

The Maya Rally 2016

Panama City to Mexico City

Paul Markland





For several years now we have been keen to do a trip from Panama City to Mexico City. Our first attempt at this was in 2006 when a rally organiser called Nick Brittan developed a really good trip through Central America to Mexico including a side trip to Cuba. However, Nick died prematurely and the rally was abandoned. Since then there have been a number of rallies arranged but Myra and I have been tied up elsewhere and unable to compete.

In 2015 I decided I would organise a Rally myself to this area on the basis of 'Well how difficult can it be. Having found some like minded souls to travel with I thought it would be fairly straightforward to organise a tour. I could not have been more wrong and within a couple of months realised it was well beyond my skills as it required patience and a degree of interest in other peoples wishes. So, from now on I will never moan about another rally organiser or his foul ups. Having had this revelation I remembered that John Brigden had started up a new rally organisation specialising in bespoke rallies called appropriately, 'Bespoke Rallies'.

I contacted John with my list of friends keen to participate and he agreed to take on the trip and advertise it to a wider audience with the goal of finding 12 or more cars that would like to go.

The best time of year, weather wise for this trip is February/March so it was decided to focus on a trip beginning in mid February and finishing in mid March 2016.

John set about getting enough participants together to make it worth his while whilst offering the trip at an affordable price. He managed to find 20 like minded people in 10 cars to go on this trip and from this has put forward a route, hotel list and some interesting stops along the way.

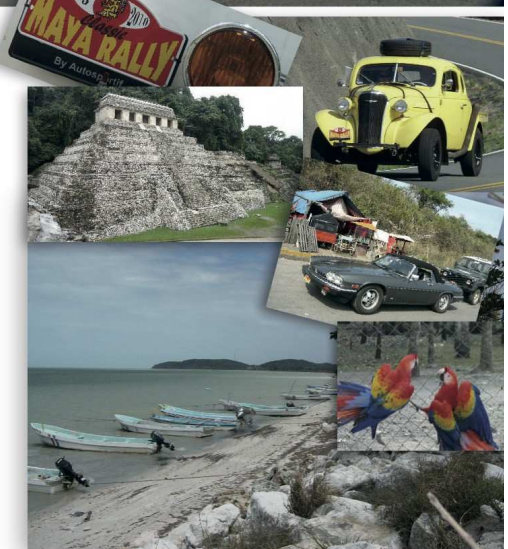
All seemed to be going along swimmingly until Costa Rica announced that they had banned ALL right hand drive cars from their country. This is supposedly due to stop Japan 'dumping' used RHD cars on the country as has been the practice in the past.



Join us on this superb journey across 7 countries - Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Belize and Mexico - in just 30 days.

For vintage and classic cars it offers great roads, superb scenery, history, Mayan temples, Rainforests, volcanoes, Spanish colonial style hotels, authentic and unspoiled locations. From the famous Panama Canal we go from one great sight to another on the roads less travelled, visit towns not on the tourist routes and meet people who have never seen a classic car.

It's a truly remarkable journey which is open to anyone with a car dated pre-1980 - we will take more recent cars if they are true classics. Please tell us now and we will reserve you a place.





This put a potential spanner in the works as the majority of our cars are RHD. However, having considered various options including abandoning the trip or starting in Honduras, we decided to press on in the full knowledge we may have to put the cars on lorries to cross Costa Rica. John has applied through the local classic car club and the ministry for special permission to transit but as of today, 10 days before we arrive in Panama City, we still do not know the outcome.

In the meantime car preparations continued and on the 8th January all the cars were shipped from Tilbury to Christobal in Panama. With modern tracking methods we could not only see when the containers were loaded and unloaded but with the help of AIS have been able to see the progress of MSC Eloise as it has crossed the Atlantic and passed through the Caribbean.



So, here we are on the 6th February 2016 knowing that our cars have safely arrived in Cristobal and that we will be flying out to them on Monday.

Myra and I are flying to Mexico City this Thursday to catch up with the city in which we spent much of 1986 when I was posted to Ciudad del Carmen in Campeche for almost 2 years. I was the project manager for the Pacific Constructor which at that time was working for the Petroleum Workers Union of Mexico, otherwise known as the Sindicato. A sinister name for what was a very sinister organisation.



In fact a lot of this trip will be nostalgic as Myra and I first visited Panama in 1975 when we transited the canal on the way to Fiji in a tanker and later when we spent so much time in Mexico visiting Guatemala and Belize for diving holidays and Mayan explorations.

So we are all packed and ready for departure just a few days to go

Finally the day is upon us and we are on our way to Panama City. Cannot say it is too soon after the dreadful winter we have been experiencing in Devon. Pleased to get



away to somewhere warm and sunny like Mexico City.

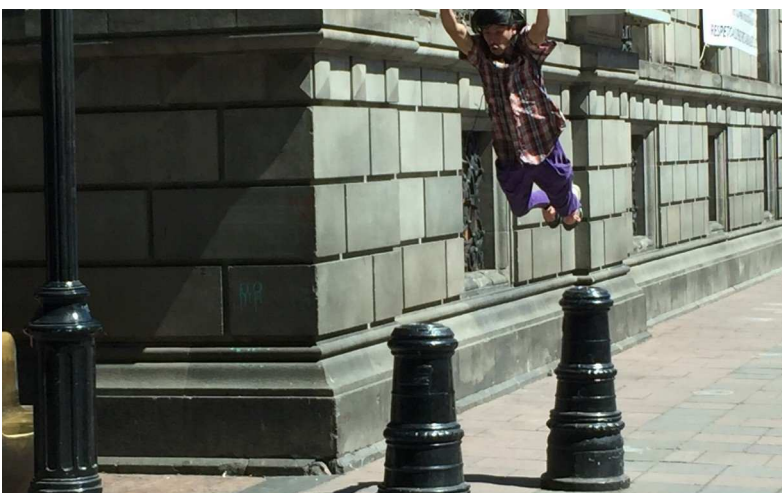
Having said farewell to the young and assured them our wills etc are all in order and located safely at home, we headed off to Heathrow airport and our flight with British Airways. Never my first choice but they had some good deals on for flying to Mexico and unlike the US airlines they fly there direct.

In fact the flight was very good, beds most comfortable and service better than anticipated. We arrived in Mexico City at the same time as El Papa, the Pope. It was very kind of the Mexican police to clear the roads into town and we had a record breaking journey to the Angel of Independence square in Reforma.



The hotel Sheraton has changed little since we were here in 1987 and we were pleased to find that we had a room with a great view over the Zona Rosa.

In 1986/87 I was posted to Mexico as a Project manager for my then shipping company, Swire Pacific Offshore. This period in my life was one of extreme adventure as we tried to work for the Petroleum Workers Union of Mexico, aptly called the Sindicato. This bunch of crooks were based in Reynosa in Northern Mexico but we had offices in Mexico City and Ciudad del Carmen, the latter being a small island in the bowl of the Gulf of Mexico where the oil industry was centred. Julian Thorogood, John Madeley, Sam Pullan and I can tell any number of largely unbelievable stories about our time here but I will limit it to just one.



When Sam and I arrived in Carmen we were met by two enormous Mexicans called Mesa and Ortiz, latterly known as the 'Snake'. Within days of arriving we understood just what an incredibly difficult job we had been given, this brought home to us one morning when Sam's hotel room door was broken down by Ortiz the Snake - as I came running from next door I found Ortiz leaning over Sam with his hand out delivering the



only word of English he knew 'Money'. This referred to the fact he wanted some of our money and would we accompany him to the bank to fetch some. The story continues but the bottom line was Swire were out of their depth in this contract and country and the next two years continued in a not dissimilar vein.

On the positive front we had many friends in Mexico amongst the Oilfield workers and many positive adventures as well. Myra and the children spent some time out here with me and particularly loved the beaches in Carmen and the company flat in Mexico City.

Much of our time in the latter was spent in the Zona Rosa just along from our hotel and close to the office and flat. It was with this in mind we thought we would spend a couple of days in the city to refresh our memories of our time here 30 years ago.



Having been here 24 hours I am not so sure this was a great idea as quite frankly everything has changed and through our gilded eyes not necessarily for the better. Our favourite bar and grill, 'The Piccadilly Pub' has gone and much of the Zona Rosa has lost it's ambience to either new uninteresting buildings or rather tacky sex shops and brothels.

However, we spent a day dodging El Papa whilst we visited the Centro Historico which was very pleasant as well as visiting Polanco which is the posh residential area. Our visit to the Zocalo, big square where the cathedral is, coincided with El Papa's welcoming mass so we were surrounded by hundreds of thousands of locals and were even given medals and photos by a group of nuns from Poland I think.



Anyway, the atmosphere was electric and it reminded us of how friendly Mexicans really are. We had a pleasant Mexican lunch but avoided the Mole (Chocolate) sauce and had a few Tacos instead at El Cardenal, one of the more famous traditional restaurants in the city.

Sunday saw us going out to Coyuacan, a village within Mexico City but very quaint

and unspoiled. After a morning of wondering around the old town we headed back to the hotel for lunch. Our driver took us down a few back streets and we ended up eating in an Argentinean parrilla restaurant in Reforma. The food was fantastic and we had a huge steak to share which was undoubtedly the best we have had in a long time.

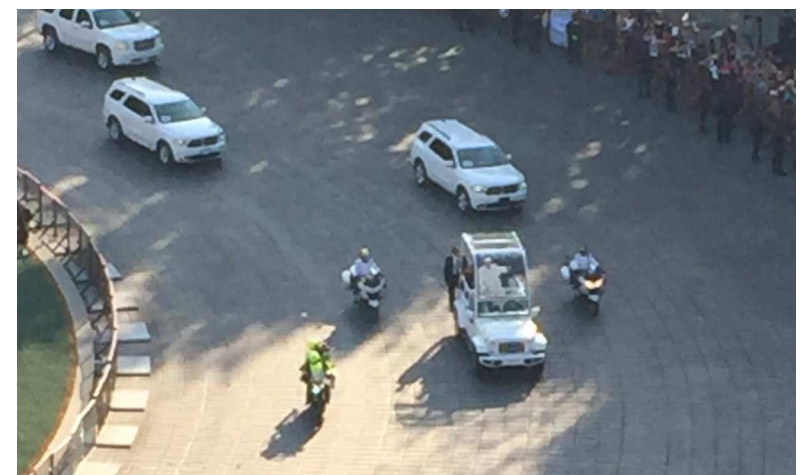
On returning to the hotel we got way laid again by El Papa who just happened to be passing on his way to meet the president. Luckily he didn't hold us up and we did get a couple of photos to remember the occasion.

That's it for Mexico City, great disappointment at how the Zona Rosa has changed but pleased to see other parts as good as if not better than our last visit.

Phew, thought we had a real problem at Mexico City airport, forgot the fact that you cannot travel to Panama without a return or onward flight booked. Of course we are leaving by car and returning home from Mexico City. Luckily they had a really switched on guy on the desk and once he had seen our rally brochure and the V5 for the car he managed to get us cleared to travel. Coupled with the fact the flight was heavily overbooked I thought we might be stuck in Mexico for another night.

Anyway, we safely arrive in Panama City at lunchtime, weather is hot and clear skies, fabulous . Meet up with some of the gang who have already got their cars out from the dock and have a photo of mine in one piece. Uber is huge here and we quickly learn that taxis are a waste of time.

So supper is an Uber ride to a really smart seafood restaurant overlooking the Pacific Ocean with Alistair Caldwell and Snjezana who is his latest navigator. Alistair is famous for being the team boss of Maclaren when Hunt won the world championship, more recently he is probably the most prolific rallyist in the world spending nearly all of his time participating and quite often winning competitive rallies. This one will be a bit tame for him but not for the rest of us. Also at supper were Reg and Michele Toohey from Perth who we have not met before but have just completed John Brigden's last





rally along the Amazon from Surinam to Lima. They are driving a Mach 1 Mustang that certainly looks a beast ideally suited to Central America where American cars are common and all the countries are LHD.

We had hoped to pick up the car the next day but have been told that as it took 5 hours to get three cars out of the dock, the agent is to do the paperwork and then we will pick up the cars on Wednesday. This means we have time to visit the Miraflores Locks and watch a few ships transit the canal. Myra and I went through the locks together in 1975 on the Fusus, a Shell tanker, which surprisingly circumnavigated the world on that trip. It was surprising as this rarely happens on a tanker but for some reason we headed out of Europe for the Singapore, Australia and New Zealand and then just kept going to Fiji and Panama before getting orders to go through the canal and onto London.

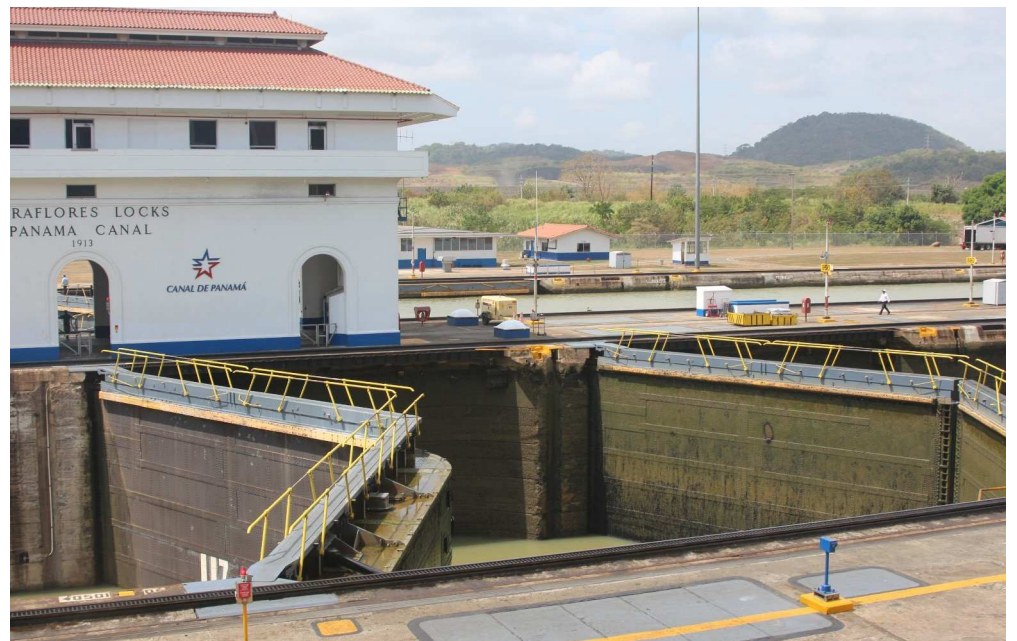


Having picked up an enormous shell in Fiji that weighed about 40 Kgs and that we expected to leave on the ship when we ‘paid off’ we in fact found ourselves in Shellhaven (Stanford no hope, well le Hope to be accurate) to find my father had arrived with a trailer to take the shell back home. It is still in the garden of my parents to this day.

Anyway, the old locks are unchanged although almost everything else is new, huge container port, major bridge across the canal and a new million tonne locks being built just within sight of Miraflores. The mules are more or less the same but have been replaced with slightly more modern units but the operation is timeless after 102 years.



Myra and I have arranged to go by car to Colon on the Caribbean side of the isthmus to catch the train that runs alongside the canal back to Panama City. On leaving the locks we head back to the hotel before getting an Uber with another couple to Colon. The train is very American style with large carriages and observation coaches. It only goes once a day to and fro from Panama City and so timing has to be precise. We board in Colon and are immediately given a lunch box which is most unexpected. We haven't even paid the fare yet .Anyway the train gets underway and we spend a pleasant hour



travelling along the side of the canal. It is an interesting journey and we see a few transiting ships but it was frankly not as exciting as I had hoped for, however for USD 25 including a lunch box who can complain.

So, back to the hotel to prepare for car collection tomorrow.

Wednesday morning we head off to the port to clear our cars through customs. This takes 3 hours before we then get to see the cars, two more hours and we are finally in the cars .

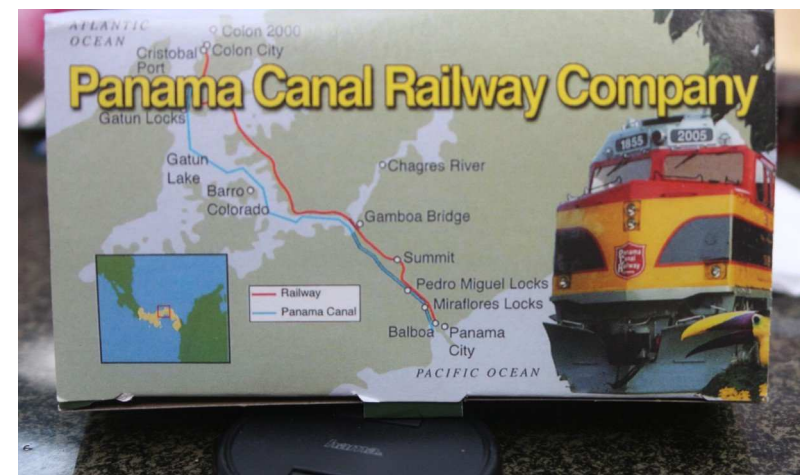
Benjamin Bentley starts first time and seems fine so we get underway, I have the camera man with me who is filming my every comment including the one about 'how reliable the Bentley is compared with Alistair's Mercedes' which he seems to be rebuilding. Did I ever get my comeuppance, ten minutes later we are stopped on the side of the road with what I think is vaporisation of the petrol. The ambient temperature in the car is around 45 C, unbelievable and certainly unexpectedly hot, under the car it is probably nearer 50 C.

So, no trouble I have a pump fitted close to the fuel tank for instances just like this and I quickly turn it on. It helps but the problem does not go away so we top up the tank with more fuel which will not only be cooler but will put more pressure on the pump suctions. An hour later and several stops we finally stagger into the hotel car park.

I am not overly worried at this point and decide to let the car cool down in the evening before taking any further action.

Three hours later I fire up the engine and sure enough everything is running perfectly. All well then ?

Thursday morning I sort out the car; putting gear in, taking some out, washing the dust off etc before deciding to go for a run and see how things are going. I drive off around





the town for 40 minutes without any problem at all, then the car just stops in the middle of the street and will not restart .

I call Toby our rally mechanic who I had been helping first thing with the other Derby Bentley which had a failed condenser. Toby jumps in John Brigden (Rally Organiser) car and comes to help out. We thereafter spend 5 hours in the street trying to get the car going again without any success. We are not sure whether we have a fuel problem or an electrics problem but whatever it is has stopped the car completely. Worst still the vaporisation is occasional forcing the engine to run backwards for a few seconds and after the third time this happens the starter motor is no more. Either the coils are damaged or we have bent the shaft. Total disaster not only are we disabled but we have no way to try to start the car except to tow it or bump start it.

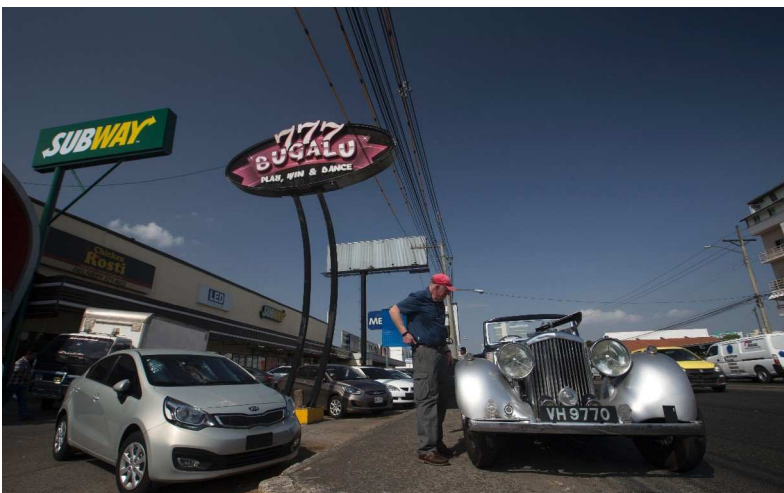


As dark approaches we decide to tow the car to a garage with a lift in the hope we can remove the starter and see if it is repairable or u/s, inspect the fuel filters and check the fuel lines under the car. The garage is closing but for an outrageous fee they will let us work on into the night with their lift. Toby has a fuel tank to refit to an old Range Rover as well so he does this whilst I remove the starter motor and quickly test it, dead as a dodo.

Fuel lines and filters look fine but there are two portions of the exhaust pipe which have been flattened. Although not enough to cause our problem it looks as though someone has lifted the car with a forklift. You might say this is a bit of a jump to conclusions but oddly the reason we are fitting a repaired fuel tank to the Range Rover is because it had been lifted by a fork lift at the rear and this had substantially damaged the fuel tank and guard.

Anyway, this is the least of our problems just now.

Toby and I start going through the electrics bit by bit and are joined by George Nader, a local mechanic who lived and was educated in the US, speaks perfect English





obviously and has a thorough knowledge of electrics. After 3 or 4 hours of working through Fuel and Electrical systems we hope we have found the problems be it all we have not found anything substantially wrong.

Bump starting the car we find it runs perfectly and we leave it ticking over for 40 minutes whilst tidying up etc. Finally we decide the problem is solved and we pack up and head off back to the hotel thinking our only issue is the starter motor.

Half way to the hotel it conks out again . Tired and exasperated we tow the car to the hotel. Toby keen to try a few more things, George has headed home oblivious to the situation. So, we spend another hour or so trying things and then bump starting it, no joy. We have had enough and head off for a beer and some food as we have only had a bag of chips since breakfast.



Myra is very understanding and we have a quick room service supper before going to bed with a plan to recommence repairs at 0600.

In the meantime we are running out of time to continue with this car on the rally. The start is 0800 in the morning and the last support car; i.e. Toby, will need to leave at 1100. We have set a drop dead decision point with John at 1000 and if I cannot get the car going by then we either have to leave it in Panama City or Myra and I separate from the rally and catch up later either in the Bentley or if this is truly dead then by flying to San Jose in Costa Rica and meeting the rest of them there.



I cannot sleep and so get up at 0200 to work on the car in the dark. I start from scratch having been in communication with Chris George in the UK, my long time rally and boat mechanic. He has sent through a sheaf of ideas to work through and I get on with these as the night progresses. He is up as we are 6 hours behind so we have several conversations during the night.

By recruiting the security guard, manager, and car driver I manage to get them to bump

start the car several times after various repairs. None work and by 0600 I am again at my wits end. Packing up I head for breakfast.

An hour later Toby is up and fed and we head outside to carry on trying to get the car going. 0800 passes as does 1000 and John is now piling the pressure on. Alistair Caldwell who has a great talent for fixing cars comes over and we review all we have done and all that has failed. So many possibilities and we are still uncertain if we have a fuel or electricals problems although I think all but me are now certain it is electrical.

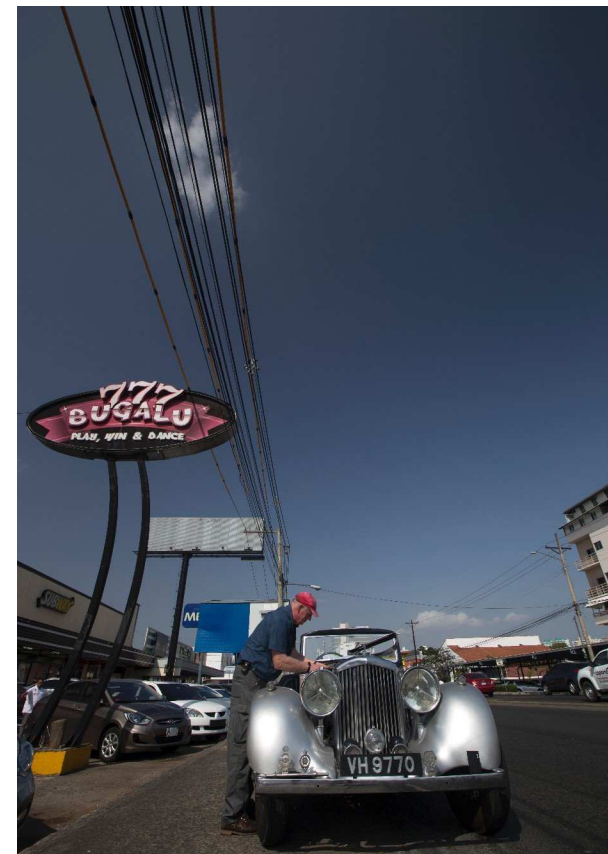
George returns to say he has dropped the starter off at a shop who will inspect it. He also wants to get the car to his shop so he we can work in a cooler environment. John wants Toby to break off and follow the rally. Alistair urges me to persevere and not throw in the towel.

So, I agree with John, I will stay behind with Myra, take the car to George's shop and elicit the help of a local expert. If by 1900 we have not fixed the car then we will abort the idea of catching up at the Costa Rican border tomorrow and instead ship the car home, fly to San Jose and hire a car for the rest of the rally. Horrible thought but one has to be practical.

George orders a tow truck and we wave off the last of the rally whilst waiting for this to arrive. Myra is force feeding us water, juice etc. to ensure we do not expire and Toby is devastated he has to leave having not been able to solve our troubles.

By 1330 we have the car at George's shop and he insists we stop for lunch with one of his team. Delicious lunch and not before time, I have drunk more water in the last 24 hours than in the last year and need to keep the food up as well.

After lunch George spends an hour going back over the whole electrical system testing the low and high tension sides of the distributor. We do this, that and the other but she still will not run. Chris in England is urging us back to basics so we keep trying this,



that and the other. Finally George is at the point of not knowing where to go next so he slips next door to his friend who is a Panamanian racing legend. Ariel Gonzalez is a lovely chap who has three old cars in his shop including a Corvette Stingray and an old NSU. He comes around to George's place, listens to the grumpy noise from the engine as we bump start it up and down the yard and then declares it is a points problem, forget fuel, forget condensers, forget coils, it is the POINTS.

Ariel Gonzalez gets too it, he is meticulous in everything he touches. He takes out the points and static earth, cleans polishes and inspects the points, fiddles with the leads, checks the rotor etc. and puts it all back together. Car starts and runs, yippee however it is grumpy over 2000 revs. He then stops it, we replace all the plugs and try again. Cars starts hooray, then stops dead. I am thinking here we go again but Ariel and George look confident and go back to checking point gap, rotor etc. and try again. Vroom, she is off and running, 1000, 2000 ,3000 revs and all is well. YES.

It runs and runs, sounds better than ever and hope is in sight. However, I have had my hopes dashed so many times in the last 24 hours I just cannot celebrate yet. Ariel is happy, says it's fixed and heads for home .

George closes up shop and we decide to drive back to the hotel in the Bentley with one of his guys following. 20 minutes into the drive the car starts spluttering and our hearts drop, then I remember that this is the usual vaporisation warning and putting on the aft booster pump solves the problem. I flick the switch and hold my breath. Three seconds later she bursts back into life and we are off, the rest of the journey is uneventful and we arrive back at the hotel full of hope.

In the meantime the rally is well under way but the other Derby Bentley is caput, it has run a big end and is disabled totally. Toby has arranged for it to be recovered and returned to the hotel from a spot some 190 miles from Panama City. Hans and Bea the owners are obviously very upset but at least it happened in Panama which means it can be shipped home easily. More excitingly, Hams has agreed I can have any parts or



spares I need from his car for the Bentley.

Well, just so happens I am desperate for a starter motor as without one it is going to be a very tiresome rally starting the car several times a day.

So, George and I go our respective ways for supper and some sleep whilst we await the arrival of the second Derby late at night. In fact it finally arrived at midnight in the hotel car park.

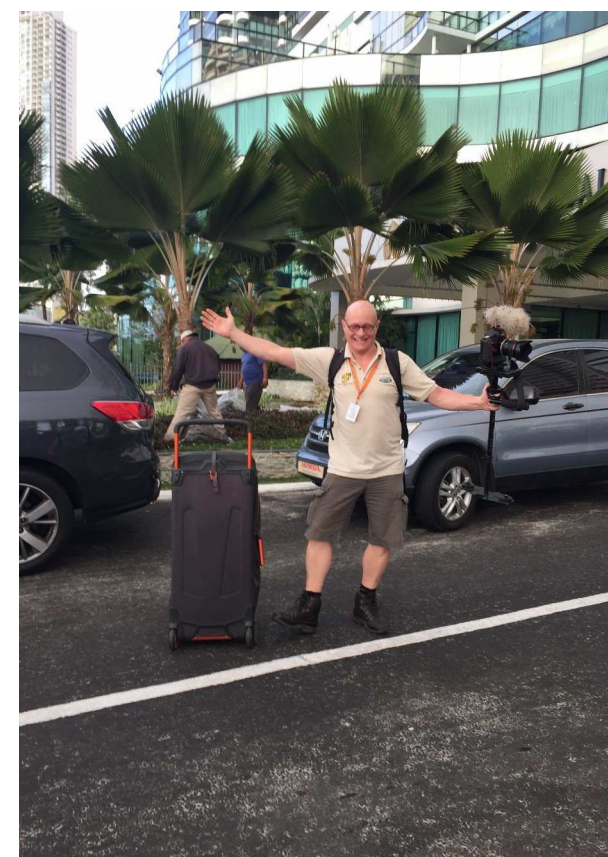
Like two tinkers we were on the flatbed in a flash and off loading the car into a parking spot next to the Bentley. I already had spare wheel off my car ready to use as an axle stand and it took just 20 minutes to get Hans' starter out and put into Benjamin.

George asks me if I want to drop the car back onto it's wheels before testing the starter but I do not want to tempt fate so say we will do it on the jacks. Ignition on, contact and away we go, Benjamin bursts into life on the first try and purrs quietly as we stand back and congratulate ourselves. It is now 0200 but who cares, the Bentley is back to normal and all indications are the 3 days of hell are almost over.

I cannot thank the team too much for their patience and help. Toby, George, Alistair and John, Giancarlo our Agent and Hans Moser for the starter motor; but most of all Ariel without whom we would be in a hire car for the next month. Thanks guys .

Having retired to bed with the certain knowledge that the car is now a runner, we sleep like a log until 0500 when the alarm goes off and drags us out of a coma.

We dash around the room, need to be out by 0515 to drive the 400 miles to catch up with the rally by the time they are crossing the border into Costa Rica. Down to the car, Myra goes off to find us tea and coffee whilst in trepidation I start up the Bentley. Zoom, perfect start first press of the button.



Full of hope we climb aboard and head out of the hotel for David in North West Panama. The first hour is the most traumatic, partly because we have to get out of the City which is quite tricky and part because if the car is going to fail it is most likely to happen before the hour is out.

As we hit the open road and all is well we just have to contend with the dark. The lights on Benjamin are poor at best and the road is difficult in places to see the edges. However, we pound on at 110 kilos heading North, the first hour comes and goes, second closely follows. We stop for coffee and petrol on the motorway and are greeted by a guy and his children who are desperate for a photo. Whilst I am filling up. Myra is searching for coffee, the children are having their photo taken. The guy dashes back to his restaurant and he and the kids arrive back with several bottles of water as a thank you.

Very kind locals.

On we go, road works for 110 miles but who cares, very few cars on the road as it is Saturday and I never go more that 110 kilos even though roadwork's speed limit is 45. We arrive in David after 6 hours of driving and pull in for a brief lunch of fruit and a terrible sandwich. An English guy from Exmouth in his 80's comes over to chat, he has lived in Panama for 50 years but still

goes home regularly. He warns us to watch out for high winds and lorries when we continue on as we have to climb the mountainous spine of Panama and come down on the Caribbean side.

Lorries hog the whole road and the winds can be very high. We note his concerns and ask how long it will take to get to the border, he reckons 4 hours which is double what I had hoped. Anyway we mount up and press on, quickly climbing off the plains and into the mountains. Road is pretty good and we are lucky it is Saturday as there is very little traffic or lorries. Reaching the top of the first pass we are hit with a tremendous



blast of winds that takes my cap away and blows my sunglasses onto Myra. We stop but cannot find the cap so continue on with suntan lotion on my head rather than a cap.

The mountain road is very beautiful but we do not have time to linger, Myra tried to take some photos but between the swinging corners and the high winds we did not get much worth sharing. As we come down the mountain on the Caribbean side we get several glimpses of the sea but not a wide vista that one would hope for. Once at sea level we are driving along the coast north to Sexual, the river which acts as the border with Costa Rica.

As of this morning John was still unclear as to whether we would be allowed to drive our right hand drive cars across Costa Rica and it was not until we arrived at the border and were met by everyone else that we found out we cannot proceed in our cars.

John had considered this a likely possibility and had three large flat bed lorries waiting onto which we were to load our cars. This was going without a hitch so I just left my car with Toby and asked that he had it loaded on to the trailer. In the meantime Myra and I cleared customs and immigration out of Panama and into Costa Rica. However, as we were unable to drive the Bentley across the bridge it left Myra and I walking into Costa Rica with two young lads pulling our bags.

All went well and we were soon in a taxi to take us to the hotel resort on the Caribbean coast at a famous surfing area called Puerto Viajes. This has some of the best breaks in Costa Rica and there were a lot of surfers staying there. However, on the way I had a fairly confrontational discussion with the taxi driver about the route which led to us going cross country on a single gravel track for 10 miles in order to reach the coast road. Still not sure this was the best route .

Anyway, we arrive safely if knackered and after repeating our story half a dozen times and drinking several beers head for our room where I promptly fall asleep. The hotel is an adventure in itself, rustic but chic and actually very well managed and serviced. The



whole group have supper together which gives me the opportunity to commiserate with Hans over the loss of his car from the rally. By 2200 we have drunk all the red wine in the hotel and head off to bed.

Waking up in the morning to the sound of monkeys, birds and other wildlife we quickly see that we are only 100 metres from the sea and within easy distance of the nearby town. At 1000 we collect hire cars from a company in the town, this seems to require 20 signatures and 4 Amex payments before we are finally on our way with a Hyundai.

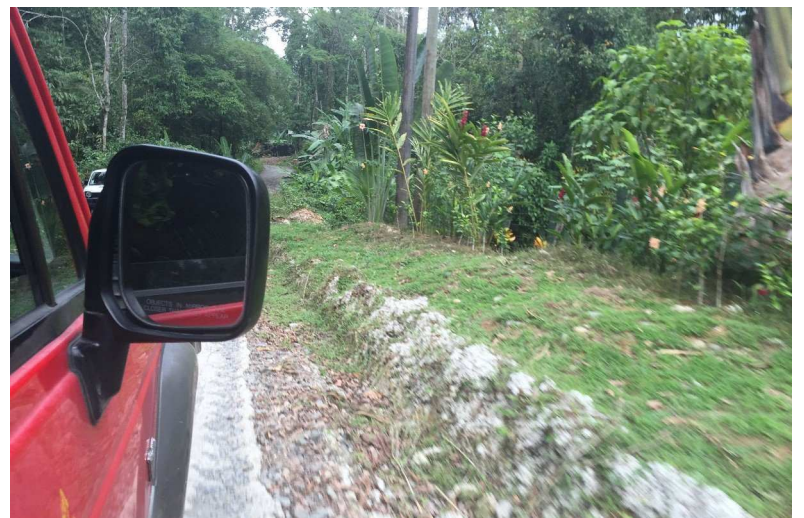
Myra wants to drive along the coast to see the beach etc. and so we head out east on a road that ends in a place called Manzanillo. This a great drive and we stop at the end of the road for coffee on the beach. Although the surfers have come in there are local people everywhere picnicking in the palm trees on the edge of the beach. We could have gone for a swim but left costumes behind in the hotel .

Returning the way we came we stopped for lunch at a ‘sea lounge’ and had an enormous plate of fajitas and a second on on tiger prawns. Fantastic food at a very reasonable price, even managed to get Myra a bottle of Chilean sparkling wine by Toro & Concha.

Great day off, heading for the Arenal Volcano tomorrow in central Costa Rica.

Our stop in Puerto Viejo was very pleasant and the following morning we embarked in our Hyundai across Costa Rica to Tabacon which is a small town adjacent to Mount Arenal, the volcano that until 1968 was thought to be extinct. In that year it spectacularly blew it’s top and for 30 years sent fireworks into the air every night. Today it is once quiet again but from a distance paints the picture of the perfect cone volcano.

Our drive across Costa Rica towards San Jose is hectic. North of Puerto Viejo is Puerto





Limon, the main sea port for Costa Rica on the Caribbean side. Hence the road between here and San Jose is packed with articulated container lorries. The drive requires endless overtaking sometime with accompanying screams from Myra.

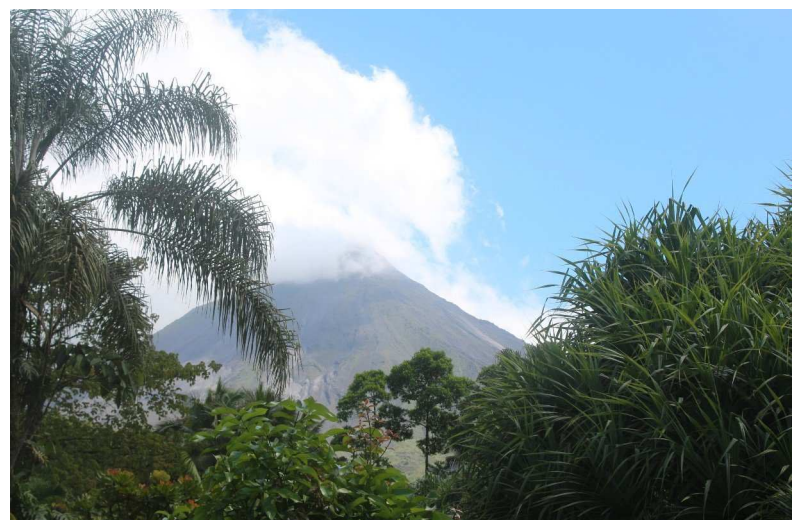
After about 3 hours we turn off the San Jose road and head up Ruta 4 which is a lot quieter and a more pleasant drive altogether. We finally arrive at the Tabacon Resort just after lunch to find it is a 'Leading Hotel' which is great. After a leisurely lunch we take it easy before having a group dinner in the evening.

It is a rest day at Tabacon and so we decide to explore the private gardens of the resort which are in the foothills of the volcano. We have already taken some more distant photos and as we are not really interested in zip lining or hiking decided to spend the day by the pool at the resort. It is still incredibly hot so enthusiasm for serious exercise does not exist.

The following morning we head off along Lake Arenal in the Hyundai for the Nicaragua border at Penas Blanca, hate to think what that means. The drive is a continuation of the day before through the hills and around the lake meandering our way down to the Panamerica Ruta 1 which runs right across Costa Rica. When we join this road the traffic increases but never reaches the level we had on the San Jose road and in fact diminishes as we get closer to the border crossing.

With mounting expectations of being reunited with the Bentley we press on with all haste to arrive at the border in very good time for lunch. However, on arrival the stories regarding the classic cars are not good. 'They are still 5 miles away', 'The local police chief will not allow us to drive them to the border', 'The Nicaraguan Police Chief will not allow us to drive them in Nicaragua' and so it goes on.

The hire car company have arranged to pick up the cars but are not at the border yet. Myra and I do the only sensible thing, clear through immigration and then go and find a snack for lunch. Three hours later we have handed back the hire cars and are walking



across the border to Nicaragua pulling our suitcases 'again'. Yes, the police have said we cannot drive Right Hand Drive cars in Nicaragua anymore and so they will have to be transported to Honduras on the lorries we have already hired.

In the meantime we are to cross the border and pick up another hire car in Nicaragua for the drive to Granada, our destination for tonight. What a pickle, we feel sorry for the organisers as even the Costa Rican police chief says they have many RHD cars entering Costa Rica from Nicaragua so he cannot understand why the police are being so difficult. Anyway it is a fait accompli so we are going to drive to Granada tonight on Lake Nicaragua and stay at the base of Mount Mombacho, another volcano.

After a long 100 km drive we finally front up at the Hotel Granada, Granada to find Reg and Michelle waiting for us with cool beers and a sparkling wine for Myra. What a great reception after a long dusty day, supper follows paid for by the organisers in a very pleasant local restaurant and thereafter we return to the hotel via the vibrant nightlife which is Granada.

There are many tourists here, particularly from North America and particularly kids on their gap years. It is a fun place apparently with plenty of dancing and drinking. We of course avoid both .

Whilst in Granada we get hourly updates on our cars which are still stuck on the Costa Rican border awaiting clearance to transit Nicaragua for Honduras. Having thought that the Nicaraguan chief of police was our final problem we now discover that they want to Xray the cars before allowing them into Nicaragua and yes, their Xray machine is broken .

I have been very critical of the organisers not having anyone on the border with the cars instead relying on the Customs Agent to sort things out. Finally Hernan is dispatched to the border to 'persuade' the customs that an Xray is unnecessary. In the meantime we sit around in the hotel awaiting word that our cars have cleared in and are







on their way by lorry to Honduras. Finally at 1000 we hear that the lorries are on the road. We 'jump' in our hire cars and drive from the hotel to a town near the border called Ocotal. We have booked a 20 USD hotel on Bookings.com for the rally and hope this will avoid a long drive once the cars arrive. It has already been agreed that we will not attempt to drive the cars to Tegucigalpa tonight as this would be in the dark and very dangerous. Instead we are going to meet the cars at the border and help clear them through into Honduras so that the next day we can clear ourselves through on foot and then jump into the vehicles for the long drive to Copan Ruinas in Northern Honduras.

The Left Hand Drive cars have already left the hotel for Tegucigalpa and pass through the border mid afternoon. We will bypass Tegucigalpa completely and leapfrog to the following days destinations thereby catching up with the LHD cars in Copan.

Their drive is not without incident as they do end up driving into Tegucigalpa at night and one of them nearly becomes entangled in a major lorry heist that is taking place on the outskirts of the city. Reg and Michelle keep their heads down and drive like the wind away from the trouble before finally arriving safely at their hotel.

In the meantime our cars pass our hotel in Ocotal on their final 20 kilometres to the border. Myra and I load up our gear and leave the rather horrid hotel in pursuit of our cars. We have loaded up because it is possible we will need to sleep at the border in our hire car if there is a risk of people breaking into the Bentley. However, as it turns out all is well up at the border, the lorries have arrived and are being cleared through to Honduras without any issues. Moreover the cars will stay on the transporter until we arrive in the morning to offload and clear customs.

On our way back to the hotel we decide to visit the hotel that the organisers are staying at as they were unable to get into the Bookings.com hotel. This turns out to be a fair bit better than ours and when we arrive everyone is having supper in the courtyard. Myra says can we change hotels so for a further 60 USD we pay for a room here and ditch



the one down the road.

At supper are an English couple on their honeymoon, Edward and Suzanne who are spending 2 years travelling around the world, alright for some. Anyway the purpose of mentioning them is that they were driving, yes you guessed it, a right hand drive Landcruiser which they had driven right across Costa Rica and Nicaragua. They said that it had darkened windows and they reckon that no one noticed it was RHD when they passed through the Costa Rican border. Not too easy to emulate in an open top Bentley .

Anyway, we are up at 0500 to get to the border and clear ourselves through into Honduras. This is another organisational fiasco but by taking the bit by the teeth we manage to get everyone through and the cars offloaded by 0830 and Myra and I are first off up the road for the 500 kilometre drive to Copan. It is so nice to be back in our car after so many days in lousy hire cars.

Obviously I am really nervous as to whether our earlier problems will reoccur but this turns out to be an unfounded worry as we drive for 10 hours across Honduras without incident. In fact the only remarkable thing about this drive is that we had to drive through the centre of Tegucigalpa and did so without delay whilst expecting it to be a very slow and difficult transit.

80 kilometres from Copan we come across Hans and Bea, Mark and Alex, on the side of the road with the series 1 Range rover. It appears that the regulator on the alternator has packed up and the car battery is too flat to operate the ignition, pumps etc. We try our small new Li-ion battery pack but this works for a few minutes before the car stops again. Oh for my big heavy Snap On power pack substituted by this little electronic device which doesn't do the job .

Anyway they manage to get to a garage and there buy two batteries for the car which will allow them to soldier on until they can get a new regulator. We finally arrive at the



Clarion Hotel to be met by Reg and Michelle who have arrived an hour earlier from Tegucigalpa in their Mustang Mach 1. Over the next three hours all the cars from the rally turn up at this hotel and we are finally a single group again. What a relief and thank heavens all the cars are in one piece.

Finally, in tandem with all the above, my starter motor has been repaired and has been put in Hans' Derby for shipping back to the UK, 320 USD for the complete repair, if it works it will be a bargain .

Having had a very relaxed evening after all this rushing around we decide to visit the Copan Mayan ruins early the next morning. These are famous for being one of the most extensive sites and having a significant number of Stele carvings. These are basically a stone block on end into which details of a specific king are engraved including his likeness etc.

Much of the site is well preserved and one is reminded just how clever the Mayan's were in the 5th to 9th century AD. The site use to be famous for Macaws, indeed the Mayan's held these birds in high regard and there are many carvings of them here. However, in latter years the Macaws have slowly died off and the only ones left here now have been bred in captivity. Still stunning to look at as you will see in the photos.

Having been through the museum we move on to the town of Copan Ruinas which is close by. Although a very touristy town the place is delightful and colourful. We have a wander about before lunch and then home for a siesta.

Thats it for Copan and we leave at 0630 sharp the next morning for the Guatemalan border crossing just 15 minutes away. After the usual hassles of the border which we complete in just over 90 minutes we are off and running for Guatemala City, some 200 kilometres away.

The terrain is very hilly in this area and we spend several hours winding up and down

