

Rolls-Royce Owners' Club of Australia Library

Living with the Spirit, 1996

By Ean McDowell

For some six months now, I have been working in Malaysia, firstly in northern Sarawak where there are few cars and even fewer roads, then lately in Kuala Lumpur where there



are plenty of bad roads and the traffic is awful. In fact, it is no exaggeration that my office is 10 minutes' walk from where I live or one hour drive in peak periods. When I do drive it is behind the wheel of a Proton, Malaysia's National car. What more can I say... it has a beautiful radio! So, as the end of the year approached, we agreed we would spend Christmas with my parents at Coffs Harbour, New South Wales. My wife assumed we would fly but I had a different son of flying in mind, on the wide-open road behind the wheel of a proper motor car.

The resistance was demolished; the kids were on my side with promises of motels and McDonald's and the plans were made. It was going to be fun. By fax I arranged for Hamiltons to take the car out of storage, check a front-end ball-joint that was recommended for attention some time ago, charge the battery, change the oil, re-gas the air conditioning and generally make sure it would be fit for the trip. The service was outstanding, and the car was returned not only mechanically checked but beautifully cleaned. I flew into Melbourne on the Saturday morning before Christmas, re-introduced myself to the family, fixed bikes and dripping taps, mowed lawns, tried to read three months of junk mail and magazines and packed. I didn't even look at the car.

At this stage I should introduce you to the crew and the car. Firstly, the car is a 1984 Rolls-Royce Silver Spirit, chassis number ASE09580, known in the family as 'The Gold Car', even though it is two-tone blue. The name is a throwback to our previous Silver Shadow II, which was gold, and to a three-year-old that's near enough. The crew consisted of my wife Dorothy, co-driver, who had one previous try at driving the Shadow and declared she couldn't reach anything. This time we had pillows to go under her and pillows to go behind her. In the back we had Andy (6) in the first-class seat behind "Poppa", Colin (3) in the centre, and Nina (5) on the left. The politics in the back are complicated and essentially

revolve around being allowed to look out "my side" but if you have "the lucky seat" in the centre you can look out either side! We tend to leave the politics to the back seat only interrupting when violence is imminent. Under some circumstances a car with a division would be wonderful.

When people say that Rolls-Royce is the Best Car in the World, I often add best family car. Forgetting safety, comfort and everything else for a moment three youngsters in their car seats can see everything from the back and they love it!

So, not too early and not too late on the Saturday we left Melbourne. A good start except that an hour down the road we were laughing or singing or something and we totally missed the Shepparton turn-off. I know... the letters on the sign are a metre high, but we missed it. Well, we saw a bit of central Victoria that other travellers don't see before picking up the highway again. Of course, driving a Rolls-Royce, it wasn't far before we had to stop for fuel, too! We pushed on, up the Newell Highway, making Dubbo that night. Being Christmas Eve, the motel owner thought his present had come early then I'm sure he loaded up the room rate in keeping with the mode of transport to offset his disappointment. Including our detour, we covered some 900 km. in the first day, no problems - not even a stone chip when I checked, and such fun to drive.

Father Christmas came to the little ones so the start the next morning was delayed, but fun. With more fuel of course we set off again, cruising at about 110 km/h which seemed sensible in view of numerous warnings. There was hardly another car on the road. Mum even had a drive and found she didn't need the pillows so the driving position of the Spirit must have more adjustment than that of the Shadow. The comfort, complete lack of fatigue and sheer pleasure of driving a Rolls-Royce were again emphasized on Day 2. The Moonbi hills slowed us a bit, but I've always found the momentum of a big heavy car carries you through the hills if you keep moving. We left the Newell at Armidale and headed towards the coast. I had been on this road many years ago and mentally noted whilst driving that it had not improved. It was about then we came down a long hill at a fair speed and hit a cattle grid at the bottom. Newton's Third Law was demonstrated with a tremendous noise as the "opposite reaction" was found along with the limit of suspension travel. I was vaguely looking in the mirror and caught a glimpse of something shiny but didn't think any more about it. Then a mile down the road Andy, who was looking back casually said "Dad, there were two shiny things going along the road". We were over the top of the rise and down the dip when I stopped and on checking both rear hubcaps had come off. Ten minutes later when we returned an elderly couple who were having a cuppa by the roadside were already looking. They thought it was Christmas too! Would you believe we found 50 hubcaps before we found ours, mostly battered plastic rubbish, but when we found ours, they hardly had a mark on them. Someone later told me the price of a replacement, and I made a mental note to increase that boy's pocket money! Without further drama we reached Coffs Harbour in the late afternoon on Christmas Day.

We tried all the beaches, did tourist things and enjoyed the grandparents' company over the next few days. We took the Spirit to beaches, down tracks and into places a R-R shouldn't rightly go, and we received enthusiastic glances and comments along the way. The number of other motorists who pointed or waved or just turned to look was amazing. We saw the only other Rolls-Royce of the trip, a Spirit also, in Coffs Harbour, but they didn't return our wave.

The trip back had its moments too. I had considered alternative routes as the thought of climbing Dorrigo Pass didn't appeal to me at all. In fact, there was no practical alternative, and it was well into the morning with the temperature outside at 35° C when we reached the bottom. I think the climb is 1000 metres over 14 km. of winding narrow road to the top, but it felt like 50 km. In a big heavy car with nowhere to get a run, often baulked by others, it was just a long grind in intermediate with the temperature gauge very near boiling. We stopped twice like many others and boiled both times. I thought of the image but opened the bonnet anyway to let it cool down and all the time I worried. It didn't boil when we were running ... only when we stopped. We reached the top and had an early lunch to let everything including the driver cool down. From there it was down the Newell again through central N.S.W. The outside temperature was now 40° and the car was running well, with the temperature gauge higher than usual but O.K. Inside it was cool and comfortable in the front but with the air conditioning needing extra outlets to really serve the rear under the conditions (the current models have these. Ed.). We enjoyed the overnight stop at Gilgandra and pushed on the next day again under similar weather conditions although a storm was forecast. And what a storm it was when it came. Wind and dust that brought us down to a crawl at first because we couldn't see. And then flooding rain. The temperature outside fell 20 degrees as we watched. Through it all nothing moved the big car from its arrow-like course. It was after the storm that a committee decision was made to change course and head for Deniliquin for our New Year's Eve stop. That took us past the famous Conargo Pub where I'd say there were 2,000 patrons spilling out all over the road to celebrate the New Year. Some had obviously been there a very long time by the look of them. They opened a path for us to pass through with calls for a "burnout", "wheelies" and other un-R-R-like behaviour. There were bows and waves, salutes and catcalls and it was in my mind that a bottle through the windscreen was even a possibility but in the end, we passed through unscathed. We didn't see the New Year in, and we spent the next day playing tourists at Echuca before the final leg back to Melbourne in the late afternoon. That night I washed and dried the Spirit before putting it back into storage and then didn't even get a chance to look at it again before flying back to KL a few days later.

I later reviewed the statistics and thought how much better I have come to know that wonderful car. We travelled 3,960 km. in just 8 days of which only 5 days were spent on the road. The maximum we did was 900 km. in a day. We got 15.5 mpg if I can use the old terminology which disappointed me slightly as we used to get that in the Shadow and I thought Spirits were better. The exhaust was always a beautiful grey when we stopped, and

the engine ran superbly. We topped up with water and oil but only as expected. We cruised mostly at 110 km/h but we saw 150 at one stage just to see what it was like. The high-speed cruising and comfort allowed those sorts of distances to be covered even with young children. I appreciated the stability, the handling, the instruments and the superb headlights. A Turbo would have been nice in the long winding climbs where the power was not quite "adequate" and the brakes at the bottom of Dorrigo Pass were also starting to feel just a wee bit short of "adequate" although they were fine elsewhere. The wipers I can't say I'm excited about, but worst of all were the front seats. I went and looked at a new Silver Spirit after getting back and I can see that they have changed things, but in 1984 the design totally lacked lower back support, and it was painfully so after the distances travelled.

There's nothing more to say than that it was a wonderful trip and a great way to really learn about the car. The greatest (family) car in the world!