

The Great Game Car Rally 2011



and I need to get the tyres sorted out and new inner tubes fitted before we leave town. Conrad, Bernard and I head off to a Vulcaniser who is really good at identifying our problem and trying to overcome it by making an addition strip of rubber to cover the spoke nuts. We do this to one wheel as an experiment and in the days ahead will assess whether this improves our inner tube problems.

I have not had time to do an oil change but as the dark settles in I check the oil levels and top up. Two new brackets for my sump guard have appeared from the Mercedes garage and I hope to fit these the next day. In the dark we load the Landrover with spare tyres and tubes before heading inside for a huge steak and chips. Exhausted I head for bed, I have lost 6 pounds on this trip already and this may be the positive spin off from the bad road and car problem.

Departing Bishkek at dawn we head for Narin, a really bad experience in 2000 repeated again this time as the road slowly deteriorates as we go into the hills. The car holds out using the rally booster battery as a power source. We arrive in Narin in good time whilst there are still 4 hours of daylight left.



I decide to leave the regulator until last and concentrate on getting the sump guard brackets on and the bumpers tightened up. Then it is time to clear the air filter again and check the mixture. I am then ready to have another go at the charging system and remove the regulator from the car so I can see what is wrong. Finding a number of loose things which I tighten, I can see why we may not be charging. Following reassembly I run the car and 'Hey presto' we are charging, at least for a short time. We are getting closer to the issue but I am out of time so need to leave it for Kashgar.

I am determined to wash the car as it is covered in dust and looks dreadful, so this becomes the final priority before dinner and bed. It will get filthy again tomorrow but at least it felt better with the grime off.

We depart Narin for the Chinese border at daybreak, we know this will be a difficult road getting worse as we cross the mountains to the south and finally reach the Tologut Pass, the 3,600 metre (12,000 ft) entry point into China. The charging circuits comes on and off so we are still reliant on an outside source of power but we have no further problems with tubes or rattles. The road is so bad for the last 30 kms that we are doing no more than 25 kph over the bumps.

Finally reaching the border we start the endless exit checks for Kyrgyzstan, they seem to have got worse in the last few years rather than better. Finally we are through, past the 5 kms of queuing lorries and into no mans land bound for China. On the Chinese side we are held up whilst our guide appears from the bottom of the mountain. Once he is on board we hare down the hill to the passport and customs office some 100 kms from the border post.

The regulator is working on this stretch but the problem is still intermittently breaking the circuit. Once through customs and immigration and having purchased a bottle of Armagnac in Duty Free we head on to the hotel in Kashgar. The time zone here is the



same as Beijing which is ridiculous as it means daylight from 09.00 to 21.00. This is made worse by the fact that the locals use their own time two hours behind Beijing. As such who knows what time anything opens or closes!

Our Hotel is miles from the town centre and we are all really disappointed about this, not a restaurant in sight and we have to settle for a very mediocre meal in the Hotel. Four Star but water still runs out of the shower and across the floor to a drain! Better than some we have stayed at in the past but hardly a Hyatt.

Hopefully, China is the start of better roads and an easier drive... at least until we approach Tibet...

The Taklimakan

Kashgar is not the rest day we hoped for. Instead we spend a whole day at the Traffic Police Test Centre having the cars MOT'd and Driving Licenses issued. We have picked the day the traffic police move from their downtown office in Atway to a new facility out on the main highway. Back and forth we go, the MOT is a fiasco, Bentley brakes cannot be tested on a rolling road and the headlights are so far out the automated machine cannot even find the beams. But we are passed. Onto the medical 'What is your height', 'eh! 185cms', 'OK that's good, next please'. Finally at 18.00 we depart back to the hotel with our Driving License but still await the number plates for the car. What a waste of a day. Luckily I took my laptop with me so was able to get the last week's Blog editions sorted out ready for transmission and reply to 20 or so emails. Then I had another go at the Regulator and fixed a few more bits that are dropping off.

Lunch was in the test centre, a very good fried rice with fresh vegetables washed down with chi (tea). Dinner was a quiet affair back at the hotel. I just ate all they put in front of me. I have been so hungry whilst travelling in the Stans.

So, mega disappointment, I did not get to see how much Kashgar had changed since 2005 but one thing I did notice, ALL I repeat ALL, scooters and moped are now electric in the city. Oh! So one day Lee Fat Ching or whatever his name is stood up and said 'no more combustion engines' and there came to pass that all combustion engines were banned. Try and do that in Europe and see how many judicial reviews you face. Bloody good though for the environment, China seems way ahead, solar power for heating, all lights are eco bulbs, 1000's of wind turbines, electric scooters and I think we saw many electric taxis, all in the space of a few years. Maybe one party government does work. But I cannot see me converting the Bentley though.

So off we go around the Taklimakan desert. Three times before I have done this, first on no roads, second on a poor road, third on a good road and this time much of it on a four lane motorway. The drive to Aksu, Korla and Turpan are all very easy except for the occasional 'offs', one of which lasted 60 kilometres between Aksu and Korla. However, in the main we can push along, two speeding tickets, great pictures of the



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Bentley, neither of which they would let me keep, no fine, just a friendly photo with the car whilst they call their friends to come and see what they have stopped.

On and on around the desert, oilfields appearing in the distance. Aksu and Korla seem to have grown enormously in size and now have large industrial areas near them. The people are the same, mainly Oighers and other non Han, so the plan to flood the area with Eastern Chinese does not seem to be working. Time is Beijing for Hotels and Officials, two hours ahead of the correct local time. I am staying on Local time, as it is what the locals use and means day breaks at 07.00 not 09.00. David is on Beijing time so thinks we are starting very late each morning!

Car is not too bad, charging system failed completely but in Korla we managed to change the engine oil, fix David's seat which had been threatening to fall out of the door onto the road, repair the exhaust pipe bracket that broke on the big 'off' and generally tighten up a few bits and pieces. I contacted Ian Crook, the auto electrician guru in Totnes who overhauled the dynamo and he gave me tests to do on the unit. Nothing works and eventually I take the dynamo out, partially strip it and clean everything – still nothing works. We charge a battery overnight each night using a fairly poor Chinese battery charger but this gives us enough power for the Fuel Pump and Overdrive the next day providing we do not use lights or the indicators. Bit exhausting but at least we can keep going whilst others are scuppered.

The Morgan has just left Kashgar having been rebuilt by Phil, however, we hear it only made it to the border before dying and is now going to be shipped through China by truck and then home by sea, a great shame but it was not the car for this trip. Phil and Lorette are meeting us in Lhasa - or so I hear. The Porsche is going well with the repaired clutch forks but Chris does not seem to think he can get it up the mountain to Lhasa as the engine performs badly at altitude. Chris George, our engineer in the UK, suggested they advance the timing as I do on the Bentley however, whereas we can do it on the steering column, the Porsche would require physically turning the distributor.

The current plan is to truck the Porsche up to and presumable through Tibet whilst Chris and Liz go by train to Lhasa from Golmud. Apparently the train is pressurised so they is no chance of altitude sickness on the way up, not sure what happens once you get there. Take Diamox I guess.

So, could just be the Bentley going up the hill along with a couple of modern, state of the art (if there is such a thing) Landrovers, one of which is only firing on 4 out of 5 cylinders ! Lets just hope the B keeps on trucking, it doesn't seem to mind the altitude although I am not so sure about it's driver and passenger.

Here we are in Turpan, third lowest place on earth and supposedly the hottest place in China, which I would dispute having stood in a blast furnace in Wuhan, the town known as the boiler room of China, 50 degrees Celsius plus. However, I have just had Peking Duck for lunch whilst David had a very fine Crispy Pork and will shortly be



taking the Dynamo apart again with the help of Ian on the end of the phone as I reach various test stages. Fingers crossed we find a solution to this issue.

Farewell the plains

From Turpan we continue on around the Taklimakan desert to Dunhuang, the start of the Great Wall of China. The drive is uninspiring but includes the worst 'off' we have had so far in China. It is so bad that driving in the sand I can see nothing and have no real idea whether the lorries in front of us are coming towards us or going the same way. Very scary and after 10 or so kilometres we notice a stretch of tarmac to our right which seems to be intact. Ignoring the signs and piles of earth we find a way onto this tarmac and are soon driving alongside the off on a clear road with good visibility. We are not sure whether we will be forced to turn back at some point but for now we are going strong and can see the odd place where we could rejoin the 'off' if forced to do so.

I should explain that the de rigor in China is to divert cars off the road for road works rather than closing a lane. This is coupled by huge piles of earth to block any driver from trying to do what we have just done by closing access to all alternative tarmac stretches. However, every so often the piles of earth have been flattened out and the brave ignore the minimal signs and just drive on the tarmac.

Signage here is so bad that on a dual carriageway we met a lorry in the outside lane that should have been over the barriers on the other carriageway. He had missed the rotten sign that told him to rejoin his carriageway after an 'off' and hence brought him down the road the wrong way, imagine the consequences of that in England.

Further on we meet a queue of lorries disappearing into the distance as far as the eye could see. Four wheel drive vehicles were leaving the carriageway and driving in the sand to bypass the blockage. As we were foreigners in a Bentley we just drove down the centre of the road waving the on coming traffic out of the way until 5 kilometres or so later we reaches the accident that had caused the blockage. I love Chinese lorry drivers. They would not let a local car through but it was like the parting of the Red or was it Dead sea for us. Awful accident, a shunt I am told, one lorry into the back of another, enough said, I was too busy bypassing it to look.

We were really quite pleased when we turned off the Beijing road to take the southern route to Dunhuang and Tibet, with no lorries to contend with. It should be said that the lorries, thousands of them, were all going east to Xinjiang province, the boom area of China since they struck oil and gas there some 10 years ago. The growth is extraordinary and we cannot believe the change since our passing through here in 2005.

The new road to Dunhuang goes right between two sections of the Great Wall and this confused the hell out of me as we had always seen it on the right when it appeared out





of the desert.

But what of Dunhuang, the small desert town in the Taklimakan? Well it is no longer small and has become a must visit tourist sight in China. What a great place, all recently built but complete with idyllic pagoda lake, huge night market, big food street and a very cosmopolitan population.

Loved it, food was excellent, thoroughly recommend Yang Chou Fan, the Beijing Duck, Rack of Lamb (Chinese Style – more rack than lamb) and chicken with some meat on the bone (common complaint on this trip all bone no meat !). Got the car on a lift here and managed to do the oiling and sort out more loose bits. The charging circuit is still not functioning properly but problem is no longer in the dynamo but somewhere in the regulator I think. More or less given up and just travelling with two charged batteries. We have 10 driving days left so we will just charge up a battery every night until we get to India.

However, the next adventure is about to begin. We face several 5,400 metres (17,700 ft) passes in the next few days - as well as Everest Base Camp which I think is nearer 6,000 metres (19,685

ft). David along with the Grieves is going to take the train to Lhasa whilst I with one of the support crew will drive the Bentley. There will just be us along with two Landrovers going up so we should have great backup.

Western China has just changed so much in the last decade, not just economically but more importantly, socially. It is clear that the government have realised that Tiananmen Square was a watershed and since then have tried to find a way forward that takes the people with them. I believe they have succeeded, no longer do you see a Mao Tse Tung uniform, people are more articulate, many have a smattering of English, the children are more animated, the young more sophisticated. It is quite remarkable and, coupled with their obvious drive towards reduced carbon technology, seems to me that they are far ahead of the conventional wisdom that the west thinks they understand about this country.

To me the social change is even more important than the economic change as the former was always the greatest threat to the one party system. Clearly the leaders have recognised this and although they may be slow to react in Western terms they

are undoubtedly taken a course that will bring the country forward without rocking the boat.

As we leave the plains for the mountains I can only wonder what things will be like in 5 years time if we are lucky enough to return.

Up the hill to Tibet

We depart Dunhuang for the three day drive up from the plains of Xinjiang to the capital of Tibet, Lhasa. We are expecting a difficult three days mostly revolving around the roads, however this is not in fact the biggest challenge David and I face.

The road surface is in fact pretty good tarmac with the exception of large dips and ridges which force the Bentley suspension to bottom out and rattle the whole car. During this period we break one of the fuel tank guard brackets again and due to a parking mishap in Na Qu knock the exhaust pipe through into one of the silencers. Besides this the charging system remains erratic but controllable with the nightly charging of one of the two batteries we now carry. Most positively the inner tubes hold out and we have had no further punctures or flats, fingers crossed this continues.

The second surprise is that the Porsche comes up the hill with us, our guide was unable to get them on the train due to permit restrictions and they were forced to take to the road. Although it was a struggle for Chris he managed to coax the car over the 5,200 metre (17,000 ft) passes where the Porsche became truly gutless. We did some work on the timing and found the points barely open on the first night, sorting out these issues made quite some difference but the car is still very erratic.

On the first day we drove over the initial high pass, this day took us up through barren countryside until we reached a plateau at about 4,500 metres (14,500 ft). This grassy high plain was surrounded in the distance by snow capped mountains rising to about 6,100 metres (20,000 ft) and along this plain we saw our first glacier heading down towards us. Although the scenery was exhilarating to begin with one soon became accustomed to it and was looking forward to the next big view!

The day was marred by a bitterly cold wind which made sitting in the Bentley a very uncomfortable experience. After the loss of our clothes in Osh, Liz Grieves had bought us both a Russian fur hat and a scarf along with a thick jacket for David. Thank heavens she did as over these three days we wore just about everything we owned. The cold coupled with extreme altitude made doing anything strenuous extremely tiring and we arrived each afternoon frozen and exhausted. Luckily neither David or I suffered from AMS (Acute Mountain Sickness) and were able to avoid the dangers resulting from that. In fact although some of the group had mild affects we largely avoided any serious problems even though we ascended so rapidly, the most likely time AMS will be acute.



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After three days at heights over 4,500 metres (15,000 ft) one becomes fully acclimatised but unfortunately nothing can prepare you for the biting cold of sitting in an open car in sub zero temperatures. We even experienced snowfall, freezing rain and hail, luckily for only short periods!

However, back to the scenery, on the second day it became truly amazing when we went over a 5,244 metre (17,400 ft) pass in snow and completely surrounded by towering peaks, the real Himalayas had arrived with a vengeance. Again however, much of the drive was on the high plain that, except for the cold reminded us of the Alto Plano of Bolivia.

It was on this second day that we seamlessly entered Tibet, without even knowing it. However, we arrived in Na Qu ahead of the guide and this was a major mistake. Within minutes of reaching the wrong hotel we had the Police swoop down on us to find out who we were and why we had no guide with us. They were very pleasant to us and even helped us find the other Na Qu hotel but they took our guide to bits when he arrived. So much so that for the next day we had to suffer a convoy system for the last 350 kms into Lhasa.

The hotels we stayed in, if you can call them that, are the worst we have seen, freezing cold, no food and a non existent breakfast. So we are both looking forward to warmth and a big juicy steak in Lhasa. However we did manage a really good Yak stew in Na Qu which although a bit tough was warming and full of vegetables and potatoes.

David was finding the cold all too much and has decided to abort the rally in Lhasa. With the prospect of another week at very high altitude and in freezing weather it is just not good for him. So from Lhasa I struggle on alone, hopefully with one of the support crew as a navigator. This is really disappointing but neither David nor I had really expected quite such cold and, to be honest, were not well prepared for it. However, we have had a good time up until now and I shall miss my astute navigator and fellow adventurer.

Worst still is my trip to Everest is up in the air, since our guides roasting in Na Qu we have to travel in cars together and getting everyone to agree to stop below Everest so some can detour up to it is proving difficult. Chris and Liz want to get home to the World Cup, Bernard and Dina have booked unchangeable flights for the day we arrive in Calcutta and that leaves just Conrad and I who are dead keen to visit Everest North Base Camp. Who knows? Watch this space.

Anyway the trip up the hill has been memorable and we have met a lot of Tibetans and Chinese along the way which has been fun. Given out lots of sweets to kids and taken some breathtaking photos which I hope to get on the Blog shortly.

As we arrived in the St Regis hotel in Lhasa, David and I sighed with relief to be over the cold for two days and into a warm hotel.



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Across the Plateau to Everest

Well what an incredible few days it has been. The two days in Lhasa were interesting but a bit clinical. The old town has been largely demolished by the Chinese and replaced with new buildings, streets and parks. Only one Temple, the Potala Palace and a small shopping area remain. The hotel we stayed in, the St Regis, was fabulous but also new and run by Sheraton. Of course the people were the same and they are so friendly it is a joy to wander the streets or drive around in the car which guarantees a mobbing. In fact so many people tried to see the Bentley outside the palace that the police came over and insisted I move the car into the palace entrance rather than block the 8 - lane highway outside. The most common descriptive being 'Cool Car'.



So although I got to see the outside of the Palace, I never saw the inside. I did no work on the car in Lhasa as I did not want to miss anything happening there. As it so happened most of our issues are at least stable so there was no real necessity to do more than giving it a wash.

During this stop the politics of the rally reached a crescendo with the Grieves demanding a three night stop in the hotel; Phil and Lorette, lost in China, expected to arrive at any moment; our guide 'One' (Won) trying to get our exit document couriered from Urumqi to Lhasa involving him meeting one of his colleagues in ChongChing and; the rest of us, all five, trying to get a guide sorted out to take us to Everest. What a carry on, anyway eventually Tensing joins us, most auspicious name we felt, and he is to guide the Bentley and two Land Rovers to Everest North Base Camp. Leaving the others to sort themselves out whilst 'One' is away.

So off we go, broadly together for the two day drive to Old Tingri from where we can take the track to Everest. The drive over the Tibetan Plateau is straightforward, the road is excellent and the scenery brilliant. Much of the way we follow a river through the town of Shignase and onto Lartze. A stop in the former to look at a small version of the Potala Palace and to see a traditional Tibet dance routine at the famous temple there. It is the midst of a Tibetan Holiday so the streets are full of families enjoying the time off.



Latze is fairly unremarkable but our small hotel is adequate and we find a good café for a meal.

I should update you on my new navigator. Pippa is the rally doctor, same age as my daughter Ayesha, and a very suitable driving companion although I wonder what the locals must think. She volunteered for the duty even though she hates being cold, so armed with all the clothes she possesses ,along with David's sleeping bag, she has taken over the navigator's seat in the Bentley. Considerably better looking than David, I can find nothing to complain about.

Luckily this side of Lhasa is much warmer and besides the first hour or so in the

morning we have been stripping off clothes all day as the sunshine has raised the temperature to that of Spain or Italy in the summer.

Our second day on the road to Everest consisted of a run of 120 kms to New Tingri to drop the Bentley off at a small hotel there. I had already decided after much discussion that, although it would be fabulous to have the Bentley reach Base Camp, it was likely to do considerable damage as the road is a hard rock track and not even gravel. So, discretion being the better part of valour, the car was left to cool its heels on the main road.

We had to get various passes and permissions to go up the track but having secured these we are finally on our way for the 104 kms run to base Camp at 5,200 metres (17,200 Ft). The rally Landrover, which has been running on 4 out of 5 cylinders for weeks, creeps up the hill with Conrad, Pippa and I on board. What a wreck, reminded me of the 100 reasons I had listed some months ago as to why I should never buy another Landy! Anyway we crept up the hill at 25 kph, first we have to scale a 5,000 metre (16,500 ft) pass from the top of which, on a good day you can see Everest. We made it up but there was too much cloud to see the big peaks. Undaunted we then went down a 1,000 metres (3,250 ft) or so to the valley below and an area of outstanding beauty, lots of small farms dotted everywhere, all cultivating wheat. This is the harvest season so whole villages are out in the fields working together as a community to get the crops in.

We stop at a small town, no idea of its name, half way up to Base Camp and have a Sichuan lunch in a small café next to several army soldiers, guarding heavens knows what. In fact the whole of Tibet is full of Chinese army, seems like for every citizen there is a Chinese soldier, talk about paranoia. Anyway, lunch is excellent and includes my favourite condiment, soya sauce, or in this part of the world 'Jung Yo', not only have I got this written down in Chinese characters but can now confidently order it all over China and be understood, a major achievement alongside 'beer', 'good morning' and 'thank you'.

On up the mountain we go: second major hill climb to the entrance to Everest area. Just as we are slowing to go through yet another checkpoint, I spot Everest, peeping over a hillside ahead of us. 'Stop the car, let me out', not willing to risk missing the only sighting we will have of it if the weather closes in, I jump out and take the first photo. I need not have worried as the closer we got to Everest the more we see of it. Although there was cloud around it was fair weather cumulus and was only blocking small areas of the vast horizon.

On the road up we have met dozens of cyclists. Yes, daft people who like to ride uphill for days at a time, breathing the exhaust fumes of passing 4x4's and suffering from being thrown over their handlebars regularly on the nigh on impossible road surface. Most have 'only' come from Lhasa but there is the odd one who has cycled from Parsons Green. We take our hats off to them. Well done team leader David; I hope you have the energy to read this.







Finally we approach the Rombok Monastery, the highest on earth; yaks, monks, tourists, cyclists, and us all at one of the highest and most awesome spots on this planet. All the time Everest looms larger and larger proceeded by the Rombok Glacier touching the track in front of us.

Mount Everest (Qomolangma)

It is time to pause to reflect on the enormity of our luck, Everest in full view, only happens 9 to 15 days per annum. A Yurt is awaiting us at the small base camp, it consists of a wire frame with a plastic sheet fitted to it. Inside are heavy carpets hanging from the frame to act as some sort of insulation against the cold. In the middle is a Yak Dung wood burner that belches smoke out through a steel chimney that pokes out through the roof.

Bringing fresh veg up from the valley entitles us to priority accommodation, the yurt owners rarely see fresh vegetables due to the difficulty of getting it there. Our Doma kicked out her sitting tenants, sells the veg to other 'hotels' and invites us in. We soon realise that all is warm as long as the Yak burner is

going, the moment this expires the temperature in the Yurt plummets. However, at least we have one and are not sleeping outside in our car like some. With our guide there are six of us that just so happen to fill our yurt.

But first, what of Everest? We jump in the Eco Bus - that's what they call it! and travel 8 kms up the road from Base Camp to the viewpoint belching fumes as we go. Everest all before us, small amount of cloud, but the North Face and the Glacier clear as a bell as we reach the highest point we are allowed to go without a mountaineering license. Atop a small rise we can see right up the Glacier to the peak above, doesn't look far or even hard to walk but unfortunately we really do not have time to press on to the summit!

Conrad and Bernard spend 30 mins helping adjust my camera for the perfect shot, as setting the thing to 'Auto' does not do the mountain justice. Pippa who had some reservations about coming up the Everest has now changed her mind and is madly looking for the shot to send home to mum and 'Big Hand Bruce' as we have named her potential beau, yes he is Australian.

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100 photos later it is back to Base Camp. Wow! Stop the bus. I spot a wolf with a mountain hare in its mouth loping up the slope 100 yards from us. After a struggle with the Eco bus window and doors, we finally get a photo of the back end of the wolf with its mouth full. Conrad whilst opting to walk back from the viewpoint, hears said wolf and wonders whether it has eaten well as he dashes for safety.

Back at camp we get inside as the temperature drops. Having persuaded Doma to light the stove, full of yak dung and rabbit droppings, we sit back and enjoy a Tibetan Brandy, Cointeau (c/o Bernard) and Chai. After a meal of Yak and our vegetables, much diminished after the sell off - we head for bed in all our clothes plus two duvets apiece. The end of the most epic day of this rally.



Sunrise, no sign of Everest, cloaked in a band of stratus and cumulus above. Well we have our photos but just maybe the clouds will lift if we hang on. Breakfast is terrible, a stodgy pancake washed down with warm sweet coffee from a three in one pack. I break out the Himalaya stove and fire up some real tea and coffee for the troops. Much better!

After breakfast we see signs of improvement, slight outline of Everest in the cloud. We are going to wait. An hour later we are certain that patience will pay off; the mountain is shaking off its mantle and reappearing in all its glory. Click, click, click, many more photos for me, one for Conrad (he is extremely fussy what he uses his 35 mm 24 shot camera for). Composition! Composition goes the cry and I am struggling to get the small temple in the fore ground without whiting out Everest behind. Eventually I turn to the camcorder, set it up on a tripod and leave it running for 10 minutes, capturing the tranquillity of the place interspersed with Chinese chit-chat, the damn Eco bus and the flutter of passing doves. All done it is back to the Yurt to pack up, load the Landy's and set off down the hill again to rejoin the main road and collect the Bentley.



As we mount the first ridge above the road, the cloud clears and we can see 5 of the big 8 mountains of the world in front of us, cannot get all in a single photo but the view is breathtaking. Conrad even uses up one of his 24 shots, the second in so many days!

As I drive us down the last few miles to the road we are all very quiet in the car, this has been a very special two days. You can say what you like but seeing the highest point on earth is definitely one of the 500 things to do before you die.

Down we go to Kathmandu

After Everest it has been difficult to get excited about the remaining few days travel, however, Tibet was not finished with us in regard to awesome sights. As we continued across the plateau we stopped at a hot spa hotel for a swim and from there got a fantastic view back over the plateau to Everest probably 100 kilometres away, in fact that day was the clearest of all and we could see Everest for miles as we travelled on



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towards Nepal.

If that was not enough our last 5,200 metre (17,000 ft) pass took us to a viewing point of the Western Himalayas and once again we could see numerous 7 and 8,000 metre (23,000 to 26,000 ft) peaks from the top of the pass, again not a cloud in the sky.

This however was the last of Tibet and we descended through a forest-lined gorge all the way down to Kathmandu, passing through the border at Zhengmu. The most notable features of this gorge were the 600 metre (2,000 ft) plus waterfalls cascading down the sides from the Himalaya peaks just out of sight above. The road was atrocious and so only Pippa got to see the most impressive waterfalls as I struggled to keep the car from dropping into the gorge!

Kathmandu did nothing for us; dirty, hot with poor roads but the surrounding area has breathtaking beauty and unlike Tibet is deeply wooded and cultivated. The Yak and Yeti Hotel was fun if only because of its name and the fact it is the most famous hotel for mountaineers in the world although the cockroach in my rice was definitely not a celebrity. Most Everest climbs seem to start and finish here along with the thousands of trekkers who walk the foothills.

Into India and south to Calcutta

A final super drive south from Kathmandu through more passes and valleys saw us arrive at the southern east/west highway that transects Nepal. This was the end of our mountain adventures and the beginning of a dreadful 1100 kms three day drive to Calcutta.

Nothing can fully describe the bone shaking, car wrecking roads of Northern India and to say we made it was an achievement all in its own. The Bentley suffered terribly and arrived in Calcutta badly damaged from the shocking potholes that saw us abandon the exhaust on the road side, empty the boot onto the track leaving a 12V car battery and wheel spanner (probably or maybe hopefully through the radiator of some careering bus).

The last we saw of the exhaust after I had demounted the remnants from under the car was two little men running off down the road with it, presumably to be fitted to another car later that day.

Perhaps the most remarkable event on the drive across India was the evening we arrived in the town of Berhampore in the dark, exhausted after a difficult days drive, so tiring in fact that we arrived with Pippa at the wheel giving me a break. The road into the town was a track, rough, muddy and uneven. As we approached the town it started to rain and get dark all at the same time. In the dark foggy conditions we could just make out people, cows, children, dogs, horses and other obstructions crisscrossing the road in front of us. To the sides were parked up lorries under which the drivers had built fires to see the repairs they were carrying out and to keep out of the rain. The



combination of darkness, fog, smoke, fire and confusion lead me to comment to Pippa that ‘This must be what Dante described as the inferno’ !!

After a dramatic hour we finally found a hotel which had been advertised on a billboard on the way into town as the first 3 star hotel in Berhampore. In fact it was very nice and we were delighted to disembark there, stay in two of their best rooms for the princely sum of 15 USD each. We even had a brilliant curried supper and were feeling much better by the time we reeled off to bed before our last unrelenting driving day.

Pippa and I were so relieved to get into and through Calcutta that we hardly remembered to congratulate one another on completing the rally. I decided that I had seen enough of India on the three day drive. It hasn't changed since I worked here in the early 80's and that the best place to stay was inside the Oberoi Grand hotel until my flight home two days later.

To say we disliked the last three days of the rally is an understatement, having nursed the Bentley all the way from London it was sole destroying seeing it being wrecked just as we completed the 15,000 km drive.

The charging system did come back into its own during the last days when, in order to ensure the horn and lights worked, I bypassed the regulator completely and stuck a nail in the charging circuit fuse. This kept the second hand Pamir battery fully charged the whole way to Calcutta and meant we could lean on the horn as much as the next man!

Pippa was a star in the last two days when I was feeling so tired after driving for 10 hours continuously in the most manic traffic conditions imaginable when she took over and drove for a few hours to give me a rest. All worth it when ‘big hands Bruce’ was waiting at the Oberoi as we arrived having wooed her all the way from Australia to Kashgar! Hope it all goes well for you Pippa.

So here we are at the end of an epic drive from Salcombe, Devon to Calcutta, India. It has unquestionably been the most demanding drive I have done across Asia but at the same time, partly through the chaos of it all, been the most exhilarating and exciting. The problems with the tires and new rims could have been done without, I think we had some 20 punctures, went through 12 inner tubes and any amount of worry and anguish during this period of the rally. As it turned out we never did use any of the spare tyres I shipped out to Bishkek at considerable expense. However, I do not think we could have done without the toughened Michelin inner tubes which came over with the tires.

The problems with the regulator threatened to be a major hassle but thanks to a man with a car in the middle of the Pamir Highway in darkest Tajikistan we managed to get a battery to get us home. By the by, this battery was completely burnt out when I finally took it out of the car in my shed in Kingsbridge !, so not much of a souvenir. Other than these annoying but far from terminal problems a 76 year old car drove 12,000 miles across Asia, went to Afghanistan, drove to a point near Everest Base



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Camp, delivered us safely to Calcutta – we can only salute the Bentley mechanics that built this car and Chris George who helps me rally prepare it. I would take this Bentley anywhere on earth where there is a track or road.

As always the highlights are split between incredible scenery, awesome wildlife and the people, particularly the inquisitive children who flock to see the car at every stop. These trips are all about the people, I would not do them in a modern vehicle nor even one that has a roof. The ability to get close to people cannot be achieved without such a car – vintage, open, good looking.

Putting India aside which, to me, is just a sad case of a country where less than 1% have everything and the rest very little or nothing, countries such as Iran and Tajikistan were terrific places to visit both architecturally and socially. It is difficult to reconcile the country we hear about on the news with one we see on the ground. Iran in particular is due for change and the young there are going to force it through before long whatever the Mullahs do.



