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Peking to Paris Motor Challenge

Leg Two

Kathmandu to Istanbul - the ugly face of motor sport

By John Matheson, 1998



The Author, John Matheson, with the newly brazed fuel tank, and the brilliant non-English-speaking Nepalese mechanic.

Kathmandu was a rest day. It proved to be the first bit of civilisation we had experienced since travelling through the grinding poverty and subsistence living of Tibet. The Yak & Yeti Hotel was a pleasant place to stay and we were able to have a beer at last as previously we had been abstemious since Lanzhou; alcohol and high altitudes do not mix well. Even in Kathmandu it was difficult to drink alcohol even though we knew we were facing the dry countries of Pakistan and Iran to come. The contrast between the Yak & Yeti Hotel and the Choksom Hotel was quite startling. The Choksom Hotel had not been occupied for six years, plumbing did not work, there was no lighting - only a diesel generator which was turned off when the meal was over, and a pig had to be chased out of the front of the hotel before people could go in there.

Jeanne had arranged for the Mercedes mechanic to come out and have a look at our car. He took the spring out in the compound where the car was parked rather than taking it into the workshop as the Phantom was too large. The old spring was taken away and a brand-new spring fabricated. It fitted perfectly and was made from correct materials. The car was again fully functional. They took the fuel tank out and brazed it up so that it was working properly too. We now had a car functioning on all systems. One of the competitors



Kathmandu car-park. The broken, and previously welded, rear spring has been removed. New fabricated spring, still wrapped in hessian, in the foreground.

whose family owns a large part of the Daimler Benz corporation apparently visited the Mercedes workshop in Kathmandu and was horrified to note that it had very few facilities and that their chief mechanic was working on a Rolls-Royce. By this stage everybody had become pretty self-sufficient as far as trying to do their own repairs were concerned. The back-up vehicles for the Rally were not much use. All that they could manage was bandaid-type repairs.

Furthermore, they had come along with some Vauxhall Frontiers, a new 4-wheel drive vehicle being marketed in Europe. These vehicles proved to be useless. They blew their shock absorbers in the first day out of Beijing and their springs all collapsed. The back-up crew spent most of their time working on their own vehicles and eventually in Lhasa rebuilt them using Toyota components for the suspension to try to make them work.

There were amazing stories from the other competitors of keeping cars going. One of the Railtons had its engine pulled apart twice on the trip and new bearings put in. A Deux Chevaux drove in one day on three wheels having broken a front wheel with the driver sitting in the passenger seat steering and the navigator standing out on the rear bumper to balance the car. Extensive suspension re-building was done. One of the Citroens which broke its front suspension called into a local farm where the components were welded accurately and they were able to keep going on that. A Morris Minor travelled half of the trip on a welded con-rod. Kathmandu was the first place that we could get effective repairs done and a lot of people took the opportunity of rebuilding their suspensions at that stage.

The Rolls-Royce and Bentley cars on the rally were by and large trouble-free and apart from the boat-tailed Phantom I pulling out in Kathmandu they all finished. The boat-tail could have gone on but he and his wife decided they had had enough and would not continue. We eventually headed out into West Nepal and in one day we had something like thirteen river crossings. Fortunately, the rivers were not very high. There was water up to nine inches deep on a stony base with a lot of ruts. A few cars broke down and had to be towed out of the water. The Phantom handled these conditions with equanimity. Its great weight and adequate clearance allowed it to simply motor through these conditions without any trouble at all.



Crossing one of the 13 rivers in Nepal --- no problem.

We left Nepal to go into India, and the unpleasant part of the journey began. Indian customs had been paid a \$16,000 bribe to allow us through but apparently this had not been handed down the line and a process of bureaucratic obstruction began at the border. They asked for another \$5,000 but this was refused and the consequence of this was a six-hour delay while

they laboriously handwrote all the details of the vehicles four times over at four different desks before we got into India.

Signs of resentment and unpleasantness also began in India with the beginnings of some stone-throwing, rude gestures and trucks attempting to run us off the road. However, it was not too bad in India. Delhi itself was relatively pleasant.

We eventually travelled up through Amritsar across the border into Pakistan. The Indians after the row that had been created had evidently decided not to ask for another bribe on the way out of India although initially, they had done so. The obstruction to us leaving India was not so great. Nevertheless, the Indians did not earn many brownie points for the way they treated us.

The next destination was Lahore. The Pakistanis were co-operative and pleasant at the border and Lahore was an island of civilisation in what was to turn out to be virtual warfare over the next eight days after we left Lahore. There was a pleasant interlude with a garden party with the Governor of Lahore in a very British tradition and then it was on into Baluchistan. We climbed up to Fort Monro which took us up into Baluchistan. Things began to go very wrong at this stage.

Lahore, Pakistan. The Governor's residence, ready for high tea in the gardens. Behind the Phantom V is the 1927 Mercedes 630K.



There were two earlier incidents. In Nainital in India a Landrover had been travelling into the night after a long day, something we were told would not happen. The days were too long and the competition too great. They pulled over to the side of the road to allow a bus to pass but got too near the edge and fell over. They fell about forty feet down onto a small platform and were held up by a tree from falling another 100 metres down a gorge. But for this tree on the edge of this cliff they would not have survived. As it was, they were not able to continue the journey and had sustained some minor injuries including one of them receiving a crushed cervical vertebra. Their vehicle was then trucked down to Delhi for repatriation to Britain but on the way down to Delhi the Indians stripped the vehicle and took everything moveable off it that they could take.

The next ugly incident was to occur in Baluchistan. The climb up on to the Baluchistan plateau was a difficult road and heavily populated with Pakistani trucks. It took us into an area that is not controlled by Pakistan.

Although Baluchistan is part of Pakistan there is no control up there. The Pakistani police would not drive up the road to Fort Munro. The road itself was supposed to be a closed stage in the rally, but the Pakistani truck drivers would not stop.

Even those that were paid money at the top of the pass not to go down merely took the money and continued to drive. For them it was sport. They simply came down the middle of the road and would not move and drove every car off the road. It became an endless game of 'chicken' with these Pakistani drivers roaring with laughter as they pushed us off the sides of the road. The road was a one lane tar road with poor shoulders and many of the cars tore their tyres. Under these conditions there were frequent punctures, and some cars were side swiped including our own although we did not sustain very much damage.

Baluchistan. Typically ornate Pakistani trucks and typical road conditions at Fort Munro. Allard from Malta in front.



Once in Baluchistan it became evident that the place was quite lawless. Every male carried a rifle and there were no police. We drove on from Fort Munro to Quetta where we stayed in some pretty flea-bitten hotels. The standard of the hotels remained poor until we arrived in Western Iran.

The long day into Quetta was a competitive day and the times were not achievable for cars. The day was so long that it again took us into the night. The final control for the day was in the hotel inside Quetta. Thus, there were cars racing to make time through the busy peak-hour traffic of Quetta. This resulted in the deaths of two of the competitors; a father and son who were in a Volkswagen convertible. They had been travelling at great speed through the town. They went round some trucks and ran underneath a bus.

When we came into the town, we passed the bus which had extensive damage underneath the front where the car had gone underneath it and we made some flippant comments at the time. When we turned round the corner we were horrified to see the remains of the Volkswagen on the back of a forklift truck. It was a gut-wrenching feeling waiting to find out how they were. One of them was killed instantly and the other died shortly thereafter in the hospital without regaining consciousness. One can understand why competitive rallies are not permitted on open roads in western countries. To run a competitive road race such as this, going into a town at nighttime to a control in a hotel was to my mind quite irresponsible. It was the second night stage. The first one had nearly lead to the death of two contestants and this stage had led to two deaths. Some of the Germans stayed behind in

Quetta to arrange the repatriation of the bodies. Most of the rest of us then continued on to Iran, across the border with the minimum of formalities and drove on to Zahedan.

Zahedan is a frontier town quite close to Afghanistan and near the Pakistan border. It is a lawless town and a town which is a major drug trans-shipment centre from the poppy and hemp fields of Afghanistan. It is also Baluchi populated. The advice was not to leave the town at all and not be out in the town at nighttime. Now that we were in Iran the lack of alcohol was absolute, but alcohol had been



Baluchistan. In the crowd is another entrant's car! No women in sight.

unobtainable in Pakistan in any case. The female contestants had to wear covering clothes and a veil to cover their hair. It was in Iran that the viciousness of the crowds became pervasive. The stoning of the cars was continuous, and a lot of damage was done. The people in the open cars were hit and some of them sustained minor injuries. Fortunately, there were no major injuries. We had a lucky escape when a fairly large stone went past my ear and hit the glass division in the Phantom and bounced and hit Jeanne on the hand causing her some bruising. There were some quite deep stone-chips in the vehicles. Some of the vehicles were hit with sticks and there was at least one attempt to pull a driver out of one of the open cars. At every village you came to you would be ambushed by people blocking the roads and throwing stones as you went past. The vicious stone throwing was done by young adults, but the children were also involved. They would tie stones to flowers and throw them at you. Some of the women spat on. The police who were pervasive throughout the trip made no attempt to intervene and the matter continued all the way to Turkey.

On the last day it got so bad in the Kurdish part of Iran that we decided to leave two hours early at five in the morning and go at short intervals to try and get out without further stoning, but this was to no avail. The last hour to Horasan was as bad as any from stoning. Despite our early arrival they had managed to ambush us and in some places there were people stoning from both sides of the road especially at the open cars. We eventually got across the border into Turkey near Mt Ararat. It was a beautiful clear day, and Mt Ararat was clearly visible without any cloud cover. What a relief to get into Turkey.

I think Iran should be crossed off the lexicon of travellers until such time as these savages learn some elementary points about civilisation.

Eastern Turkey was quite tense. The Turks had just invaded the Iraqi part of Kurdistan and we were in Kurdish territory. We were warned not to be out on the roads at night and were told that the Turkish police would not come out for us at nighttime as we would be safer on our own. If they went out, they would be shot by the Kurds. 'Mere was quite a lot of banditry

going on. There was a lot of military action and along the roads in this part of Kurdistan the only vehicles from the government side were either tanks or armoured cars. However, the locals were pleasant enough to us. There was an immediate and obvious increase in the standard of living in Turkey as compared to Iran. Iran had all the signs of an economy in retreat with half-completed buildings and mud huts everywhere. Apart from a few mud hutted Kurdish villages Turkey was clearly a much richer country and provided us with a welcome bit of civilisation. The scarves were discarded, and alcohol was available.

We went to a town called Nevsehir where we stayed at a skiing chalet up a quite steep mountain. We drove on past some of the cliff dwellings and then eventually travelled through some very beautiful country into Istanbul. This proved to be another rest day and for me was the only day that I did not spend either travelling or working on the car all day. I took the opportunity of spending the entire day in bed. I am afraid sightseeing and touring were not things that featured much on this trip. By this time we had teamed up quite closely with the Mercedes 630K and we tended to travel in convoy. The Mercedes was to have one further bout of magneto problems but eventually completed the trip using my spare coil and bypassing his magneto.



Dasht-e-eut Desert, Iran. Time control stop. Mercedes 630K behind, Rover 3-Litre on the left and 1936 Raiton from Holland on the right. Note military vehicles and gun in the background.