

Weather permitting – ‘Moggie’ the Morris 8 journeys from London to Sydney

Trevor Webster (Holman 1944-47) recounts his momentous trip in a Morris 8 from London to Sydney in 1958.

On a sunny morning in June 1958, two small cars drove through the heavy London traffic, heading for the South Coast of England. After over a year of planning routes, organising visas, permits, inoculations and equipment, overhauling cars and endless letter writing, our expedition was on the move. The road to Sydney lay ahead!

The cars were a 1939 model Morris 8/40's, a tourer and a sedan, thoroughly overhauled, but only slightly modified, for the ordeal which was to come. In the tourer was Alan Taylor and his wife, Vera, of Chelmsford, Essex, and in the sedan, Trevor Webster, his wife, Mary, and young son, Tony, 17 months old. Both cars carried full camping equipment for their crews, as well as personal gear for six months' travelling. Also included were essential provisions such as 192 packets of dried soup and 96 tins of milk! Add to this spares for the cars, jerrycans for extra petrol and water, and you realise that space was at a premium.

The first sea crossing was by air. Twenty minutes after leaving the airfield on Romney Marsh, our Bristol Freighter touched down at the Le Touquet in France. From here we made for Belgium, to see the 1958 Brussels International Fair, and the excruciating cobbles of Calais and Dunkirk soon gave way to the high speed Ostend-Brussels Motorway. We continued south, over the excellent roads of Western

Europe, through Luxembourg, France and Germany, and over the Swiss Alps (St Gotthard Pass) into Italy, with its myriad Vespas and fast Autostradas.

We entered Yugoslavia at Trieste. The contrast from Italy was immediate, the clock being virtually put back a hundred years in as many yards. We entered a land of peasants, obviously very poor, working the land by hand, and driving ancient carts, drawn by incredibly thin horses, along roads thick with white dust. Only an occasional diesel truck or official car mars the peace, even on the twin-track autoput, which stretches from Zagreb to Belgrade. Everyone waves frantically as you pass, and one starts to appreciate the feelings of visiting Royalty!

Our route lay inland, at first through Bosnia to Sarajevo, and regained the coast at Dubrovnik, where a week was spent. Known as the 'Pearl of the Adriatic', Dubrovnik, formerly known as Ragusa, existed as an independent republic for a thousand years and was the great rival of Venice. It escaped the Turkish domination, which has affected the rest of Yugoslavia, as it is today, so profoundly. Our stay was spoiled only by an on-the-spot fine, at pistol point, for entering a one-way street in reverse; the policeman's English was on a par with our Serbo-Croatian, so argument was out of the question!

Following the magnificent Dalmatian coastline, we circled the huge bay of Kotor

and, near the Albanian border, we headed inland into the interior of Montenegro. The country is mountainous and, with our heavily laden cars, 112 miles were covered in 11 hours solid driving! The mountains gave way eventually to the plains of Serbia, and, after some more horror sections of road, we reached the Greek frontier. Our impression was that Tito's Communist regime in Yugoslavia is obviously making an honest effort to improve the lot of the people, but there is still a long way to go.

At the Greek Customs, we re-entered the 20th century with a bang. After Yugoslavia's 44-gallon drums and ancient bowsers, even a modern petrol pump was a sight for sore eyes. Bitumen roads, unfortunately marred throughout by enormous potholes, led to Athens. We completed our tour of the sights of Ancient Greece via Corinth and Delphi, before heading north again to Larissa, Salonika and the Turkish border. For military reasons, the roads on both sides of this border have been almost non-existent for centuries, but the Iron Curtain around Bulgaria and American Aid have led to great improvements in recent years.

After an interlude at the Turkish Customs, listening to seductive oriental music over the radio and completing numerous formalities, we headed for Istanbul, which we found one of the most interesting cities on our route. We visited the enormous mosques, the Sultans' palace and the islands in the Sea of Marmora, and camped high above the Bosphorous, overlooking the summer residences of the President and other heads of state. A beautiful site, to which we were fortunate enough to be taken by the agent of one of our sponsors. Our stay in Istanbul was actually extended by a few

days because it coincided with one of Turkey's periodical 'petrol famines', experienced when foreign currency runs out! For three days, petrol was unobtainable, and it was only through the kindness of the director of the local BP company, who saw us in a queue with 300 other cars, that we got sufficient petrol to proceed on our way.

A 10-minute trip by ferry took us across the Bosphorous to Scutari, where Florence Nightingale's hospital now serves again as a barracks. Our first experience of Asia was the fine modern highway leading to Ankara, the capital of Turkey. This is a modern city built to replace Istanbul as the administrative centre of the country; it resembles Canberra in setting and general feeling. The Iraqi Revolution, and assassination of King Feisal, had occurred while we were in Istanbul, setting the Middle East aflame, but the British Embassy in Ankara assured us that the border with Iran was still open, so we went on after a further search for petrol!

From here on, bitumen roads became a curiosity, except in the bigger cities, until Pakistan was reached, although in Turkey modern military roads are being built. On the Black Sea coast we experienced heavy rain, and the cars had to be almost carried through one river crossing by about 20 road workers. This coast is where hazel nuts, one of Turkey's main exports, grow in profusion. About 100 miles from the Russian frontier we turned inland into the rugged interior of Anatolia. More mountains and the petrol consumption rose to 22 miles per gallon – for an 8hp car! We were given a jeep escort for the Erzurum military zone and, in a complete reversal of our previous experience in Turkey, we were compelled to fill our tanks with petrol to

ensure that we did not run out in the middle! Near here, we had some clothing stolen from under our pillows as we slept, and were given a striking example of the efficiency of the 'Jandarma', or military police, who control the area. The Kurdish culprit was located in an outlying village and our garments returned within two hours of reporting their loss! We passed close to Mt. Ararat, and finally reached the border of Iran, or Persia.

By the time we had cleared the Turkish Customs, dusk had fallen and the Persian Customs closed. We passed the night in No Man's Land. This was, perhaps, a blessing in disguise as we were under cover and the heavens opened with a torrential mountain storm. Our first taste of Persian roads was a precipitous mountain track, inches deep in thick mud! After nearly 2,000 miles' experience, we can vouch that Persian roads are among the world's worst!

The proximity of the Russian frontier makes the authorities in this area very spy conscious, and we were asked to produce our passports about every 10 miles on average. The soldier or policeman concerned then examines them for some minutes, in detail but very often upside down! In one town the police officer had a particular interest in obtaining our Census Card Number, and it took an hour to convince him that such things do not exist in England.

Five hundred miles of bumps brought us to Tabriz and then Tehran, capital of Iran, where we enjoyed the luxury of a hotel during our stay. The city is built on the desert plain below the Elburz Mountains, and its summer climate is extremely hot and dry. It is a city of contrasts, with 'jubes' (open gutters which combine the function

of sewer and water supply for many parts of the city) and air-conditioned coffee bars side by side.

From Tehran our road lay eastward for 600 miles to Meshed and Afghanistan, skirting the northern fringes of the Great Salt Desert (Dasht-e-Kavir), which forms the barren heart of Persia and is completely devoid of vegetation. The sun and heat were intense, and the wind like a dragon's breath during the day, and bitter at night. The desert and arid hills do, however, have a beauty of their own during the hours of sunrise and sunset, the sunlight giving rise to the most wonderful tones and colourings. The boulder-strewn road surface was shattering, and after 200 miles we experienced our first major breakdown, our previous troubles having been rectified comparatively simply. A front engine bearer of the tourer sheared, allowing the engine to drop and the fan to tear into the radiator. However, using a Heath Robinson arrangement of ropes, we were able to lash the engine in position. We also managed to seal the worst of the radiator leaks and drive the 60 miles to the next town before our water supplies gave out. In Persia, repairs of any sort are a nightmare. The average welder and mechanic is completely inept, and quite likely to damage the car irreparably if his every action is not watched. Since all work is usually carried out in open courtyards, thick with dust, in full sunlight, this can be quite arduous. The price for the job is fixed by prolonged argument and bargaining. Further trouble soon followed, and we spent the day living on 'kebab' as guests of the colonel at an Iranian Army Fortress in the mountains while the damage was repaired. The General was away, so we occupied his quarters!

Near Meshed we turned South, along the Afghanistan frontier, for the 400-mile drive to Zahidan. We had a series of broken springs and shock absorbers along this road, on our cars and also a Ford Zephyr, en route to Pakistan, which joined us in Persia. Safety in numbers, we hoped, as the area had been the scene of several bandit attacks by Bedouins in recent years. However, all was well and we reached the Pakistan frontier intact.

We now had to cross the Baluchistan Desert, and we piled the cars with petrol and water for the 480-mile run to Quetta. Baluchistan must be one of the most desolate areas in the world, the entire landscape consisting of black broken rock. The heat was even more intense, and it was not possible to drive the cars more than five miles without boiling during the day, so we drove at night. Fortunately we were able to obtain extra water (and tea!) from workers on the railway which runs near the road. Aspirins were much appreciated in return! In Quetta, we were entertained by a Baluchi prince and land-owner, who saw our cars and considered this hospitality to travellers in his country to be his duty. Unfortunately only our wives were permitted to enter the harem!

From Quetta, a pleasant hill-station, we made for Sibi, which was living up to its reputation of being the hottest place on earth. About here we entered the Indus irrigation area and the humidity was fantastic. Travelling at night to escape the heat, we crossed the Indus on the mile-wide Sukkur barrage, and reached Lahore, capital of Pakistan. The only member of the party who seemed to thrive on the heat was the youngest, Tony, who remained energetic throughout!

In Lahore, we received very kind

hospitality while the cars were being checked over, and even sampled the pleasures of the only air-conditioned bar in town. At 80 degrees F inside, it felt like an ice box. A mysterious noise in the engine of the tourer, which had developed in Persia, was found to be caused by a cracked piston, about the one spare we didn't carry. Fortunately this was the only damage and a suitable replacement was located in the local bazaar!

Crossing the Partition line, India was the next country on our list. After a brief stay in Delhi, we reached Agra and visited the Taj Mahal. Living up to its reputation, the Taj impressed us deeply with its beauty and symmetry, despite the worst the monsoon could do.

We had experienced considerable delays in Turkey and Persia, and the time until the sailing date of the ship on which we had booked from Madras was running out fast. On account of the late ending of the monsoon, the rivers of India were still in full flood. The first ferry crossing, over the Chambal, involved us in nearly a day's delay.

When we reached the second river crossing on our direct route to Madras, everything had been swept away, and the only living beings in sight were a herd of buffalo! We had no choice but to retrace our steps and take a detour via Poona and Bangalore, involving an extra 800 miles, mostly in torrential rain. Travelling night and day, we reached Madras with two hours to spare, having covered the 10,500 miles from London in 12 weeks.

Fortunately, the roads of India, although narrow, are bitumen, although now showing signs of deterioration. The worst hazards are water-buffaloes and sacred cows, not to mention the truck drivers. It is not

possible to camp in the normal manner in Pakistan and India, but we stayed in 'Dak' bungalows or rest houses, built originally for PWD staff and government officials, but open to travellers at a small fee.

Our ship from Madras was the 'Rajula', noteworthy as having the largest passenger certificate in the world in pre-war days, when she was licensed to carry 4,500 souls, mostly on deck. The 'Queens', although nearly 10 times as large, only carry about half this number of passengers. On our trip, we were the only European passengers and, being rather outnumbered by 1,700 Indians, we lived on curry to Penang!

After visiting the Snake Temple on Penang Island, we drove south through Malaya. We passed innocently through numerous traffic checkpoints, erected as part of the anti-terrorist campaign. Our cars were never searched, and it was not until later that we discovered the trouble our very complete medical kit could have caused us – someone had been heavily fined just previously for having a packet of aspirin in his glove box! We spent several pleasant days, as guests on a rubber estate near KL (Kuala Lumpur), and then

completed our journey to Singapore via Malacca, over perfect roads.

From Singapore, we caught out booked ship, the 'Gorgon', to Australia, and landed at Derby, Western Australia on September 24, 1958. Tony developed a fever on board, but fortunately this was cured before we landed. This was the only real sickness experienced en route, achieved largely by careful boiling of all drinking water and cooking of dubious or unsealed foodstuffs.

Our first impressions of Australia were very good. You could drink the water! We were given a very hospitable welcome in Derby and spent over a month in the North-west in Derby, Broome and Port Hedland. We reached Perth without hitting any bullocks or kangaroos. From Perth, we made for the 'big timber' in the Karri forests of the South-west. We passed through the Valley of the Giants, and visited Albany, before setting out for Esperance and the Nullarbor, 906 miles of gravel and sand road. We reached Port Augusta safe and sound after a cool crossing, and finally arrived in Sydney in January 1959 via Adelaide, Melbourne and Canberra. After 17,663 miles, our 8 horses were still going strong!
