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The Peking to Paris Motor Challenge Leg One - Beijing to Kathmandu

By John Matheson, 1998

After two years of preparation, we flew into Beijing on August 30th, 1997, to meet the other contestants and the rally organisers and to pick up the car. We bussed down to Xingang on Wednesday to get the cars out of the containers. Here bureaucratically everything worked very well, and the cars came out, dusty but undamaged. We then fuelled up the vehicles and headed out in convoy for Beijing. With our Chinese number plates and drivers' licences we were able to head up to Beijing. Two pre-war Fords never even made it to Beijing, developing terminal engine problems coming out of the port. There we were able to prepare the cars properly and pack them. On our last night in Beijing, we met the Australian Ambassador Mr Rick Smith who takes a great interest in the old cars and the next morning saw us off as well as entertaining the three Australian crews at the Embassy.



On a hot, sunny day the convoy eventually headed out of Beijing on September 6 for the Great Wall. The first two days were more or less convoy days with the Chinese police being reluctant to leave us alone. Heading northwest from Beijing into inner Mongolia, the police presence was very heavy. Even in the country areas there was at least one policeman every kilometre and in some areas the policemen were 10 metres apart. The route followed the Yellow River. The first night was spent at Baotou, and the second night in Yinchuan. These were fairly easy runs of about 500 to 600 km. The third day took us into Lanzhou which is very much an industrial area. Lanzhou itself is in a Muslim province in the Ningxia Autonomous Region. We had a rest day in Lanzhou spending most of the time attending to the cars and then headed out on Thursday September 11 to head for Koko Nor.

Lord Montagu's 1914 Prince Edward Vauxhall had broken down shortly after the start of the event when its fan came loose and cut the radiator. He and his mechanic tried valiantly to keep going but eventually they had to give up. The car and the mechanic went back to Beijing. Lord Montagu continued the trip joining us in Lanzhou and travelling with us until we broke down in Tibet. He was to rejoin us on some other legs of the trip. He eventually arrived in Paris after travelling in some 17 different cars.

Koko Nor is a lovely lake nestling in a rather barren landscape of dusty hills on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau. The following day we headed out to Golmund, a town originally part of Tibet but now in a separate province. Golmund itself is a bit of a frontier town and the facilities were now starting to deteriorate. Nevertheless, the running was easy but some cars were starting to break down as we were continually climbing higher.



A lovely pre-war Stutz had terminal electrical problems and several other cars also pulled out reducing the fleet by nine cars. The driver of the reproduction La France had to pull out. It was starting to get high and cold and at the campsite at Koko Nor he developed hypothermia and went on to get pneumonia forcing the withdrawal of the car, although it was to re-join the fleet in Istanbul.

Once we left Golmund we climbed up on to the Tibetan Plateau. This was a long, hard day on indifferent roads. Light snow had been falling, and the roads were quite wet. There were many bypass sections due to incomplete bridges and a lot of offroad excursions through deeply rutted, muddy areas which had been cut up by trucks. All of the cars had trouble with stranding under these circumstances.

The climb brought us from the relatively low attitudes of Golmund at about 2,500 metres up to 5,200 metres - about as high as any road goes in the world. Not surprisingly this day was associated with the development of some mountain sickness, but it was less than I had anticipated. Most people had taken Diamox and this had ameliorated the effects of altitude. However, some people had to be put on oxygen and Prince Idriss Shah from Malaysia had quite a hard time accommodating to these high altitudes. Eventually everybody did acclimatise.

The Tibetan Plateau is a grim place. It depends on the spring melt to provide a pasture for grazing sheep. Nothing grows up there and there are no trees, only barren grasslands. One of the few places that has been affected by the greenhouse effect has been Tibet because there has been a fall in precipitation leading to poor pastures. The Tibetan herdsmen are starting to struggle because of lack of adequate pastures for their sheep and overgrazing. There is no fuel other than sheep dung and no source of heating in winter in this harsh and barren environment.

We were heading for an army compound at Tuotuoheyan where we were to camp for the night. It was here that the Phantom V ran into troubles. At one bypass for a partly constructed bridge the washouts were particularly severe. We had picked a path through this, keeping our wheels up on the edge of the truck ruts. Unfortunately, at this moment the driver of a Chinese



4-wheel drive vehicle chose to come down and watch the sport. He pulled his vehicle up in front of us, forcing us down into a hole. This stranded the Phantom V on its differential with the back wheels in the air. Without any traction to move we needed assistance. An inexperienced driver of another 4-wheel drive came around in front of us and attached a rigid towrope. Hoping for a gentle tow we were disappointed to find that he rushed out at speed and dragged us out on the differential as fast as he could. This resulted in the after-market offside rear spring breaking its main leaf right forward at the front shackle. We were able to drive back onto the main road. By this time the axle was starting to move backwards, and we could proceed no further.

We had travelled beyond the first pass of 5,200 metres and we were only down a short distance from this on the Tibetan Plateau. One cannot think of a worse place to be stranded with a broken spring than at 5,000 metres up in the Tibetan plateau with no towns or civilisation anywhere in sight. There were two sweep vehicles with mechanics on them accompanying the fleet, but both these vehicles went past us without stopping, saying that they would leave us to the China International Sports Travel Company.

The China International Sports Travel Company (CISTC) was following us round in 4-wheel drive vehicles. They were supposed to be organising the tour and assisting with the evacuation of break downs. In fact, they did nothing. They even refused to tow contestants when they needed a tow. They provided no service, but they certainly did their best to collect money. The Lonely Planet Guide to China describes the CISTC as having a reputation for overcharging and providing a poor service and I must say that is an understatement.

They pulled up to tell us that they would try to get a truck for us but that would probably take two days. We were then left to our devices on the Tibetan plateau. That night in the campsite. which was down in a valley, the temperatures reached -8 °C. We were up in the windswept plateau and the temperatures were clearly a lot lower than that. There was some snow that night and a very very heavy hoar frost. Fortunately, we had brought a quilted car cover

with us and with this over the Phantom V and our sleeping bags inside we were actually quite comfortable for the night and did not get cold.

About 3 o'clock in the morning the CISTC turned up with two so-called mechanics from Tuotuoheyuan. They said they had instructions to take our spring off and get it repaired. I pointed



out to them that they could not take the spring off and they certainly could not get it repaired. There was no method of detaching the front shackle that had been welded on. However, I could not stop them. It would have taken me to physically prevent them from doing this, something you really cannot do with the Chinese. These two mechanics mucked around for a couple of hours, dismantled the spring, realised they could not get it off and could not re-assemble it. They left us then with the spring partly detached and in a worse state than we were in before we had broken the spring. They insisted on charging us quite a lot of money for this ridiculous service although the local Tibetan mechanics did not want to take the money. They then disappeared into the night.

We were stranded for more than 24 hours until eventually, late the next day, a truck turned up. This truck had a tray which was barely 6 metres long and had no means to load or unload the car. The CISTC people then turned round and said to us that it would cost \$US3,000 to put the car on the truck. We could take it or leave it. When I complained that it was too much money they turned round to walk away. So much for their so-called contract to get the cars out. We were forced to accept this. We eventually got the Phantom V on the back of this truck by finding a washout on the side of the road and building a ramp. The Phantom V was then winched onto the back of the truck from a 4-wheel drive. The winch was fed forward round the cabin of the truck and pulled us on while I steered the Phantom onto the tray. There was no method of tying the car down and no method of locating it on the back of the truck. The sides were put up. Fortunately, the vehicle being long was solidly jammed between the two ends of the truck so that the tray wedged the Phantom in. There was no room in the truck for us to travel and we were forced to travel inside the Phantom V on the back of the truck - a rather sea-sickly ride. We then proceeded in this manner for the next 19 hours until we got into Lhasa. We know that the truckies were paid approximately \$US200 for the trip into Lhasa for which we had to pay \$US3,000 - the rest of it being pocketed by the CISTC.

There is not a bit of timber, let alone any grass, on the Tibetan plateau, and we had no way of locating the axle and preventing the spring damaging underneath the car. In the ride to Lhasa we sustained horrific damage from the broken spring. Some of the other cars that

were trucked on this section sustained a lot of bodywork damage because the vehicles were unsecured in the backs of the trucks and just slammed from side to side inside the trucks. Fortunately, that did not happen to us.

The first death associated with the trip occurred on the Tibetan Plateau. One of the locals had stepped behind a bus and was clipped by one of the Mercedes Benz cars. These people were responsible drivers and were not speeding and the accident was simply unfortunate and one of those events which occurs in street crowds. The Tibetan sustained a broken hip. In our societies this would not be a major problem but in Tibet it is. He was simply put in a hospital bed and offered no treatment and eventually died of shock about four days later. The inevitable outcome of untreated fractured hips. We passed the Mercedes with the crew and one of the Rally officials being detained on the side of the road under apparent house arrest. They were surrounded by a group of Tibetans, women on one side and men on the other. One of the men was carrying a rather crude smallbore rifle. The matter was eventually settled by handing over a bribe to the Chinese Police.

When we got to Lhasa there was no method of unloading the trucks. They wanted to put rope slings through the windows and lift it off. You can imagine the damage that would have caused to the bodywork. When we said we would not allow this they suggested that we put two steel 'I' beams through the windows of the car and lift it up in that manner. Naturally, we again refused.



Finally, we found a bank near the Brahmaputra River. We were then able to build up some stones on this bank to make a ramp and to tow the Phantom V off. This resulted in some damage to the offside rear wing as it dragged along the ground. We then towed the Phantom a short distance down to the hotel and had a look at the damage.

The damage we had sustained on the truck was quite horrendous. The rear spring had rocked backwards and forwards. The front of the spring had penetrated through under the seat, cut the wiring loom, damaged the main battery lead and penetrated through the air conditioning and heating unit in the back of the car. This resulted in coolant loss as well as loss of electricity. Fortunately, I had disconnected all the batteries, so we did not have a fire. The spring had also split open the petrol tank. So, we had multiple systems failure with fuel loss, coolant loss, electrical system loss and a broken spring.

We took the car down to the local Toyota dealer's yard in Lhasa. He had some pits but few facilities. They assured us they could fix the problem. I went down the next day to find that the car had been reassembled on its springs. When I had a look, they had merely brazed up the front of the spring and put a welded spring back on the car and had not built a new one. An electrician had joined up the



sections of the loom that had been cut but had made no attempt to deal with the bare wires and the main battery lead. Coolant continued to leak from the car as did petrol.

Surveying the sorry scene we really could not see how we could go on. We attempted to get a truck to see if they could take us through to the Nepalese border, but the CISTC said this was not possible and that we would have to truck the vehicle back to Beijing. They really had dollar signs in their eyes at this stage and were starting to talk about it costing \$US21,000 to get the vehicle back to Beijing! Unable to get a truck to go on we had given up and had decided that we would fly on to Kathmandu and send the car back to Beijing.

High altitudes are a strange thing. When you are sitting up at 5,000 metres trying to do physical work like jacking a car up it is very exhausting. I could only manage seven turns of the jack handle before I would need to take some oxygen, and everything became in slow motion. Thinking also became slow motion, and I found it very very difficult to sequence my thoughts. I really could not see any way out of the situation.

The following morning, I went out of the hotel to see the fleet departing but left behind was one vehicle. This was a rather wonderful 1927 Mercedes 630K open tourer owned by Etienne Veen who had come from Holland together with Robert Dean his English mechanic. They could not proceed because they had burnt out all their magnetos. A warning for those of us with magneto ignition cars who might want to go on long trips. He had spare magnetos with him but they had been wound in the original manner using shellac. With long hot days of driving the shellac had simply melted in the magnetos leaving him without ignition. The car could not continue with coil alone as it would not develop any power especially at these altitudes. Etienne had decided that they were going to go on and that he was going to truck his car through to Nepal as far as he could and he himself would fly on to Kathmandu to arrange mechanical workshops and spare parts. He left Robert to accompany the car to Kathmandu. Jeanne and I met up with him and decided we would go on too. Etienne had gone to the Tibetans and had managed to get trucks from the Tibetans at a fraction of the cost that the CISTC people charged. I approached them and we made an arrangement to

truck on with these vehicles. At this stage the CISTC found out what was going on as Jeanne and I had cancelled our arrangements to truck back to Beijing. I was to go with the truck with the Phantom V while Jeanne and Etienne would fly to Kathmandu to make arrangements for trucks to meet us at the other side and to have workshops available.

Mr Ma from CISTC then intervened and tried to get our vehicles unloaded. He wanted the money to get them back to Beijing and he also wanted his cut from the Tibetans. He told them that they were undercharging us and that they would have to offload the cars. We refused to offload the cars and at that stage the drivers went on strike for 12 hours and would not move the cars overnight. However, we persisted, refusing to take the vehicles off and finally they consented to go on. We travelled on with contracts saying they would take us down to the border town of Xhangmu. They said in no man's land there were facilities for loading and unloading the vehicles. This was not to be the case. They knew perfectly well that they could not get down there because of the washouts on the road. We headed out and decided we would travel overnight and get to the top of the Friendship Pass as soon as possible in order to try and avoid Mr Ma and his attempts to get us off our vehicles. We had the two trucks and three drivers with us and we went on through into the night. But at

10 o'clock that night climbing back onto the Himalayas and getting back up to high altitudes things started to go wrong. One of the vehicles developed two punctures in quick succession. The Tibetans were absolutely exhausted changing these tyres. They just simply could not go on. We pulled into a small village where we stayed in a mud hut for the night. It



was a dirt-floored room, but it was quite comfortable with five reasonably comfortable beds in it and we slept well that night.

The next morning the appalling Mr Ma from CISTC caught up with us. He sat and talked to the drivers for a long period of time and again tried to get the drivers to go back. We held out and refused. One unfortunate effect of the night driving was that we went past Mt Everest at nighttime so that I have travelled over the top of the world without actually seeing Mt Everest.

Nevertheless, we went on until we reached the next town, a little border town called Nyalam. On the way through my driver had developed mountain sickness. Indeed, it is the locals who change altitude that get more trouble with mountain sickness than some of the visitors. I fed him Diamox and managed to keep him going. At Nyalam Mr Ma again intervened to try to stop the vehicles and after a row they continued. We drove on to the top of the Friendship Pass to a place called Choksom. Choksom has a hotel, but it had not

been inhabited for six years. We caught up with the rest of the fleet at Choksom and stayed the night in this hotel. At this stage the drivers were refusing to go on saying they could not get past the washouts. The reality of the situation was that the drivers were terrified and indeed I do not blame them. The road was appalling and not really passable for trucks.

The following morning reluctantly Robert Dean and myself unloaded the Phantom V and the Mercedes 630K, again using banks on the road to push the cars out of the trucks. The Mercedes could not go at all but at this stage the Phantom V was mobile. I had bypassed the coolant system underneath the car and puttied up the fuel tank. I had also wrapped electric tape around the main battery lead, so it was working although it was still damaged. Thus we had electricity. We had some fuel ability, and the coolant system was secured. We then proceeded to head down after the rest of the fleet, down the Friendship Pass with the Mercedes being towed when it had to be, and freewheeling the rest of the time. There was a Phantom I on the trip which had also had problems. Its electrical loom had caught fire- and burnt out and he was also travelling down the Friendship Pass without power. Andrew Snelling, the mechanic from the Australian Wolseley team, accompanied me for the first part of the trip as we headed off down the Pass. Travelling on a welded spring on what was the worst road in the world that I have ever been on, was quite an experience. I drove down at an average speed of 2 kilometres an hour making sure at no time did I bounce the rear spring. The latter part I did entirely on my own as Andrew had to leave.



The Mercedes was actually able to get power halfway down by using a second coil to bypass the magneto and managed to get enough power to run. There were landslides and washouts on this goat track down the Himalayas. This track in a very short distance goes from 5,200 metres down to 3,000 metres. At one stage we drove past an overhang on the road. I kept the

side of the Phantom as close to the rock as I could on the inside of the road and on looking out the window on my side I could not see the road at all, only down 1,000 metres into a gorge. There were rivers going down onto the road forming waterfalls and at times the rivers had used the road as a watercourse. On at least two places I had to get out of the car and rebuild roads down through these river washouts so that I could drive across them. The hairpin bends were such that you had to back and shuffle to get around them; I could not take them in one swing. The two vehicles that were freewheeling had to be towed up the hills on the hairpin bends in order to get round them. I used fuel in the auxiliary fuel tank letting only small amounts of it into the ruptured main fuel tank so that I would not waste

fuel as I went down the pass. I managed to get to the bottom of the pass without breaking the spring.

Jeanne had flown on and picked up a truck to meet us at the bottom of the pass. After clearing Chinese customs, we had a look at the truck and it was too small to take the Phantom, forcing me to drive the rest of the way into Kathmandu. On the way in we ran out of fuel. All the fuel stations there only have diesel and kerosene and no petrol. We eventually managed to get in by buying seven 1-litre bottles of adulterated fuel and putting them in the tank to keep us going. This consisted of 70 octane petrol adulterated with diesel and kerosene, but the car kept going albeit pinging a bit. We eventually arrived in Kathmandu.

Apart from the broken spring, the trip across China had been relatively trouble free. The reconditioned S.U. fuel pump packed up after two days into China, but I had a spare (non-S.U.) pump with me which never gave any trouble. The variation in the different types of fuel we were using in the high altitudes was handled well by the twin S.U. carburettors and only required me to adjust the mixture from time to time to cater for the quality of the fuel and the altitude. The car lost a lot of power on the hill climbs but never stopped and handled the conditions quite well.