

# The Great Game Car Rally 2011

Salcombe to Mount Everest in a vintage Bentley

Paul Markland







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### The story so far

Travelling around the world has been both a hobby and a career of mine since I went to sea as a teenager. Years on Oil Tankers gave me the itch to continue travelling long after I came ashore and became a businessman first in Hongkong and then back here in the UK.

Since 1999 I have travelled extensively in a classic car that I own; completing several long distance rallies and tours. Some of these are competitive and some not but they all have one thing in common; interaction with the local populations of the countries through which I drive. In fact it is essential that these trips be carried out in a classic car, as there is not a child born or a male adult that will not turn out to see such cars. Doing these trips in a Landcruiser would just remind locals of the people who govern them, usually badly, and would not lead to any real interest.

The Great Game is a rally devised by Conrad Birch to follow the borders of the long fought over region between Turkey, Iran and the Stans in the 18th century. Although this was not a well-

known conflict it was a secret war fought between Briton and Russia for many years for control of the trade routes in this region. We are to pass through many of the places that were notable in these troubles.

The route from Istanbul takes us east across Turkey to Iran, north to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan before going east again to Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The entry into the Wakham Valley in Afghanistan will be both a highlight and an adventure as I am fairly apprehensive about this area. From Afghanistan it is back into Tajikistan, onto Kyrgyzstan and then south to Kashgar in China. This is a town I have been to several times and heralds the start of the long drive around the Taklimakan Desert and onwards south to the Tibetan border. Entering Tibet we will drop down to Lhasa before travelling west to Mount Everest and then south once more into Nepal and Kathmandu. Finally we leave Nepal and travel due south to the port of Calcutta or Kolkata as they now call it.

This is a trip I cannot turn down, as Afghanistan and Tibet are very high on my list of countries not yet visited.



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### Preparations

This has been the most unsettling run up to a rally I have been involved in - Visas are still outstanding - we have reduced numbers from 16 cars to 4 with an organiser's car and I guess no doctor and there are real questions as to whether China will let our cars enter from the west due current insurgency issues in Xinjiang Province and Kashgar itself. However, come what may we will set off on Wednesday 17th August 2011 for Istanbul and the start on the 25th August.

On top of all this the Bentley decided to throw me a real scare three weeks ago when by chance I noticed water on the floor of the garage whilst showing my friends the Cubbons around the industrial unit where I store the cars. Having phoned Chris George, my engineer, and asked him to look at the engine, he came over the next day and reported back that we had two large cracks in the cylinder head! Panic! A quick call to Peter Fitzcharles, who bought the Mercedes 220 from me after the London to Sydney in 2005, established a working fallback if we could not get the Bentley sorted out in time.



After calls to Riskes and Jeffrey Engineering, we attempted a repair using an American product called Devcon. The cracks were at each end of the head and had travelled from the top rocker cover gasket all the way down to the head gasket and partly across the bottom of the head. The repair was completed without delay and I took the car on a high speed run to Bristol and back. This went well but when I got home the leaks had reappeared adjacent to the repaired cracks. Further advice suggested that the head was unserviceable and needed to be replaced.

Through chance Chris Forrest called me and suggested I talk to Jeremy Brewster an engineer who had worked on his Vauxhall 30/98. Jeremy confirmed that there was no real repair possible to a 75-year-old head and I needed to contact Will Fiennes and buy a new one, as he put it "just hold out your cheque book and sign whatever he writes in it!". Friday evening saw me phoning Will who was fairly certain he had just completed the machining of a new 4 1/4 litre aluminium head that I could have, brilliant... now the cheque.

The head arrived the following week. Chris and I spent a day





moving bits and pieces off the old one and onto the new head before re-assembling the engine. No issues doing any of this and within a day we are back up and running with a brand new aluminium head! A trip to my father in Kent put 634 miles onto the engine without incident, and we re-tightened the head on my return to Kingsbridge.

So, catastrophe averted, Peter stood down and we are back on track for our departure.

My co-driver is David Moffatt. We have travelled together several times but in separate cars, including London to Peking, London to Sydney and Kuala Lumpur to Hanoi. We both think this may well be the biggest adventure we have had - even though we have been to most of these countries before.

Afghanistan sounds hairy but we are going to the northeast corner, an area that is known as the Wakham Valley, a tongue of land that extends into China. As of this week the border is shut but we are told this changes daily so hopefully we will get through.

I am desperately keen to visit Tibet by car and especially Everest Northern Base Camp, which is only reachable from Lhasa via the Rongbuk Monastery. The last 40 kilometres will be extremely difficult, not in the classic cars but staggeringly uncomfortable Chinese 4x4s.

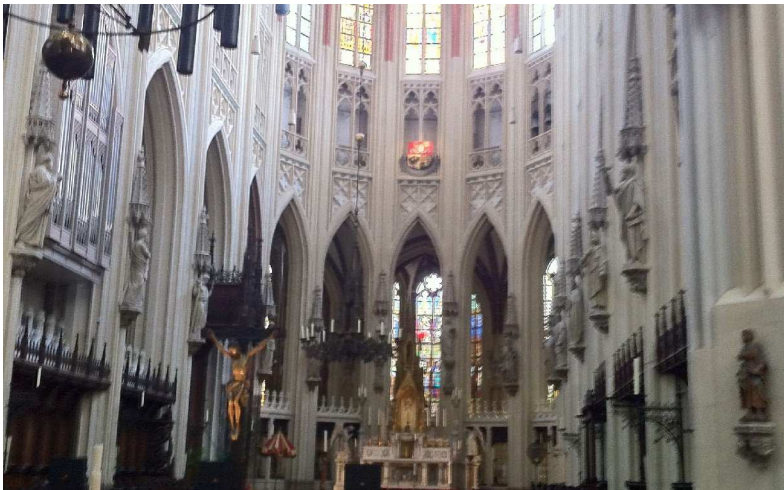
We are both keen to see Iran again, we found the people there really friendly and approachable. This time we are going closer to the southern edge of the Caspian Sea and passing through Tehran.

So there we are, the route we are taking to Istanbul is a combination of train, ferries and driving. We drive to the Channel Tunnel and then onto Hertogenbosch in Holland. Here we put the car on a train and travel overnight to Livorno in Italy. A beautiful drive through Umbria to Ancona following the route of the 2000 London to Peking Rally and then the Superfast Ferry overnight to Igoumenitsa in Greece. From there we take two days to drive across Greece via the monasteries of Kalampaka to Istanbul.

We hope to collect our second passports full of visas from the



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organiser, Conrad Birch, in Thessaloniki before taking him with us across the border into Turkey. Having gathered my things together, loaded my wife Myra into the car and released the handbrake, we set off from Salcombe to London to pick up my co-driver, David Moffatt from Knightsbridge. Very uneventful drive with absolutely no arguing, although as I could not hear Myra above the roar of the engine, I have no idea what she was shouting anyway... something about going too fast I think but who knows.

Anyway, arrived in London safely and met up with Charles our son for supper at Number 2 Mums, this is the name Charlie gave Yvonne Moffatt on the Inca Rally in 2001 when I was being a difficult dad. Early Thursday we load up and set off for the Channel Tunnel via my father's home on Romney Marsh where we stop for coffee and to say 'goodbye'. With time to spare we arrive and board the Eurotunnel Train to Calais. We have been concerned about the weather since the morning but thus far it has stayed dry.

### The Run to Istanbul

I have explained to David at length the unpleasantness of the Bentley in rain, it's lack of credible roof and the constant spray on the back of the neck and inside of the windscreen. All this in the hope it will lessen the impact if rain should occur.

I was doing fine until Belgium when Brussels instigated a rain directive and we were flooded with water for two and half hours to Hertogenbosch! After spending 30 minutes looking for the hotel, which we actually arrived at once but couldn't figure out how to get through the bollards, we eventually get in the dry and ring out clothing, car and baggage.

Friday a.m. we are up with the lark and off to see the cathedral, very interesting if you are into that sort of thing, before arriving at the train station to load the car and board for Livorno. We meet a Clyde and Co Admiralty Lawyer, Carlo, who is in an AC Cobra and about to marry an Iranian girl in Tehran. We depart friends with an invite to the wedding. Having boarded the train we relaxed over a good supper before sleep and morning arrival in Livorno.

Wow, Sun, Sun and Sun - it's 35 degrees and it is only 10.00. We unload the car and set off on the London to Peking route through Tuscany: wonderful, brilliant, sunny and no traffic, great scenery, vineyards everywhere and lots of corners to buzz around. After a couple of hours, enough with the corners and twisty road, lets find a motorway to Ancona! It is 40 degrees and blistering. We head south to Perugia and then northeast to Genga and the Grottos - caves to us English.

We stay at La Grotte Hotel that, contrary to its name is very good indeed. After a futile search for a restaurant in the local village, we settle for a drink in the town square before supper at the hotel. A decent bottle of Barolo slips down effortlessly, this we suspect being the last bottle of decent wine for quite some time.





On to Ancona and the ferry to Igoumenitsa in Greece. This is a great way to avoid Yugoslavia and Albania not to mention a hell of a lot quicker. On the ferry we meet up with fellow rallyist the Grieves from New Zealand/Spain. They have arrived in a very cool bright yellow 1974 Porsche, don't ask me which one as I know nothing about these cars, I have always felt myself too fat and too old to own one!

We pass Corfu to port and enter Greek waters; the crossing is totally calm and extremely fast, 17 hours in all.

Out of the port in five minutes and off on the new EU paid for motorway to Thessaloniki. Greece is broke but is the tollbooth open and charging for passage through the 50 tunnels between Igoumenitsa and Thessaloniki - NO they are not, whole trip free, not a penny spent!

We detour en route to Kalampaka, which is where the amazing monasteries are that hang to the side of cliffs and were featured in a James Bond film. Stunning to see though no longer only reachable by pack house and on foot, the EU has paid for roads to be cut though to many of them so coaches can disembark tourists at the monasteries' door.

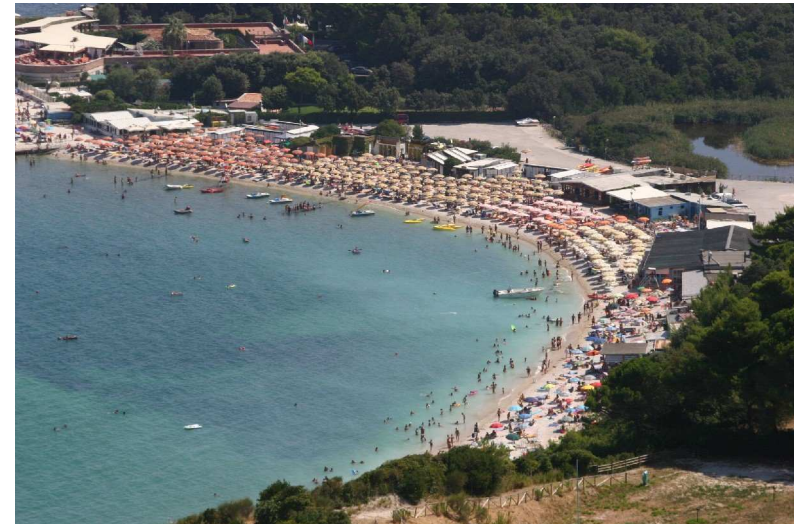
After a quick lunch of horsemeat kebabs, we are back on the road to Thessaloniki; arriving at the Macedonia Palace, in time for several early evening beers, a shower and chat to Myra at home.

Weather is fantastic, sea calm, light breeze and stunning views from the bar's balcony looking out on a sea of fishing boats, walkers and swimmers. Conrad the organiser of this rally arrives in from the UK with our second passports packed with visas for the trip and the passport for our car, called a Carnet, and issued by the RAC. The only visa missing is for Afghanistan as the border is still shut this week. However, we will try and get visas in Istanbul from the embassy there.

The plan is to take Conrad in the back of the Bentley through to Istanbul, some 600 kms. This entails moving bags into the Porsche and then giving Conrad a pair of goggles as his head will be 6 inches above the top of the windscreen and he will get very windswept.

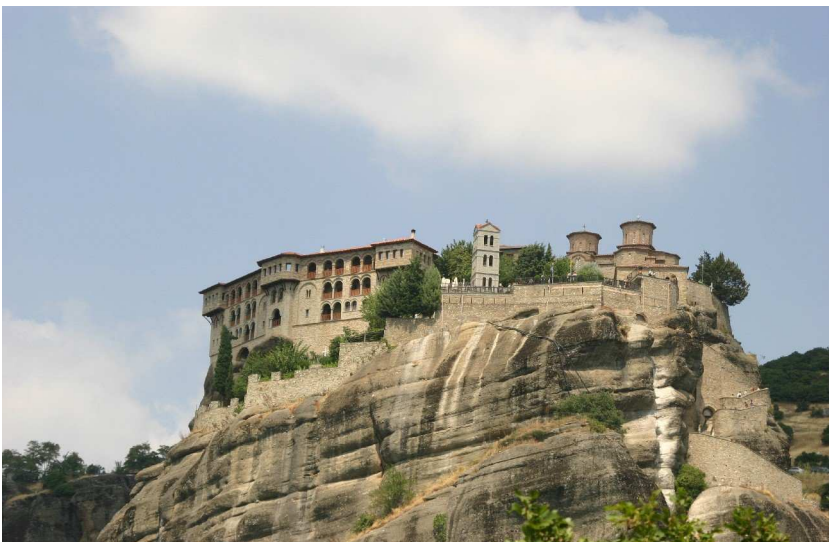
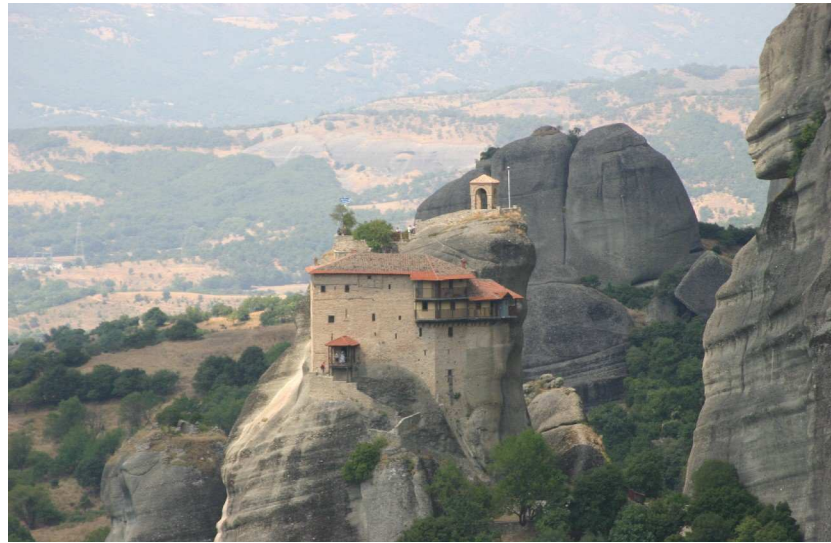
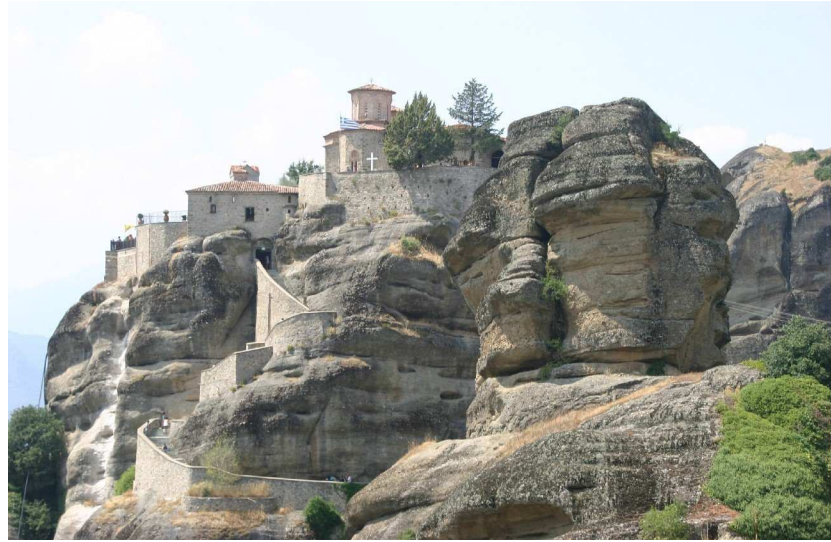
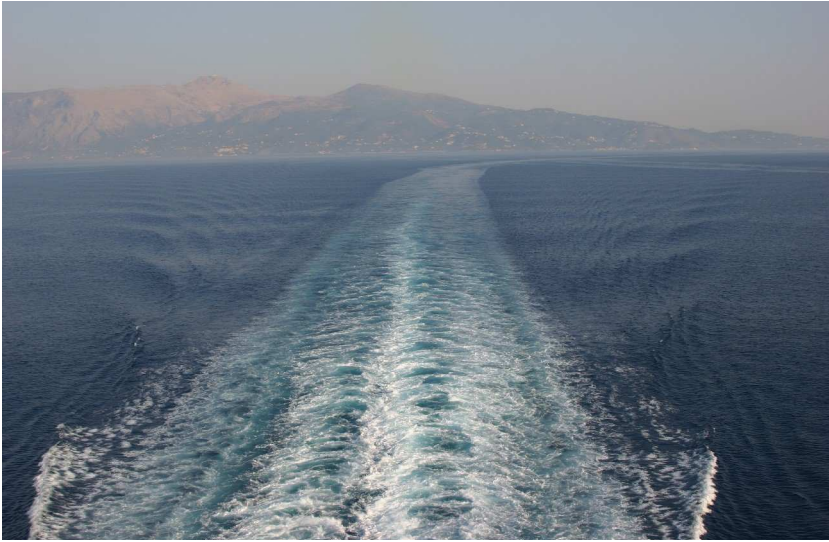
Tuesday early we leave Thessaloniki with our passenger and plough up the A2 motorway to the Turkish border. Road brilliant and we make the border in just over three hours. No holdups there and we are soon on our way to Istanbul, oh but wait a second, no EU no ROAD. No long sweeping highways paid for by the people of England; instead we have the Asian equivalent complete with dips, potholes and inevitably punctures.

We lose an hour changing the tyre and then finding a repair station to have it fixed. However, it was not really the road's fault as when we pull out the inner tube we find it has split along its inner seam. Oh no! By the way we have four more tyres with these





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brand new inner tubes. Lets just hope this is not the start of an ongoing issue. Anyway we get to Istanbul for 1700 and with the help of a taxi leading us find our way to the Pera Palace Hotel, where Agatha Christie wrote the 'Murder on the Orient Express'.

We have driven a little over 2,000 miles since we installed the new aluminium head and touch wood all is fine with the engine. We had a small fuel leak yesterday which required the fuel pump to be dismantled and various nuts tightened but besides this we have used no oil or water and everything seems fine.

Tomorrow, I will find some more inner tubes in case of problems and sort out my Afghanistan visa. Istanbul is going to be a great stop. After three beers I already feel great!

Having installed ourselves in the Pera Palace Hotel, we spent a day sight seeing, David in a tourist bus and me in the Bentley. I think we saw all the same things but I was saved from a visit to the Turkish Carpet shop!

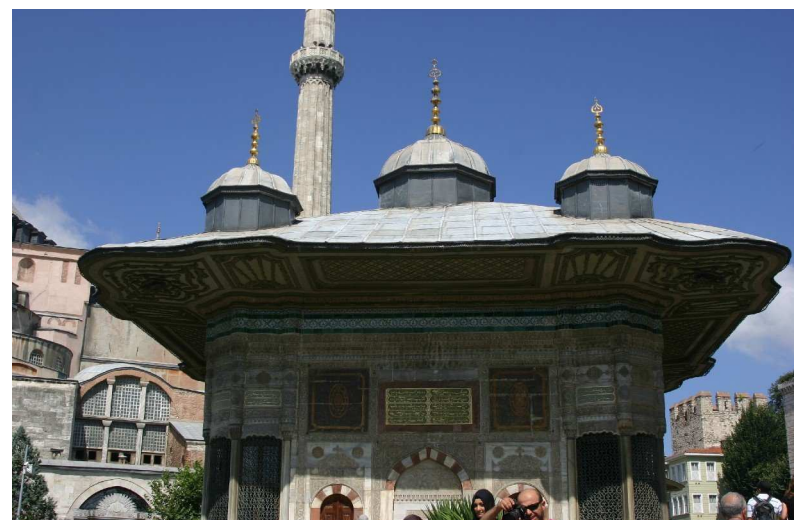
The situation with inner tubes worsened in so much as various emails between myself and Richards Brothers suggested that the tubes they had supplied were not suitable for the Bentley after all and needed checking at the very least. With this in mind I found a Goodyear dealer, who after 30 minutes communicating by MSN with Ankara established that for a small price he could ship me 4 tubes by air to arrive the next day. As we have 10,000 miles to go I was not willing to risk further problems and so sent for the tubes. As promised they arrived the next day and we inspected all four tubes replacing the two rear ones that seem most affected by the problem. The rest I have loaded as spares.

The same day we finally received the road book for the trip. This is the navigator's bible prepared by the organiser to get us across Asia. To say we were underwhelmed is an understatement however; we always knew this was going to be a real adventure. Luckily we brought maps of the whole route with us and Conrad supplied a GPS, which will, at the very least, help us find hotels in large cities.

The route has yet again changed but maintains the essential elements of the Wakham Valley in Afghanistan and crossing Tibet to the North Everest base Camp. So except for a few very long days the route is much as expected.

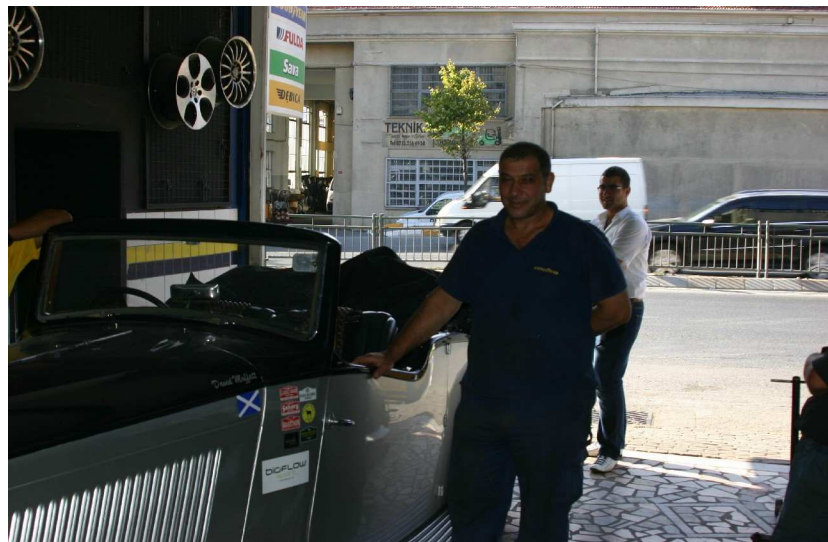
We also finally met the other participants and the support team, which contrary to my expectation includes Pippa the doctor, although she is almost certainly younger than my daughter, Ayesha. That to me makes her very young! Jim is the route master and sometime mechanic and he, Pippa and Conrad will share driving the Landrover 110 across Asia. Rather than me is all I have to say on that!

The other teams are Bernard and Dana in another Landrover, although this one is the latest model and filled with spare parts etc. Then there is Bill and Lorette in a 1969 Morgan loaded down to the gunwales with equipment. Finally there is the Yellow Peril with Chris and Liz previously mentioned, a small select band of adventurers facing





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10,000 miles, 8 countries, and the Himalayas.

### The Start of the Great Game

On the 26th August 2011 at 08.00 we finally depart Istanbul for Ankara.

As we pass over the Bosphorus Bridge we approach another tollbooth that does not take cash, we head for an electronic sensor lane without a barrier and zoom through at speed setting off the alarm as we depart. The Morgan which is just in front of us picks a different lane with a barrier, drives right up to it and then proceeds to go under the barrier whilst it is still down, no alarm!

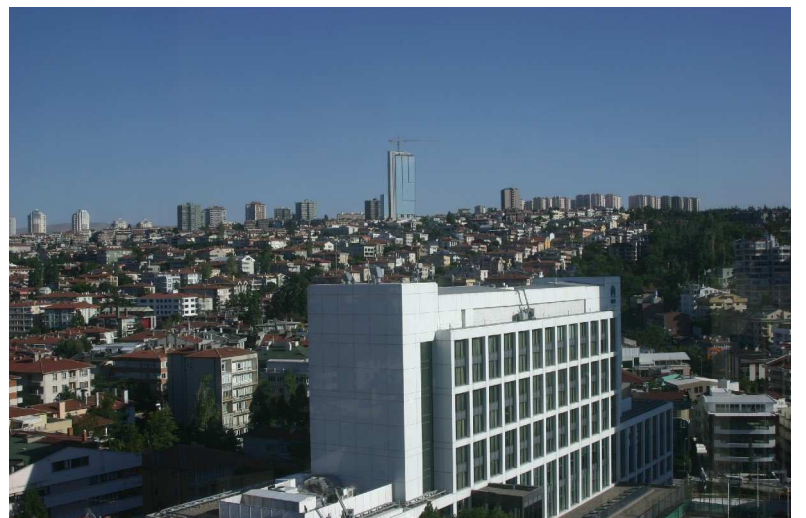
It is only three toll stops later that we finally find out from Liz that you can buy a token in various shops to enable free passage through all Turkish tolls. Bit late but worth remembering for next time!

The drive to Ankara is uneventful and fast; it is motorway the whole way. However, whilst we are cruising at between 60 and 70, cars are passing us at more than 100mph, it is very disconcerting. The drive into Ankara is hectic to say the least but we arrive at the Hilton unscathed and relaxed.

After much debate David and I decide that we will need to modify our stops to ensure we do not do excessive miles in the next few days, neither the car nor us can stand 700kms in a day as this takes about 14 hours to drive including regular stops. As such we will not only arrive in the dark but the car and ourselves will be exhausted. So our second day on the road sees us bypass Cappadocia (where we have both been before) and head for a point further East and closer to our pre Iran destination of Lake Van. It also means we will bypass a run through the mountains on Day 3.

We drive southeast to Kayseri. Having arrived and settled into a good lunch at the Hilton we embarked on an exploration of the Souk. A local who latched onto us as we arrived gave us a run down on what was interesting about the town and how very few tourists ever stopped there because Cappadocia was so close to the. He showed us the original Caravanserai from the time of the Ottoman Empire. This was where the trade caravans rested in the city; camels downstairs and humans up. It still has some remnants of the past in that there is a wool trading floor in the building, but as we were about to find out from our guide it is mostly now for, you guessed it, rug salesman, of whom our guide was one.

30 minutes of Turkish Rug history later we finally escape and continue our tour of the Souk. I wanted to buy a plastic container for the honey I bought, as the last time I left this in it's original container, it ended up all over the car. Having found a stall that sold plastic stuff I was informed I could not go in as they were closing, not very Turkish I felt. The next day we set off for the 600 km drive to Diyarbakir in what might one day be Kurdistan? The locals are fiercely patriotic and we were reminded several times that it is Kurdish Coffee here and not Turkish! However, everyone was very friendly even





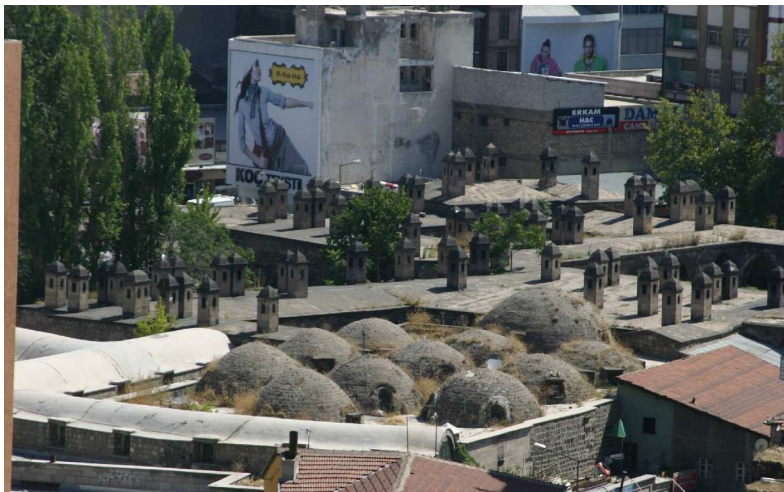
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if the guys in the Turkish tanks along the roadside were looking for trouble. The drive was fairly unremarkable but long; the road is a dual carriageway now that at least meant we could press on. We arrived in Diyarbakir to stay at the London to Sydney Hotel that had not changed one iota from our last visit. I even managed to get a plastic container for my honey in the supermarket across the yard.

As we cannot enter Iran with booze we drank our penultimate bottle of Barolo with a typical Turkish mixed grill, very pleasant. I was woken at 0400 to the sound of a single drum beating which when I looked out of the window was in the hands of an official and I think marked the end of Ramadan.

Up early for the final push to Lake Van, the highest enclosed lake in Turkey and one of the highest in the world. With a pH of 9.8 only a single species of Carp can live in it, as the water is full of salts that are supposedly good for humans. We head up onto the high plains that lead east from Diyarbakir at 2,100 metres (7000 ft). It is beautiful countryside full of wheat fields and shepherds. Every few miles we meet a combine harvester as they work to get the crops in. I do not think they have the weather pressures farmers in the UK have and seem very relaxed about how they harvest; they even store the wheat in the fields in huge uncovered piles.



We met a lot of locals on the way who would either drive us off the road or jam on their brakes right in front of us, all to get the best photo with their mobile phones. Very good natured but at times a touch frustrating. As we approach Lake Van about 100 km from our destination we drop to 1,700 metres (5,500 ft) and reach the edge of the lake. It is a perfect clear blue, no pollution. It takes a further hour and half and another pass at 2,225 metres (7,300 ft) before we reach the town of Van itself and our hotel perched on the side of the lake with a long finger pier extending into the water.

Having been dared to go in by Chris Grieves, who is already in the lake I dive in with shorts on to experience the rather strange soapy feeling of the water. After a suitable soak it's out in the sun for a beer. However, after three days of 40 degrees plus the temperature up here plummets with the sunset and I am soon shivering.

### Into Iran



We depart Van for Iran, Barolo finished, last beer drunk, long trousers on, documents out. The drive to the border is fairly bad with major 'offs' every few kilometres but we make the border by 10.00 and are greeted with tremendous enthusiasm, first by the Turks but more so by the Iranians who all insist on sitting in the car for a photo. Luckily our papers were given VIP treatment as the photo shoot continued.

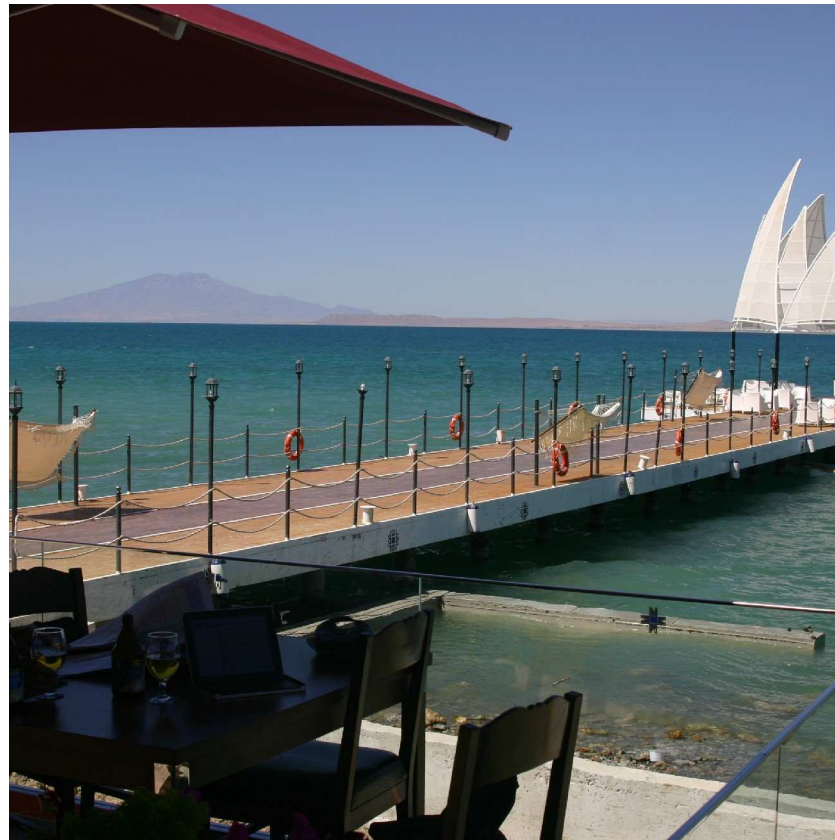
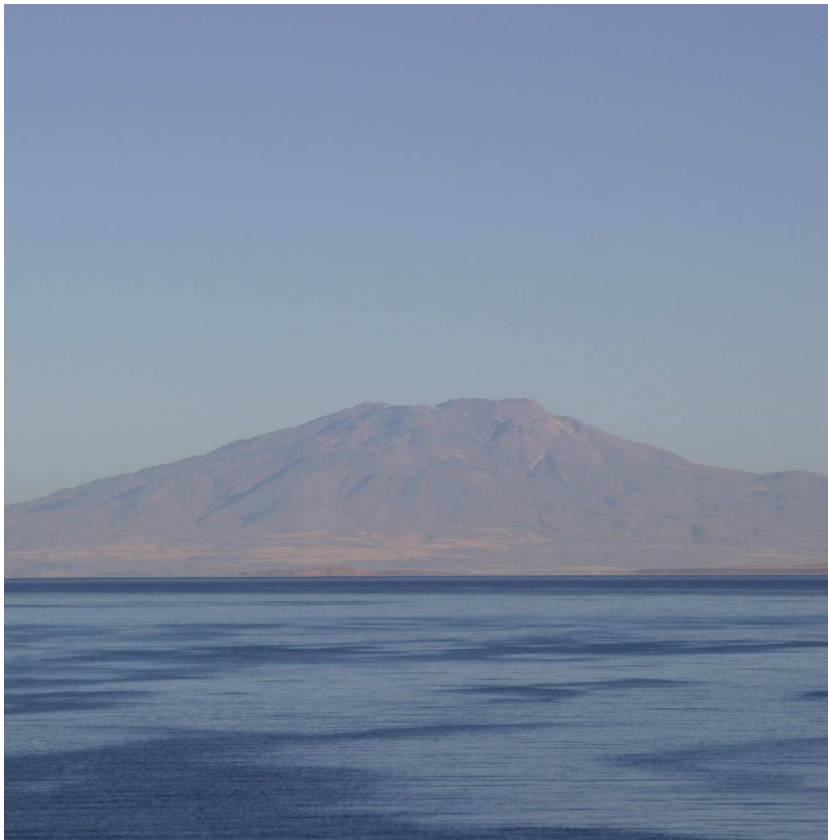
We managed to escape with our car and belongings in tact and set off on the worst road of the event so far, in fact 'road' is an overstatement. Besides bad gravel we had to wade through two rivers and bounce around a number of big potholes. Luckily this state of affairs had been forewarned - first by Google Map showing no road on the Iranian side and then the customs officer saying there is 25 km of 'difficult road'.







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Finally we reached a more normal road and got going to Tabriz. However I had forgotten how dangerous driving is here in Iran until the first time we were forced off the road by an oncoming truck. Coupled with endless cars swerving around us to get photos and massive sleeping policeman at every junction, the first day was the 'drive from hell'.

Our arrival in Tabriz should have been a doddle but having got into the hotel car park we were unable to find the Hotel. We left the sanctity of the park and got completely jammed up in traffic until rescued by an Iranian Good Samaritan. He took us down a one-way street the wrong way back to the car park we had left an hour before and pointed out our hotel entrance. I felt such a twit when the car park attendant welcomed us back with a strange expression on his face.

Well first one has to say what an amazingly friendly and tolerant people the Iranians are. Friendly as we have been helped by all sorts of people to find our hotel, change a tyre and replace an inner tube etc. Everyone is happy to help and it is quite extraordinary the generosity of these people. Tolerant as they have to put up with a load of intolerant moody Mullahs who

quite frankly have stifled this country's development and wasted money on atom bombs and ever bigger Mosques. It is not surprising that the average Iranian wants change - 4 channels of Mullahs dictating on TV all day, No extramarital sex and only your mates to talk to. If the last election was trouble the next will be dynamite.

We did develop a number of new definitions however in regard to Burkas...

A car full of Burkas - Batmobile (Bit obvious I know).

Fruit Bats - Young Iranian girls with lots of boys hanging around them.

Vampire Bats - Older ugly women who look as though they would bite.

Ding Bats - Bats with money.

Bling Bats - Bats dripping with gold.

And finally a definition for a group of Mullahs - a Pride of Mullahs.

Yet to find the definition of a Brick Bat ! Any thoughts? As we noticed in 2005, girls play lip service to the dress code and we



hardly seen a full blown 'bat' since we arrived here. It is a little sad to note the speed with which Turkey is developing and the complete lack of change here. Outside the cities the villages still consist of mud huts and ramshackle brick buildings, the roads are like Turkey's were 10 years ago and the only sign of wealth is in the Mosques and a few tall buildings.

However, back to the people, they are clearly warming to the idea of change and we can only hope they get their way this time - not many of the younger generation can see the Mullahs as an improvement on the Shah.

We left Tabriz for the long drive to Tehran, some 680 kms. This was not a very exciting day although we did manage to have another issue with the same rear wheel going flat on us. This time we managed to change it fairly quickly on the side of the motorway but not before an Iranian family had stopped and brought over a bucket of fruit for us to eat whilst we changed the wheel. Can you conceive of that happening in the UK or even in Europe? I think not. Just amazing.

We arrived in Tehran late afternoon to be met with a massive amount of holiday traffic fleeing the city for Ede. We had met up with the Landrover and Porsche, the former having our Iranian guide on board and this made locating the hotel in this huge city very straightforward. I then headed off with the guide to get the inner tube replaced whilst David recce'd the hotel.

The following day we were out earlyish to drive to some dump in the middle of nowhere near the Caspian Sea called Minudasht. The road was hideous, full of holiday traffic going over the mountain pass to the North, which rises to 2,100 metres (7,000 ft) and in sight of several mountains with snow on them. They must be high as the ground temperature at 2,100 metres (7,000 ft) was 35 degrees. The route was very pretty but laborious and after we got lost in Sari, David and I had had enough of the drive.

So, as you can see a riveting days driving to arrive in a dump of a hotel where water ran straight through the sinks onto the floor.

Did manage to get hold of a can of beans for the next day but supper was horrid.

We could not leave Minudasht quick enough and neither David nor I had a shower or a shave before departing at 0630 for Mashad and our first rest day. We drove the Northern route, close to the Turkmenistan border and through the Goleston National Park. Many Iranians from Tehran and Mashad come to this high park and camp on the side of the road in huge groups. Not sure why they do not venture off the road but they seem happy anyway. Passing through that early in the morning we see many strange sights including dozens of tiny tents with huge families in them, trucks with two pairs of feet sticking out off the flatbed and even a few couples entwined on the road in blankets. However, the drive is the easiest and fastest we have had in Iran and we arrive in Mashhad at lunchtime without any stress at all. In fact we stopped in the mountains and brewed up for breakfast consuming our tin of beans along with tea and coffee. By the time we have finished breakfast whilst watching a family denude a tree





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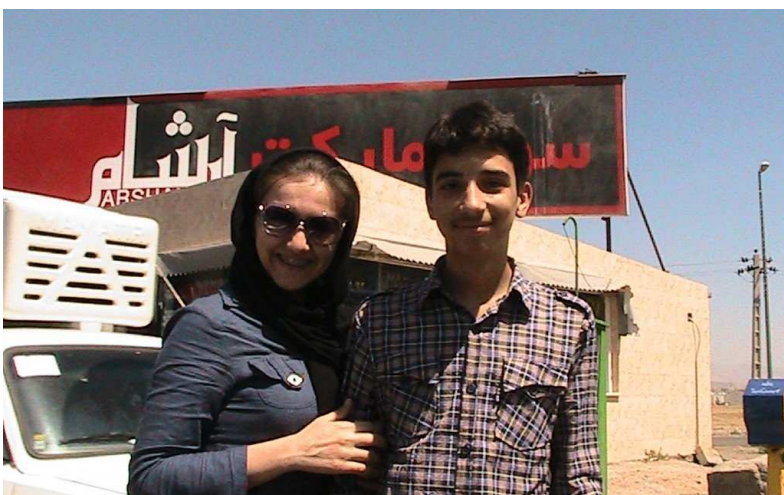
of Walnuts we have several villagers and a tractor alongside us observing these strange people in an old Bentley.

We stay at a really good hotel in Mashhad called the Homa, it is Friday and the place is heaving with slightly better off Iranians having the Sunday buffet. This is the first decent food we have had in several days and we tuck in to an enormous helping of soup, salad, Beef Stroganoff and Crème Caramel. So much so we have to have a siesta after lunch before we go looking for petrol and somewhere to change oil the next day. Petrol is hard to come by in Iran and every petrol station has a large queue waiting to buy their ration. Diesel is even more difficult as many lorries out here are either petrol or CNG (Compressed Natural Gas). The latter is becoming ever more popular as Iran has plenty of gas. We think the reason that petrol is an issue is that they do not have the refining capacity to produce a surplus of petrol. They also import all lube oil presumably for the same reason. Anyway we have always managed to find petrol and Mashhad was no exception.



Our first rest day is most welcome and I plan to carry out a full service of the Bentley that has now gone 6,000 miles since leaving home. David is in charge of sight seeing and disappears off with one of my cameras to document our stop in Mashhad. I however, drive off to a small unit where the owner has a pit and lots of oil. He does not speak a word of English but with the help of my 'Point It' book we manage to change the engine oil and find oil to top up the gearbox, overdrive, rear axle and shock absorbers along with a full inspection of the underside of the car. All looks good as far as I can see.

Next it is two doors along to a tyre shop where local kids who all want to sit in the car and have their photo taken surround me. Many people stop to take photos and I have to juggle taking off wheels with keeping an eye on the car. After many emails Richards bros and I have come to the conclusion that the Dunlop tyres have some rough edges on one side caused by their mould. The solution is to take all the tubes out, remove the tires and sand down the offending rough edges. This is a big job and takes two lads and myself two hours to get them apart, sand, talc and reassemble however I have some confidence that this may solve our ongoing problem with the tubes failing.



A much bigger problem has arisen over the last week in that it is clear we do not have enough tread on the tyres to make Calcutta, in fact I think anywhere south of central China will be a problem. I have therefore instigated the help of Chris Simons and my crew at Ecoflow to come up with a way of getting 4 Tyres to Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan. We are going to try couriering them there either to the Hyatt hotel GM or the British Embassy. However, successive rallies have shown that consignments usually get lost in customs and rarely does the driver take delivery before he is forced to move on.

Be that as it may we have to give it a go before executing the fall back plan which is to get one of my mates to fly to Beijing and then Kashgar with 4 more tyres as hold baggage. We should know in about a week if UPS is going to work for us or not.

After the tyre place it is on to a car wash with the help of a 12ish year old Iranian