

Rolls-Royce Owners' Club of Australia

London to Peking by Silver Ghost

by Neil Collins, 1991

New South Wales RROC(A) member Neil Collins had the wherewithal, the car and the courage to undertake this fabulous epic journey.

Luigi Barzini's book "Peking to Paris" inspired many of us to dream of recreating the fabulous trip of 1907. When the 1990 run from London - Paris to Peking was announced, it was a dream come true. I then faced the logistical difficulties in completing the undertaking, however my "hat was in the ring". We colonials do not give up easily... particularly as I was the sole Australian entrant.

For my part the magnitude of the challenge to complete the 15,000 km drive was irresistible. I had no hesitation in selecting my 1920 Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost (Alpine Eagle Chassis 94FW) for this arduous challenge. Only five pre-1930 vehicles started the rally and two were Ghosts. Hans Aepli's Ghost commenced in Istanbul. The majority of entrants were Range Rovers, Pajeros and Jeeps.

Once accepted for the trip, first job was to prepare the car. It is true to say you need two types of people to prepare a car: one with a spanner and one with a cheque book. As I have three left thumbs, the man who restored the car, my good friend Peter Lamb, a man who can fix anything, was the natural choice as my co-driver.

Preparation always takes longer than expected. As there was not sufficient time to totally rebuild the car, the following will give some idea of the crucial areas of the car that were overhauled or replaced.

Replace fuel lines, fit new electrical wiring throughout, replace linkages, overhaul magneto, replace coil with modern coil, overhaul radiator, pressure test the main bearings, overhaul the carburettor, fit SU fuel pump, retention springs.

Apart from the fuel pump and modern coil, the car was absolutely original in every respect. The rear seat was removed to accommodate essentials for the trip. Because of the lack of fuel stops, it was necessary to carry 4 jerry cans of petrol, 6 litres of oil and 5 litres of water. Two additional wheels and two spare tyres were carried and 8 spare tubes. Additionally, the following essential items were squeezed into the car. This may be of interest to anyone considering undertaking a similar folly:

- Spare coil
- Fan belt
- Dynamo belt
- Gaskets
- Light bulbs
- Perspex windscreen
- Perspex headlight lenses
- Coir matting (for bogs)
- Wheel spanners (2)
- Tow rope
- Fire extinguishers
- Insulation tape
- Fuse wire
- Hydraulic jack
- Grease gun
- First Aid Kit
- Cans of power tyre inflator
- Radiator hose
- Muffler bandage
- Rolls of electric wiring
- Full tool kit
- Assorted nuts and bolts
- Puncture repair kit
- In line fuel filters

Most importantly, we had to pack FOOD for 52 days. My provisioning amused many of the other entrants, however having been sick on a trip down the Amazon I was determined to be prepared for the uncertain cuisine across Russia and China.

Food carried was mainly protein. I packed one tin of meat or fish for each day. In addition, I took a considerable quantity of packet soups and vitamin pills. We carried a Bunsen burner

for boiling our water and heating tins. It was presumed rice and potatoes would be plentiful *en route*.

The car (94FW now affectionately known as "Big Red") was shipped from Sydney on the 16th of January. There were storms in the North Sea at the time hence the ship was delayed arriving in the United Kingdom. Coupled with the mandatory Customs paperwork delays, there was considerable anxiety while the clock ticked away into the pre-start mechanical check time before our departure from London on the 7th of April 1990.

When the 7th of April 1990 dawned, it was almost a relief to get the car to the starting line in Hyde Park Big Red was No.3 in the rally. The start was spectacular with Chinese dancers, oriental drums and the Welsh Guards Band playing. It was all very colourful with friendly smiling Londoners waving off a unique caravan en route to Peking. Sadly, en route to Dover, Car No.4 (the 1937 4¼ litre Bentley) was the first casualty when its motor expired.

The channel crossing was uneventful, however driving into central Paris during Saturday evening traffic in a 70-year-old Ghost is an experience I will not forget in a hurry. The car being right-hand drive is difficult enough to drive on the wrong side of the road but trying to navigate whilst dodging the Citroens is not my idea of fun.

Sunday the 8th of April we assembled at 7 am in front of the Paris Hilton for another colourful gala departure. After a photographic stop in front of the Eiffel Tower and a brief parade through central Paris, we were on our own.



The organisers allowed each entrant to choose their route to Istanbul. The sensible members of the group went via Salzburg, Sophia through Greece to Istanbul. A few decided to go through Romania, whilst the writer, having carefully studied the various routes, decided the "short-cut" was through France into Italy and then by ferry to Greece on to Istanbul.

The first day from Paris was uneventful with Big Red covering some 800km and we spent the first night just outside Nice. The following day we left Nice on an overcast morning. As we came into Monaco the heavens opened, and we were caught in an extremely heavy storm. The windscreen wipers worked magnificently for ten minutes then, despite having been reconditioned some months earlier, died. The rest of the day through Italy was spent keeping one eye through the windshield and the other around it. Despite the hazards arrived in Ancona Italy at 8.57 pm to catch the ferry departing at 9pm. As we drove onto the ferry the door closed, and the ferry took off.

We reached Igoumenitsa, Greece around 12.30am but alas all the hotels were full. After driving for about an hour we came to a small village, parked the car and slept in it fully clothed including rain gear and boots. It was freezing. After refuelling and Big Red's daily service, we headed off towards Kaval Ia, Greece. The scenery was spectacular. However, it started to snow - initial fluffy white flakes become blinding heavy snow. We could scarcely

make out the Flying Lady on the bonnet. We were 7-8000 feet up, without guard rails, fighting oncoming traffic in a two-wheel brake car, low on fuel. One slip and it was all over.

We came to a siding and stopped hoping the snow would ease. A Mercedes also stopped, and we bartered 1 gallon of much needed fuel from the non-English speaking driver. Too late I noticed "diesel" written on the side of the jerry can. These good Samaritans presented us with a further problem. After another hour the snow abated but by this time Big Red was not running well at all. It did not appreciate the diesel fuel. We limped down the mountain where we drained the tank and refilled with petrol. It was like a bad dream. After a much-needed hot shower, good meal and a night's sleep, the following day spent sorting out the tuning of the motor before heading off again towards Kavalla, Greece. After the dramas of the mountain range the drive from Kavalla to Istanbul was a pleasant Sunday drive. Istanbul saw the second withdrawal from the rally - the 4-wheel drive Lamborghini.

Traffic in Istanbul is beyond belief. Although a magnificent city with some wonderful monuments such as the Topkapi Palace, Blue Mosque and several architectural marvels, it is not conducive to driving. Entrants were accommodated in a hotel on the outskirts of the city and fortunately the police organised a convoy to enable us to take the freeway to Ankara.

Arriving in Ankara was like arriving in Istanbul without a police escort and departing was another nightmare until we were on the road to Nevsehir, an area of relative calm with the moon type landscape and amazing caves.

Driving in Turkey is an amazing experience. Few of the drivers have read the road rules and to come around a corner to find three cars coming towards you, three abreast, was not unusual. Passing over double yellow lines around bends seems the norm. The fact that we made it through Turkey in one piece must be regarded as a modern miracle.

We departed Turkey at Hopa. The roads around Hopa were the worst I have seen in my life. Potholes large enough to swallow a car, the road had collapsed in parts without any warning signs. We stocked up with Turkish oil prior to entering the Soviet Union and gave the car its first oil change of the trip before proceeding on to Batumi. A middle-aged Russian Customs Officer speaking impeccable English enquired about the car. She seemed more interested in the car than the contents although made the usual border check of all bags.

Within minutes of arriving in the Soviet Union we were approached by numerous Comrades all trying to change Roubles for US dollars. We resisted the favourable exchange rates which was just as well as there was nothing tempting in the shops to purchase. I must say the only consumable temptation was the Georgian red wine which was eminently drinkable and very welcome.



There was a welcoming banquet in Batumi which was highlighted by some fantastic dancing by the local children followed by a speech by the deputy Premier who pointed out proudly

that we were in the autonomous region of Georgia. I happily consumed the caviar and vodka but declined the banquet and resorted to my private supply of Scottish sardines on black bread. Gourmet dining.

The Georgian drivers must have obtained their driving instruction in Turkey. They had no regard for rules or safety. The roads ranged from terrible to appalling and police cars were prominent. The majority of local cars were Russian version of the Fiat 124 which were numerous in this region.

From Tbilisi we proceeded to Sheki and stayed at a caravanserai which had formerly been used as a stopping point on the Old Silk Road.

At Sheki I purchased a small Russian electric stove for cooking. Despite the price (A\$2) it worked like a charm. We cooked our soup adding local vegetables when available supplemented with bread and our British tinned 'goodies'. The burner worked well throughout Russia and only failed when connected to power in China. Sadly, it blew out all the lights in the hotel. Management was not impressed.

We proceeded to Baku. As there had been political unrest earlier in the year, we had to form a convoy with helicopters and police escorting us into the city. Army presence was evident with the major roads and squares in the city being surrounded by military vehicles.



At Baku we boarded a ferry for an overnight crossing of the Caspian Sea to Krasnovodsk. From there we had a 580 km drive across an arid desert to Ashkabad. The people in this region were of a different appearance, more Mongolian. We were constantly dodging herds of camels. One of the Morgans dodging camels on the bad roads became airborne and crashed. Fortunately, the passengers survived.

Ashkabad is located approximately 50 km from the Iranian border. We were given strict instructions not to go anywhere near the border; in fact, police were posted at every turn off to Iran. At one stage we went off the main road to stop for a minor repair and within minutes three Russian police cars converged on us and indicated that we must move on. Of the whole trip this area was the most heavily policed.

From Mary we travelled to Bukhara where we managed to buy some local vegetables, several pounds of potatoes, carrots and local biscuits for around A\$1. By this stage nearly everyone had been ill except the writer, one couple having been forced to fly home.

At Samarkand we had the opportunity of touring the old city which was an important point on the Old Silk Road and probably the highlight of the whole trip. Rigastan Square was magnificent with wonderful buildings clad in spectacular gold and blue mosaic tiles. Dating from the 15th Century, the buildings are still in excellent repair.

The next stop was Tashkent. Big Red had her first flat tyre as we entered this city. From here we travelled through Dzhambul, Frunze to Alma Ata where the landscape looked like a movie set for Dr Zhivago with high snowcapped mountains and gorgeous valleys. Approaching Alma Ata, we found good roads including a ring road around the city, (what a change). At Alma Ata we saw a VE Parade where an awesome array of military hardware was paraded. This was the last city in the Soviet Union before China.

Bureaucracy is alive and well in the Soviet Union and in China. When we finally entered China, we were surrounded by huge crowds clapping and cheering.

As we entered Yining the welcoming crowds were unbelievable. Thousands lined the road. We could only drive at 2-3 miles per hour whilst the police pushed back the crowds to enable us to get into the hotel compound. People were yelling, trying to touch the cars and occupants. Thank goodness they were friendly.

At this stage of the trip (after 34 days) the car had developed a massive oil leak from the oil valve at the back of the crank shaft. Rather than trying to repair it in a car park in China with limited facilities, the oil pressure was taken back from 18 lbs to 13 lbs which slowed the oil loss.

On our first day in China, we were subjected to a lecture on how to drive by the local police chief via an interpreter. What an experience. I'm sure none of us had ever had a lecture of this nature since school. Still, we were in their country and had to respect their ways. We were required to have Chinese Licence Plates. These were handed out by the police chief as if it was a Sunday School prize giving. We took it in the spirit as if we had won the lottery.

As all of China is on Peking time, it was pitch dark at 7am when we set off for Shehezi. The road has more potholes than sealed surface. We climbed up an amazing mountain track on mainly dirt roads, with dangerous hairpin bends compensated for by terrific scenery. There had been considerable rain in previous days and a lot of the road had been washed away. Although there were fewer people on the way to Urumqi, they were still enthusiastic and welcoming.



On leaving the hotel compound at Urumqi the people were twenty deep in parts, surging onto the road. The police in full riot gear were pushing people back from the road with their riot shields and using their batons to clear the road to enable us to drive to Turfan.

At Turfan we travelled to the oil town of Hami. As there were no hotels we were housed in the oil workers' accommodation building. I have no idea where the oil workers spent the night, but I think they would have been more comfortable in tents than we were in their huts.

From Hami we proceed to Dunhuang. This is the real Gobi Desert. The Ghost's clearance was a real benefit in these rocky conditions. Many of the modern cars sustained damage on this

section of the trip. After a couple of hours over the unmade corrugated jagged stone track, one tyre was totally destroyed.

Dunhuang is the site the 1000 Buddha caves some of which have been closed for 900 years. These were amazing and something else I will always remember. I also rode an unwashed, unfriendly Chinese camel. Another experience to be long remembered.

From Jiuquan we headed towards Wuwe along a beautiful piece of road, at least for a while until the front of the car disappeared into a patch cut out of the road (about 6ft x 4ft and approximately 1ft deep) - bang another tyre destroyed. The Chinese have an unusual way of mending their roads. They take a crew of road-workers and dig out sections of road for about 100 miles. At a future date they return with hot mix and proceed to resurface the holes... There are no signs warning drivers of the obstacles.

We eventually came to the beginning of the Great Wall. What a spectacular sight, although much of the wall was badly decayed.

Next stop Lanzou, a large modern Chinese city. Usual problem with spectators and pushbikes. We were about 9,000 ft up, dodging the trucks and buses coming in the opposite direction, no guard rails around hair pin bends - reminded us of Greece without the snow. Next stop Xian.

Our arrival in Xian was an incredible experience. A Hollywood style reception at the Flower Garden Hotel. Crowds lining the street, full Chinese dancing and musical welcome up to the hotel - a day to remember. It was almost as if this was the end of the trip.



In Xian we visited the Terra Cotta Warriors and despite having seen much film and many photographs of the warriors it is a fantastic sight and far more impressive than expected.

We left Xian with a police escort to control the crowds. We travelled through Luoyang to Zhigiazjuang for our last night prior to entering Peking. The closer to Peking the greater the volume of traffic, trucks, bicycles and people. 50km from Peking we formed into a line for our entry into Peking to avoid the potential problems with crowds. The first anniversary of the Tiananmen Square demonstration was only a few days away.

What surprised me most was the lack of urbanisation on the outskirts of the city. It was not until about 12 miles out before dense development was evident.

We entered Peking across Tiananmen Square, passed the gates of the Forbidden City and into the Capital Hotel for a welcome with Chinese bands and dragons, children dancing in formation, brass bands, television cameras and press from all over the world. For my part it

was with a sense of relief more than excitement after 15,500 km arriving in one piece after so many close calls. The champagne flowed as we celebrated in the Anglo Saxon tradition.

Conclusion

Apart from 3 punctures, a small bolt breaking in the magneto and the windscreen wipers giving up "the Ghost", Big Red needed less work on it than practically any other car in the rally. When you consider it was the second oldest car in the run with the majority of vehicles less than a year old, it speaks volumes for these wonderful cars.

If the trip was to be undertaken again, I would take a spare windscreen wiper and a little more food, but certainly the same car. I would recommend a maximum of two in each car and would not attempt a shortcut crossing from Italy to Igoumenitsa Greece without first making a very close study of the weather forecast.

Make sure of being fit before setting off. Daily exercise for 2 months on a running machine is not enough. I lost 14lbs during the trip.

It certainly was the trip of a lifetime. I hope others have the chance to follow this trail sooner than the 83 years between Barzini's epic and the 1990 run.