding down the mountain two days before! The people in the town gave conflicting instructions on how to proceed, until a local resident came along bound for Li Jiang. We set off up a Belgium Pave road in light rain and fog. Things are looking difficult and the Mercedes is sliding all over the place when I try to brake. After a near miss going down a slope where the brakes lock on approach to a corner and the car careers across the road to stop just feet from an earth bank, we realise that we are in deep trouble. To make matters worse, the engine starts to falter on the steep slopes and we lose sight of the three cars we are with.

It appears that we have fuel starvation and after a few minutes checking plugs etc we decide to change the fuel tanks in case the pumps are having suction problems with the main tank slung under the boot. The auxiliary tank, situated in the boot and above the pumps, does the trick. We are off once more winding our way up the endless hill into the clouds. It was then that disaster struck!

Approaching a corner on the rise, I applied the brakes and we locked up solidly and slid straight across the corner towards the precipice beyond. With no control at all, we career straight into the front of a lorry coming down the hill. It stops our slide and bounces us backwards across the road onto the edge of a ditch. The front of the car collapses and the radiator is pierced by the water pump. Oil and Antifreeze billows out of the engine, and we are out of the running! Chris and I are wearing full harnesses and sat in our rally seats. We get out without a mark, not even any whiplash, but the car is a wreck.



It was the first time a lorry on this rally has been on its side of the road which was a blessing, as it could have been worse. We are left to take stock on a lonely mountain road; stood in the rain looking at the front of our damaged car. The saving grace is that we were going slowly, so we hit the lorry at less than 20 mph.

We call for help on the mobile phone. Yes, unlike the UK, our phones work everywhere- even a hundred miles from nowhere! Wake up O2, Orange and Vodafone, if they can do it here, why is coverage so poor in the UK!

Our biggest concern is that the rest of the rally is not on this road, such had been the chaos. However when we got through to Rick Dyke Price, we are relieved to hear he was 50 kilometres behind us heading the same way.

An hour later the troops begin to arrive along with our Chinese Guide and the mechanic, Paul Marsh. We are distraught and discuss how to get the car out of China, as, under the terms of our Carnet, we are forbidden from leaving it in the country without a massive penalty.

Paul Marsh, ever practical, looks through the buckled bonnet and declares 'this can be repaired'. The engine has miraculously survived the impact and appears to be intact. The front is a mess, and a lot of damage has been done to the wings and bonnet, but the doors still work and the chassis appears to have withstood the crash.

After two more hours, the police arrive and the problem is discussed. We agree to pay the lorry driver 300 Yuan (£40), and he gets on his way. The police arrange for their tow lorry to be called and we all sit on the side of the road whilst Nikki Marsh makes us a cup of coffee. It is now pouring with rain as we offload everything from the car into the passing rally cars.

As dusk passes and darkness falls we are still by the roadside having had a visit from



the Chief of Police who is very kind and keen to help us out. Finally at 8pm the tow truck arrives and we hook the front wheels onto its towing forks. Our guide, Sim, who has stayed with us, gets us into his car and we set off at 20 kph for the 250 kilometre tow to Li Jiang.

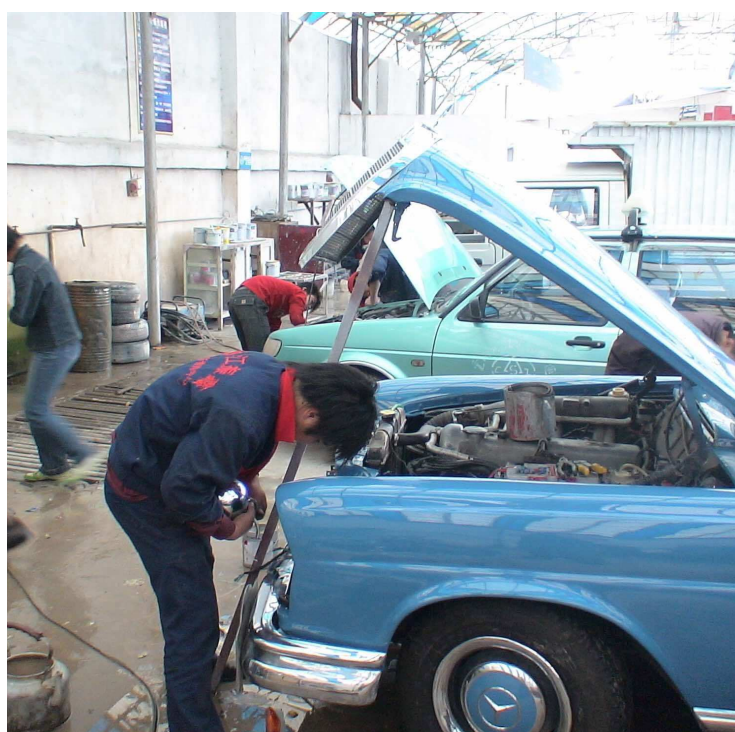
Whilst all this is going on, things have been happening to others on the rally up in the mountains. The road they are on has another rock fall and only four cars, including the three who we were with, get through before the fall occurs. The others are stuck in a traffic jam waiting for the road to be cleared. In the meantime, Sim has been calling ahead to try to find us a route through avoiding all these troubles. The first of the rally arrive 14 hours after leaving Xi Cheng. The rest are still out there. Colin makes for a farmhouse in a tiny village, and the others are finally through the fall and heading on. Two more stop in a local hostel. The rest arrive in at 0330, after more than twenty hours of driving! I have fallen asleep in Sim's car as we carry on through the night, however our route is much better and we roll into Li Jiang just after 0400. We are there, thank heavens!

After two hours sleep we are out again to tow the car to the biggest garage in Li Jiang, which is the KIA agent. Having removed the bonnet we see that the engine is looking good with most of the damage confined to the front. The radiator and oil cooler are smashed and the cross frame bent, both wings are badly damaged and we have lost the left light pod completely. The bumper has been bent right back and broken, the spot lights destroyed and the grill wrecked. The bonnet is doubled over.

Hey! They can fix it! And thirty six hours later, working round the clock with as many as twenty people on it at a time, they rebuild the car. It is unbelievable! I am sat here on the ground in the garage writing this report as they put the finishing touches to our new Mercedes. Never mind bringing the Turks into the EU we need the Chinese! Tony Blair, get on it!

The pictures tell the story. Just look what they have achieved in an unbelievably short





time (More photos to follow and on the website). Just how long would it take in the EU? Fantastic! And we should be moving again in the morning.

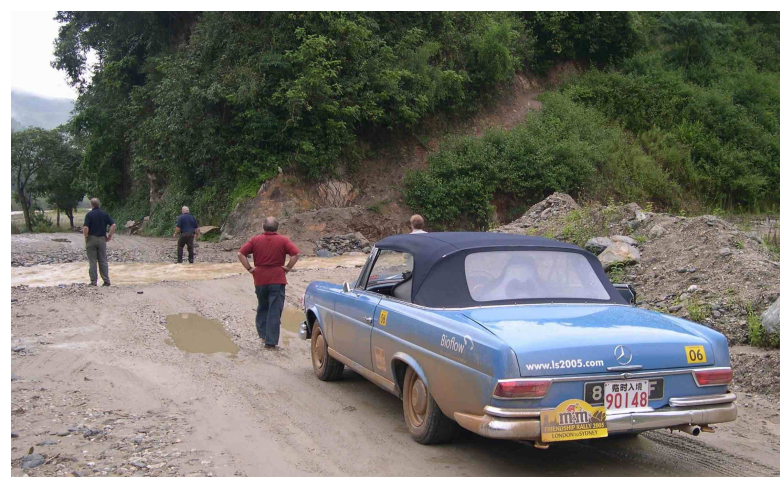
In my rush to get the last report off I did not thank the many workers who were employed on the Mercedes in Li Jiang. The staff of the Kia agency was fantastic, and to rebuild the car completely in just 36 hours is really beyond belief. We were left a day behind the rally, but otherwise with a complete usable car.

Being concerned that the rally was heading directly into trouble by returning to the very poor yellow roads between Dali and Jing Gu, we decided to ask Pat Healy for help with finding a better, faster route. Thanks to his contacts in Yunnan we were advised to head west adding a 100 kilometres to the distance to the Laos border but with the prospect of much faster roads.

David Moffat and Richard Fenhalls had insisted on staying with us when the rally left Li Jiang so that we would not be travelling alone. And on the day that the rally left Dali for Jing Gu, we left Li Jiang for Jing Gu via Boa Shan. This was a great decision as we managed to travel 750 kilometres in ten hours against the rally's 320 kilometres in fourteen. The roads were very fast with a fair amount of motorway.

When we were 160 kilometres from Jing Gu, we had the option of continuing on our longer route to Meng La or joining the rally in Jing Gu. Having listened to Stuart Onyett, the rally route master, who told us they were expecting an atrocious section from Simao, south of Jing Gu to Meng La we decided to abort the route to Jing Gu. Although Pat's contact had said it was the best way, and head south to Lan Cang very close, twenty Kilometres from the Burmese border.

We continued to make good progress to the town on Sheng Jiang where we stopped overnight. Along the way we had seen 'real' China. What an experience. We entered a small village to be met by a Dragon Dance, saw people perched on terraces at impossible heights, met people who had never seen a 'round eye' before and



experienced the most amazing views from mountain tops. A day to be remembered as yet another highlight of this trip.

At our little hotel we were sandwiched between a whore house on the first floor and a disco on the top. Doors firmly locked, we had a good night's sleep!

That evening Rick phoned to say he was very worried about the following day. The guides had let him down badly with their road condition intelligence, and he was considering driving west to join our route heading south. We advised that we had passed the road the rally would have to take and had noticed that it seemed a poor road, possibly as bad as they had experienced that day. We tried to get further intelligence on the rally's options, but this could not be done that evening.

Sensibly the rally decided to continue via Simao to Meng La as it turned out that once again the guides were wrong, and the road was much better than anticipated. However it still took them about 15 hours to get to Meng La but this time with much less damage. Two of the cars, Mike Barnes' Porsche and the E-Type, were put on lorries and arrived in style at two am the next morning.

Whilst all this is going on we decide to leave Sheng Jiang at 0700 and head on to Meng La. We have five hundred kilometres to go. Fifty kilometres from our hotel the great road finally veers off towards Burma and we are left at a check point on a gravel road. The guards let us through and we head alongside a river on clay and gravel. We meet people along the route who are astonished to see us, and then we pass into a valley where we meet no traffic in either direction. Rounding a corner we find out why. A fast flowing river has washed away the road and left a rocky ford to cross. Nigel Mendosa, David Moffat's navigator, is sure we will have to turn back.

Chris jumps out of the car and wades into the ford to see how deep it gets. It is between 18 and 24 inches but the real difficulty is the rockiness of the bottom. After 10 minutes we have marked tracks for the wheels to follow by piling rocks each side of



the ford in hope that we can cross without being stranded in a rut in the middle.

The Mercedes goes first. I run in first gear, engine screaming. It is touch and go, but we get through. Having an electric fan is a great help as we do not suffer from the propeller effect of a mechanical device. The Bentley follows without a falter and then Richard's Mercedes. We are through. 'On On' goes the cry and we continue along the dirt track. Ten minutes later we hit a long deep mud bank followed by a similar ford. Thanks Chris, at least you are already wet - just add some mud! We go through as before and are more confident we can now proceed. A third wade occurs but we then arrive in Lan Cang, and resume on some reasonably good road.

The rest of the drive is through more virgin mountains but the road holds - being a combination of tarmac, Belgium Pave, and gravel. We pass village after village before finally rejoining the rally route at Jing Hong.

Here the rally has chosen a small back road towards Meng La. We ignore this and continue on the main road through the mountains. Thank heavens we did as by then the small road is closed due to a landslide!

At this point the Bentley has some problems. Its rear shock absorbers are not working properly, so we are forced to stop and top them up. The left one is leaking but the right just a bit low on fluid. We go on, arriving in Meng La two hours after the rally. We have done three days driving and an extra 150 kilometres in two days with no damage to the cars beyond a blowing exhaust on the Bentley.

We arrive to be greeted by Rick who is delighted that we have caught up. We are now all together for the drive to the border the day after. The Mercedes is unreal. It just performed as though it has never had an accident. Apart from bouncing the radiator grill off the front, the repairs have all held. The radiator and oil cooler worked perfectly and the body work held up. Bolting back on the grill takes ten minutes early in the morning.



The drive to the border was poor but not as bad as the guides had advised. We pushed the left front shock through its mounting but made it nonetheless. Paul Marsh worked on the Bentley early in the morning, so we stayed behind until it and the E-Type were ready to cross the border.

On the far side the road was awful, and the shock absorber was rattling like mad. In the first Lao village we stopped at a hut where there was a man with a welder! He hopped up on the engine and was welding up the mounting in no time. There was a lot of rust around this one and he took 45 minutes to weld row after row of new metal until he hit good steel. A fantastic job! Ten US dollars, ten days pay! Whilst waiting for the repair we are stopped opposite what is clearly the young adult's hangout. With mopeds arriving and leaving, the lads sit on a balcony drinking beer and Lao Lao. The latter was like fire water, possibly Grappa. Nigel and I tried some; heavens was it sharp!

The village was terrific, and came to see what we were about. Having said our goodbyes, we head off along the track until we round a corner to find a line of traffic waiting for the road to re-open. The road workers are clearing their latest pile of debris. I bought some pot noodles that morning in case of a problem and we quickly brewed up and sat under Paul Marsh's awning sharing the noodles and some pineapple that Nikki Marsh had bought. One and half hours later we are on our way again. It is now four pm, and it gets dark at six.

The road improves significantly, and we are eating up the miles to Louang Phrabang. However it will be nine in the evening before we are there, with three hours of driving in the dark in a new country. We decide this is not on and stop at a small town, Muang Sing about 190 kilometres from LP. The Lao Minister of Tourism is staying there and jumps to help us. He recommends the 'best' restaurant in town for supper where we sit outside and have a fabulous Lao/Thai supper. What a treat this is, and I



ride back to the hotel on the roof of a land cruiser with Nam, the guide that the rally left behind for us at the border, replete with chilli and beer.

Next morning we leave at 0530 to catch up with the rally which arrived in LP at eight the night before. The drive is magical, the little Lao villages along the way all wave and shout as we pass, (a friendly wave that is!). The scenery is magnificent as we pass through valleys and crisscross hills richly green with tropical forest. Laotians do not terrace; instead they have fields at impossible angles on the slopes of the hills. We arrive in LP at 0945 in time for a late breakfast and a day of rest. The hotel is very pleasant on the banks of the Mekong. The town is small and dusty, but the people friendly and helpful. French is understood here, so communication in my appalling accent was all that was needed to get by.

I spend the day sat in the open air restaurant above the Mekong, using the Satcom to receive and answer the many emails I have received about the accident. Thank you all for your support. Chris and I appreciate it. You can imagine how traumatised we were after such a frenetic seven days, but we made it through and are pleased we did not give up and ship the car home.

The following day it is back into the Lao hills for the drive to Vientiane. This was an easy ride, and we arrive early enough for a late lunch and a catch up on the rally news. The cars are still going strong - although Mike Barnes' Porsche is spluttering and banging with a broken exhaust and something amiss with the engine. He is clearly exhausted from the endless attempts to solve the problem and we agree to shadow him for the next few days until he can find the problem.

The E-type is much happier now we are on better, although bumpy, roads and is keeping up with the pack. The fuel in Lao is confusing: being red for petrol and yellow for diesel. This caused an upset for the eco friendly pair in the Aston when they discovered the problem. Dumping the entire full tank on the side of the road, it then took four hours to sort out the resulting problem!



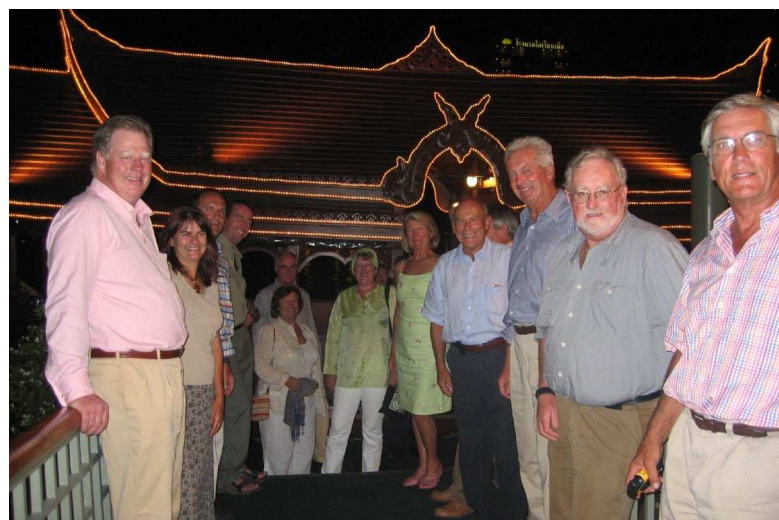
After the relaxing time in Vientiane, we set off for the Thai border and Bangkok. Finding the border was a bit of a pain, we knew we were going wrong when we passed under the Friendship Bridge rather than over the Mekong! However we quickly corrected the mistake and crossed the border in record time, racing on, at 100kph, to reach Bangkok in time to put the Bentley and Porsche into the local dealer. We then got totally lost in Bangkok trying to find the hotel. Chris saved the day when through an enormous amount of gesticulation he managed to get a customs officer at the port to explain to a taxi driver where we needed to go.

This was Chris's last day on the rally and we booked the Sala Rim Naam at the Oriental for his departure supper. Nigel Mendoza in the Bentley was also leaving us here to go back and knock a few heads together; he is a top neurosurgeon at the Charing Cross hospital. Both will be sorely missed for their help and humour during the last six weeks. Many thanks to Chris in particular for putting up with me!

In their place Myra, and David Moffat's wife, Yvonne, had arrived two days earlier and bought most of the clothes in Bangkok! Leaving Bangkok took longer than ever as we tried to shoehorn the purchases into the cars.

Our free day here was spent with me fitting a new light pod to the car and fixing the driver's door, which has been held shut with bungee straps for the last two weeks. Coupled with a full Monty valet service, the Mercedes was looking as good as new.

We were disappointed with the scenery to Bangkok as we travelled on a motorway from Lao. This disappointment grew as we continued south to Surat Thani and the Malaysian border on more motorways. Besides passing a large Buddha by the side of the road we saw little of the countryside. It was a disappointing route which in hindsight we should have varied to take us to Krabi or somewhere on the west coast.



Surat Thani came and went. The hotel was lousy and the food most un-Thai like. Mike's car was running better but it was still very sick. The Merc however was in great shape, and followed the Porsche without a hitch.

On we went to Malaysia and through the border before more motorways took us to Butterworth and the island of Pinang.

The hotel in Pinang was fairly ordinary, but Myra and I had a lovely day visiting Pinang Hill and some recent Buddha. No! They were definitely not there when we were in Pinang in 1974!

We are going to have to go 'off piste' in the next few days and take a more scenic route to Singapore if we are not to get bored silly on the roads. After Pinang we are due to go to Cameron Hills and KL. Rather than having a day off in KL, we will travel west to the coast and visit Port Dickson and Malacca. This will bring back memories as we called in on Port Dickson in 1974 on Myra's first trip to sea just after we were married.

You can tell from this report that the adventures of the last few weeks are behind us and we are now on better roads with faster journey times. But who knows what is awaiting us around the corner

Well, we have made it to Singapore. Just under 14,000 miles (22,400 Kilometres) is now completed, and the bulk of the hard stuff behind us. As I sit here in our 'Palm Court' suite at Raffles it is a good time to reflect on just what a difficult journey it has been. But with the crossing of Australia still to go we must not get complacent. We still have kangaroos and Australians to contend with before we arrive in Sydney.

The last few days have been a mixture of relief and disappointment: relief that since arriving in Thailand the roads have been great all the way here; disappointment as we have not seen as much of the Thai and Malaysian countryside as we would have liked. The route south through the peninsular has been on motorways and, just as in the UK,

