

Rallying ‘Up the Khyber’

The concept and the planning

I have always been interested in motoring and especially motorsports. As a young boy I was always trying to get my father to drive a bit faster (he was a very slow driver; having been a fighter pilot during the war he thought he had already used up all his luck and was keen not to do anything risky now) and my brother and I always had competitions about everything that involved speed. We used to go to the garage at the bottom of our road that was Ian Walker Racing and watch them prepare the Lotus Elans for Graham Hill and Jim Clark to race at Goodwood and Silverstone. And the local publican, Arthus Pope would sometimes arrange for a day out to Brands Hatch to watch some car testing. At Imperial College, I joined the Motor Club and got into 12-car rallying driving my MG Midget and navigated by the excellent Adrian Crane. We won the rally championship, not because of my driving but because of Adrian’s navigation.

Getting a plaque with half a piston on it from Russell Brooks was like going to heaven.

This was followed by rallying a Hillman Imp with my brother-in-law, Warwick Cartwright for many years and then building an MGA for circuit racing. Thirty years later I am still circuit racing the MG and it has won quite a bit of silver in its time. I have had other race cars too including a Lola Formula 3 (which won the Monaco Historic Grand Prix in 2012 but with Ben Barker in the hot seat, not me), a 1965 Mustang, Rob Huff’s old MGB (‘no..32’), and my old MGA is still pounding the circuits.

I have also done some long-distance rallies such as the Carrera Panamericana in Mexico which I did twice in 1991 and 1993 (with no significant result). In addition, Linda and I have done several long ‘road trips’, including spending a year driving 25,000 miles around the US. To put it mildly, I love cars, petrol and driving.

So, when I bumped into an old colleague from Cambridge University (I mean old in that we used to work together, not that he is old) called Shai Vyakarnham, who is also a petrol-head, one of the first things he told me was that he is on the organising committee of a road rally in the Himalayas, and would I like to join in. It took three nanoseconds to say yes and that was that; I was in. The rally is a road trip in India in the Himalayas lasting nine days and is focused on the western side of the Himalayas including Manali, Leh, Ladakh and several high mountain passes, the highest of which at 19,300 ft, and therefore higher than base camp on Everest. So what’s not to like about that?

The next thing was to meet again with Shai and get down to the nitty-gritty details of what was needed to make this work. Obvs. I needed to understand the dates, what type of car, what type of team/co-driver, where would it start, etc.

Shai told me about this guy called Rajan Syal who has done the Himalayan rally many times and has organised it for the past four years. He is the main man – and Shai put me in touch with him. Getting together on phone calls he was such a friendly helpful chap and gave me all the details that I needed; we fixed the dates and what was needed in the way of a car. He explained that it is not a rally like WRC these days but more of a ‘road trip’ with a few competitive sections thrown in. But that half of the entrants, 62 cars, are driven by ex-rally drivers who can’t wait to be let off the leash. We would fly to Delhi and then drive to Chandigarh where the rally would start. There would be a class for ‘old vehicles – before 1995’ and then a class for modern vehicles – mostly SUVs. We would go over more than five passes over 15,000 and we would go to Umling La which is the highest road in the world – WOW.

So I needed to find a car and a co-driver. I considered converting my MGA race car into a rally car but the work would have been very extensive and expensive so an option was needed. I found an old Escort Mk1 Twin Cam rally car for sale but it was very expensive

(£100k plus) and when I spoke to my pal Jumbo who does car shipping he said that it would cost about £20k to get the car to India and back. Oops, a bit too expensive for a two-week holiday.

So I mentioned this to Rajan and he said that he may have a solution. He and a friend of his used to rally an Indian car in the 1980s – a Premier 118NE – which is a copy of the Fiat 124. He and his friend still had the car although it had not been used for a long time and they would sell it to me for £10k, ie much, much less than shipping a car from the UK. Rajan then contacted me and said that, as I hadn't seen the car it was unreasonable to ask me to buy it but they would rent it to me for £1000 and I could then buy it from them for a further £9,000 if I wanted to. A perfect solution – or so it sounded at the time.

The next matter was to find someone who would be a good co-driver and would be excited about going on this jaunt. The obvious answer was Colin Clarkson – a great engineer, someone who loves India and someone who has a better compass of risk and safety matters than I do. Fortunately, Colin was only too pleased to join and – and we now had a team. The dates for the adventure were fixed for 26th September to 6th October starting in Chandigarh – 250 km north of Delhi – and then heading north into the mountains visiting Srinagar, Kargil, Leh, Hunder, Handi, Manali and many places in between before circling back to Chandigarh. Accommodation varied from nice hotels to mountain huts to 'glamping' – we were advised that we would need to have a sleeping bag that would be good to minus 20 C – and that we would be sharing rooms with our co-drivers; OK, as long as we can have twin beds!!

Travel was fixed in Virgin Atlantic and as it looks as though we will be roughing it a bit from time to time I thought we should travel in some comfort and so booked Upper Class. Maybe not as extravagant as it used to be but still better than other ways of travel. The flights were to Delhi where we planned to land on 23rd Sept to give ourselves time to acclimatise. It also gave us time to go to the MotoGP race in Delhi, the first time this race championship has raced in India.

Over the next three months, Colin checked through lots of details on the car such as fuel capacity and usage, engine power, luggage space, rally history, etc. All useful stuff, especially the fuel details as there are few fuel stations up in the Himalayas. I was checking through all my old rally gear and seeing what was relevant and what still worked. We both had endless discussions about what clothes we should take for the hot of Delhi and the cold of Hanle and especially what sleeping-bag temps we should aim for when glamping at high altitudes. Torches, computer and comms equipment: what else were we going to need? What should we do about breathing (both the car and us) at altitude was another issue. The car was addressed by Rajan who had the engine checked over and he swapped the two DCOE 40 carburettors for something smaller and a bit more sensible at altitude.

For humans, we identified that there are a couple of pharmaceutical products that can help with altitude sickness; acetazolamide and dexamethasone. Colin and I both procured large quantities of each as well as so many other drugs that we ended up looking like pharma company salesmen. We were also told by Rajan that we would all be supplied with small cylinders of oxygen in case we suffered from the altitude and lack of oxygen.

Getting our electronic visas was the usual and expected wrestling match with technology and bureaucracy but once Colin had explained to me what had to be done and which were the official websites and which were the scam merchants, all was fine and we got our visas in plenty of time.

Quite easy really.

Getting started

We got started on 20th September when Colin arrived by Ryan Air from France and we all went to our favourite Indian restaurant, Zara, for further dietary acclimatisation. On Friday

22nd Linda took us both down to Heathrow through rush-hour traffic to set off on our adventure proper. Check-in at Virgin Atlantic Upper Class was smashing; I used to travel Upper Class a lot when I was working but since then have been demoted to Ryan Air and Easy Jet, so it was a lovely experience to have air travel made special and exciting again. The lounge was wonderfully comfortable with all needs provided for and, if the flight was an hour or two late then that was fine and, in fact, training for travelling in India where most things run about an hour late.

In Delhi and at the MotoGP

The next morning we landed at Delhi airport where we were soon given our bags – well quite soon compared with Heathrow, and immigration was no problem at all. Rajan had advised us to say that we were staying in Delhi and not to mention a word about travelling in the Border states near Pakistan and China which would have resulted in a lot of questions and the possible denial of entry.

A quick taxi ride to our hotel reminded Colin and me of the anarchy of Indian drivers. We checked into our hotel in Delhi which was very adequate – but we had been given a double bed instead of the twin beds requested – something that was going to feature throughout our travels – a good job Colin and I are good mates. When we had travelled from the airport the taxi driver demanded payment (2000 rupees - about £20) which we paid, but after we had been in our room for 10 minutes one of the hotel managers arrived with the 2000 rupees explaining that the driver should not have charged us and was therefore returning the money. Colin and I speculated on the discussion that had taken place between the taxi driver and the hotel management – it wouldn't have been pretty.

We had a quiet day and in the late afternoon met the organiser for the whole event, Rajan Syal. Rajan and his wife invited us to their room for drinks and then took us out to a shopping mall for me to buy an Indian mobile phone and for him to buy some things for his wife. We were very surprised at the size of the mall and at the level of shopping being undertaken – the place was heaving. We found the phone that Rajan recommended and he haggled the price down so that I paid £80 for a brand-new Samsung S80. Rajan provided me with a SIM card and I was away with a phone that would work anywhere in India, unlike our European phones.

In chatting to Rajan it became apparent that this guy was much more than initial appearances indicated. He was head of the India FIA for more than 20 years and was the person behind the development of Formula 1 in India and the building of several race circuits. He was a well-known and accomplished rally driver and had been involved with the Force India Formula 1 team – but not with all the shenanigans that resulted in the bankruptcy of the team. His wife, Shree, was quite a character too. On talking about the various places we would be visiting she said that the place she was looking forward to visiting was Leh as 'they grow the best weed in the world there'. Colin and I were quite shocked hearing seventy-year-olds eagerly anticipating getting their hands on a bundle of spliffs. I looked sideways at Rajan and he commented that his wife was still 'a wild one'.

That evening we met some more of the drivers, organisers and participants – there would be over 200 of us by the time we all got together; quite difficult to remember everyone's names. A good meal in the restaurant – our Indian food acclimatisation had been very successful – and early bed as tomorrow we were off to the races.

The first MotoGP race ever held in India. The next day, Sunday, started hot and then got hotter. We dressed accordingly but as we loaded into cars, and drove to the race circuit (planned and built by Rajan) we all started leaking sweat into our clothing.

One of the people in our car was the only other Brit at the event (other than Shai – who is a bit 'half and half') Tim Webb, a London lawyer. Tim was a posh lawyer who swore like a

trooper and had very vigorous views on everything, and he was very keen to let you know. An interesting bloke but with such a focus on sex that it seemed all-consuming for him. At the race circuit, we found that we were in the best seats in the house – courtesy of Rajan – right on the start/finish line, in the shade and with a big screen right in front of us. However, it was still 38 in the shade and we were perspiring like leaky buckets. There was a constant stream of celebrities and officials to see Ragan and they were all very interested in hearing about the Himalayan Challenge. This guy is the Bernie Ecclestone of Indian motorsport, but a very much nicer person. The motorcycle racing was brilliant, especially the top division race where there was great competition right down the field. There were of course many spills but no one got seriously hurt, except in their pride, and so it was a great day of motorsport.

Getting to the start in Chandigarh

More people turned up at the hotel in the evening and plans were laid for the next day. Colin and I were given a modern SUV to drive to Chandigarh where the Himalayan Challenge was starting. We set off on a Monday morning as a group of about 25 vehicles in convoy through the Delhi traffic and you cannot believe the driving chaos that ensued. It was like ‘Whacky Races’ or to the younger readers ‘Grand Theft Auto’. It was both the worst style but the best fun driving with everyone pushing in, overtaking on any side, cutting up and beeping horns all the time – quite exhausting, but very Indian. We were to get used to this over the next two weeks. It is about 250K from Delhi to Chandigarh, but it took us about 2 hours to clear the Delhi traffic as our convoy leader kept being distracted by phone calls and we went round in circles several times. We finally arrived at the Taj Hotel in Chandigarh about 6 hours later: it seemed a long drive at the time but it was to be eclipsed by every other day's driving time after this. In Chandigarh we would meet up with all the other teams who were driving up from all points of the Indian compass; Bombay, Madras, Hyderabad, Bangalore, etc. It was interesting to see that we kept closest to the teams we had met in Delhi at the beginning, a bit like a new boy at school keeps friends with those he meets first on his first morning. The new teams brought our numbers up to over 200 people which made it quite difficult (if not impossible) to remember everyone's names.

On Monday evening we had a start-up dinner together and most exciting for Colin and I, we got to see our car – the Premier 118NE.

As mentioned before, this was the Indian-built version of the Fiat 124 but with a smaller and less sophisticated engine from Nissan – the NE stands for ‘Nissan engine’; the 118 is for the cylinder capacity which makes it quite weedy with only about 60 bhp. Will this be enough at altitude to get us up the hills?

The car has a roll cage, fire extinguisher, rally seats and full race harnesses (which make it quite difficult to get in and out of the car). The car is owned by Rajiv Rai (who is also driving in the event) and was driven by Rajiv with Rajan navigating some twenty years previously. Since then it has languished in the corner of a warehouse but has been pulled out of retirement and spruced up for this event and for me to drive and Colin to navigate.

I go with Rajan's son, Gaurav, to collect it from the Tube Investments steel tube factory in Chandigarh; amusing as I worked for TI 40 years previously and the business does not exist in the UK anymore but has hung on in India. Gaurav drove the car back to the Taj Hotel and I was quite concerned by several issues.

The most important was that the transmission, especially the gearbox and the rear axle differential were making very ominous noises. Other things that did not work included the rally meter, the odometer (important for measuring distance travelled), the rev meter, and the fuel gauge and there was a very long brake pedal – not very reassuring. It has no air-con and no heater and has no silencer, just a straight-through exhaust so it is extremely noisy. I expressed my concerns to Rajan who went out for a drive with me on Tuesday morning. He assured me that the vehicle had always made a lot of noises like this and he would get the

mechanic who was coming with us to look at some of the electrical matters. We weren't convinced as this sounded like a lot of Indian promises – and in fact that mechanic didn't fix anything on the car.

Later that evening was a 'posh dinner' to start the event as pretty well everyone had arrived. It was a very colourful event where the highlight was a troupe of traditional Punjabi dancers and drummers who came and entertained us and made us all dance with them. It was quite one of the wildest music escapades I can remember. SO LOUD. It seemed louder than any rock concert I can remember attending – and so energetic.

When looked at carefully – I mean 'into their eyes' - the dancers and drummers seemed like some type of exotic wild animals, only just under control and, for a short period, being house trained and safe, but likely to break out in violence if they just slipped over the edge.

I loved it; one of the best experiences.

On Tuesday we received all the necessary documentation and equipment for the rally and signed all the necessary affidavits and warranties. The equipment included a road book, medical products to help with altitude sickness, personal oxygen cylinders (small ones) in case of altitude sickness, lanyards with names on them so we could see who we were talking to, etc.

Day 1 of the 'Challenge'

We are all ready to go with a flag-off by the Governor of Punjab State on Wednesday morning – we are car number 5 of 65 cars taking part. The flag-off is due at 10.00 but the Governor did not arrive until 10.45 and then there were lots of photos and stuff. Eventually, at about 11.15 we got flagged away and we set off on the road to Jammu. For navigation, there are options of using the road book – the proper way to navigate on road rallies – or to use Google Maps – which is much easier. We had decided to do this properly and use the roadbook. Unfortunately, there was an error in the road book on the first page and so we went wrong for quite a way until we stopped, reviewed the situation and started using Google Maps, which we could do with the mobile phone I had bought in Delhi. Back on the right road. We pound along through suburbs and eventually get to some dual carriageway where we can increase our speed. By this time third gear is making so much noise that we decide not to use it which makes our progress quite a lot slower and much noisier as we have to go to maximum revs in second gear before changing straight to fourth. The car is also unbelievably hot – it is 37 degrees outside and we have engine heat flowing back at us through various apertures in the bulkhead. With windows open we are sweating like crazy and having to spend all our time drinking water to keep up. The road gets better, the road gets worse, we drive through the very fertile plains of Punjab and we climb some hills. We see monkeys by the roadside, cows wandering everywhere and dogs who just wander across the road with some inherent ability to miss all the cars and trucks. At one point on the dual carriageway, we are stopped, waiting for a large flock of sheep and goats to be herded from one pasture to another. Very India.

The trucks are amazing, plodding along like cows, at very low speeds and very likely to change direction at the last minute.

However, we are getting the hang of driving in the country and we make very good progress. As we have no fuel gauge we decide to keep going until we run out of petrol and then we will know roughly how many miles per gallon the car will do. We then pour our Jerry can of 20 litres into the tank and carry on to the next fuel station.

This works pretty well – the fuel runs out just as we enter Jammu and we calculate that we are doing about 10 – 12 kilometres per litre. We pour the fuel from the Jerry can in the boot into the tank and then go to a fuel station to fill everything up again. Sorted.

We arrived in Jammu at about 18.30 and were the first or second car to arrive. We immediately dashed to the bar where several beers were required to replenish our hydration

levels. We discussed with Ragan and Rajiv and proposed that we try to find a second-hand gearbox for the 118 and get it shipped to Leh so we can change it when we arrive there. Rajiv was a bit hesitant at first with this plan but when he found a gearbox in Calcutta for £35 and could get it shipped to Leh for a further £35 he decided that this was a good idea and got one of his men to make it happen. Rajiv Rai is a dollar billionaire and so he has 'people' to do things for him. What we learned later was that we should have organised a differential at the same time. Colin and I collapsed into bed as soon as we had eaten as we had a 06.00 start the next day to get to Sonamarg up in the hills – at 6500 ft up we are starting to get into the Himalayas.

Day 2

We set off early before most of the other cars as we are quite slow on hills being limited to about 30 mph in second gear. From Jammu, the road started climbing quite vigorously and we had to stir the gearbox a lot to keep the car moving.

Fortunately, it was a little cooler than the day before and when we made a lunch stop in Srinagar we were making good progress despite the gearbox. Lunch was very jolly and there were several dignitaries and press people there as this was quite the biggest thing to have hit town for a long time. We proceeded along to Sonamarg climbing into the hills and seeing quite a change in the towns and villages. They were much smaller and the people looked less 'standard Indian' and much more like slim lithe hills people – and much darker skins too.

We were tootling along quite happily getting towards Sonamarg when suddenly the engine just stopped. We pulled over to the side of the narrow mountain road in the middle of some roadworks, opened the bonnet and started investigating what had gone wrong.

We immediately proved that we had fuel and the petrol pumps were working and further exploration showed that we had no spark whatsoever. After a while some of the other cars turned up and everyone had their opinions about what was wrong. Colin was convinced that it was the distributor and that both the points and the condenser needed changing: some hours later this was proven to be the case.

However, everyone else had different opinions and wanted to check through the diagnosis that we had made at the beginning. One of the problems was that the car was stopped right next to one of the cement batching plants for the roadworks and by the time we had been stood there for a couple of hours we were covered 3 or 4 millimetres thick in cement dust; this was the beginning of our dust torture in India – and it took ages to get the damned stuff out of our hair and clothes and off our bodies. However, we were to encounter worse dust in days to come.

So, the car had to be towed the last 15K to our hotel in Sonamarg arriving in the dark and the car still not working. Sonamarg is a tiny village of probably 100 houses with a couple of tourist hotels where we were staying. There was some confusion about which hotel we were in – double bed again as usual – and there was no hot water for a shower to get rid of the cement dust so it was cold showers for Colin and me. Once the water issue was resolved the hotel was not too bad but we had entered the hill country where it was very cold at night and pretty hot during the day.

Sonamarg looks very much like Big Sky in Montana USA with the dispersed guest houses and no defined centre – and also with the mountains towering about. The land is still green here with some, but not many trees. The mountain overlooking Sonamarg is Mt Kolohoi standing 5425 metres (17,800 ft) high and with a large glacier pointing down towards Sonamarg. That night was cloudless and a brilliant full moon made the surrounding hills and glaciers look quite magical. Lots of wild horses, dogs and donkeys here – a really small hill village.

One of the support team, Vaneeta Tang, said that she knew of a small garage near where we had broken down and she somehow got a bunch of mechanics (and others) to turn up and,

working by torchlight using 'jugaar' – the Indian word for bodging – they got the car going. Rajan hauled me out of bed at 11.00 wearing only my pyjamas and a jacket into a minus 5C night to show me what had been done and go for a test drive in the car. I must say, he drove it like a professional race/rally driver and he expressed his satisfaction with it. There was a gang of about 8 of them and they were all real hill folk and the mechanics had the sort of skills that would fix anything with a couple of paperclips and a screwdriver. They were repaid with a bottle of whisky – rapidly consumed – and about £30 between them. However, we got up at 06.00 to start on the next stage to Leh but the car would not start whatever we tried: the magic had gone away.

We asked Vaneeta to help and she called the mechanics and the two who did the mending eventually arrived at about 10.00 hours after the other cars had left (except for one modern SUV that had trouble with its brakes and was waiting for a spare part. The young mechanics used their magic to get the car started again and we determined not to stop the engine until we had got to Leh that evening.

The car with the brake trouble was one of the support team and they proposed employing the two young hills men, taking them with us until Manali, a further 6 days so they could fix things that went wrong. This was agreed and we felt a lot happier about the engineering and mechanical support we would get. Furthermore, the young men turned up with a new set of points and a condenser for the car and rewired the coil so that the ballast resistor was working correctly.

We were ready to leave Sonamarg.

Day 3

So we were now about four hours behind the other cars, we had no third gear, we had the smallest engine of any vehicle on the rally and we had a huge hill to climb: what could go wrong!!

We set out from Sonamarg and were soon heading up the Zoji La pass which is at 3,528 metres. The road went up the mountain in a range of switchback turns with no protection on the outside of the road and with a near-vertical drop down into the valley.

The road was not tarmac but was rough with some sections of rough cobbles. The higher we went, the greater the drop down into the valley. This was our first taste of really steep and dangerous Indian mountain roads and it was pretty scary. We struggled up the mountain in first and second gear averaging about 20 mph; probably not a bad thing that we could not go faster given the danger of the road. At the top of the pass, we travelled from the state of Kashmir into the state of Ladakh.

Going down into Ladakh the road was a little less treacherous but still stayed at a high altitude of over 3000 metres height through mountain passes and the occasional village. One of these is called Dras and it is known to be the second coldest inhabited place on earth.

On the first two days in the 118 Colin and I had sweated buckets in the heat of the plains – now we were in the below-zero weather of the mountains without a heater. Lots of clothes were required now and we now enjoyed every bit of heat coming back from the engine. This day's journey was pretty long; we had set off a long time after everyone else and we had no third gear which meant that going up mountains was very slow, and we had four quite high passes to negotiate.

Colin and I realised that we would have to 'get a wriggle on'.

To help with this Colin started to 'read the road' for me so that I could maintain momentum through corners on the road with our tiny engine and handicapped gearbox. This had a significant effect on overall speed but it did rely on Colin calling the corners correctly and me trusting him. Over each of the long mountain passes of the day; Zoji La at 3,528 metres; Namika La at 3,696 metres; Fotu La at 4,108 metres; Lamayuru La at 3,510 metres Colin called every corner correctly and, whilst it didn't make so much difference to our speed going

up (it was still very slow) it made a major difference to our speed going down. As an example, Fotu La has 47 switchback turns and managing to maintain momentum on each of these had a major impact on our speed and thereby our progress towards Leh. Fortunately, the roads on this day were mostly tarmac with only short sections of 'off-road' where construction was underway.

By driving like fury all day with only one stop for fuel we managed to get to Leh by about 17.00 in the late afternoon, catching up and beating many of the cars that had set off 4 hours before us. We soon found our hotel in Leh, the Zen Hotel – obviously favoured for its 'good vibes' – and when we checked in we were given a prayer scarf each. We weren't sure what to do with this but we did know that we wanted beer and so we asked for the bar. Imagine our shock at being told that there was no bar. Never mind; please send out one of your boys and buy us some beers from the beer shop. 'Not possible' we were told. Not only would the hotel not countenance such wild behaviour but the manager assured us that the whole State of Ladakh was dry and we could get no alcohol anywhere.

Near disaster; but fortunately Colin had bought two litres of gin duty-free and so we asked for some bottles of tonic water and ice to make our G&Ts. This attracted some suspicious looks but they couldn't really do much to stop us and so we sat on our balcony in the evening sun planning what to do next about 'the gearbox'. Our stay in Leh was planned for two nights with a day off in between to acclimatise ourselves to the altitude. We reckoned that this would give us time to acclimatise ourselves with the gearbox to fix whatever was wrong with it. Unfortunately, it did not give us much time to see Leh as a holiday destination but we had to wander the streets looking for car parts (silicone sealants, gaskets, contact breaker points, etc) so we had a good view of the town from a 'working' perspective.

Day 4

We tried to start the 118 first thing in the morning but, just as at Sonamarg we didn't have the magic. Fortunately, we did have the electronic mechanic from Sonamarg and so he was asked to come over PDQ with a new set of points and condenser and pretty soon, in regular Indian style – that is one person doing the work and a crowd of 10 or 12 giving advice, tutting, or generally getting in the way – Mustafaq, for that is the young man's name, got the 118 going. Now, the next step was to get the gearbox fixed.

Rajiv Rai, who is the owner of the 118, had arranged for the gearbox (found in the scrapyard in Calcutta) to be shipped to Leh and a short search resulted in us finding it. A few minutes of undoing the wrappings disappointed us as it was clear that this old gearbox had several 'issues' of its own. One of the support team had a cousin who had a garage or repair shop in Leh – of course, someone did – and it was agreed that we could use his car ramp to remove and mend the gearbox. Driving the 1000 metres to this 'repair shop' showed that it was a small dirty hut down a back alley and the car lift was a small and not very deep 'pit'. Still, beggars can't be choosers and so we entered into negotiations to get them to do the donkey work of pulling the gearbox from our 118. We then 'opened' the gearbox and also the one from the scrap yard. The scrap yard gearbox had some wear/damage to the synchromesh on 1st and second gear – but not a big deal. Our 118 gearbox had stripped most of the teeth on the layshaft gearwheel for third gear – hence why it didn't work. A few hours of work were required for the stripping down of both gearboxes, cleaning everything to remove broken gear teeth and then reassembling a 'good' gearbox from all the best parts. Another hour to pop it back in the 118 and we were almost ready to go. Our final job was to change the oil in the differential in the hope that this would improve its longevity and enable us to see any large debris if any. A short drive around just before it got dark and we were now in possession of a 118 with four forward gears – yeehaa.

It took Colin and I a long time to get clean from all the oil and dirt but it did make us feel that we were real rally drivers entering into the 'never say die' culture of motorsports. We did get

clean enough for the 'Gala dinner' that evening when we dressed up in jackets and shirts but it wasn't as much fun as the dinner at the start in Chandigarh.

Day 6

We were to have another wave off on this next relatively short day's travel from Leh to Hunder in the Nubra Valley. The Governor of the State of Ladakh did not want to be outdone by the Governor of Kashmir and so he wanted to wave us off too. It was originally planned for 10.00 and we were pleased that, with new contact points, a condenser, a rebuilt gearbox and new oil in the differential the 118 behaved itself and started straightaway.

We were to be the first car away as we looked old and interesting but it did not surprise us that the Governor did not arrive until after 11.00. He stuck his head in our car and advised Colin 'to drive fast and win'; he waved the flag and we drove off up the hills out of Leh.

Now, the evening before Rajan had seemed a little nervous and had made it very clear that he wanted all the cars to leave in line in the correct order. However, India being India, many cars had set off early to get ahead of the rush. What we didn't know was that there had been unhappiness from the 'Union of Taxi Drivers' in Leh that no hired vehicles could be allowed up into the high Himalayas, only taxis driven by members of the Taxi Drivers' Union. Now, a number of the vehicles in the Himalayan Challenge were hired vehicles but Rajan had hoped to smuggle them up the road between the much larger number of personally owned SUVs.

However, the cars that set off ahead were spotted by the taxi drivers and they set up a roadblock on the road out of Leh heading into the high Himalayas. They stopped the first half dozen hired cars and kept them corralled at a petrol station. When we arrived at the roadblock they stopped us and said we could go no further. We disputed their rights to stop us for a while but then they were distracted by another car arriving. I saw a gap, put the car in gear and dashed off up the road. How we laughed. A few minutes later we stopped laughing as we saw a large powerful SUV charging up the hill in our pursuit – and we couldn't go very fast. However, the road was single-track with passing spaces and by jinking around on the road they couldn't get past and we thought they would get bored of it. Then, a passing space appeared and they dashed past and then did a handbrake turn to block the road – we were caught. They weren't very happy but we explained that we could see no legal right that they had to stop us. They said that they considered we were a hired car. We pointed out the lack of rear seats and the roll cage that blocked off all ingress to the rear of the car; furthermore, I offered a nice big donation to their union funds. This all nearly worked but on giving Rajan a call to check on what he thought about these actions we were told off for being wild and possibly messing up negotiations he was having with the taxi Union and the Governor. We returned to Leh with our tails between our legs. However, getting back to the hotel all the other drivers were very proud of our dash for freedom and wished they had done likewise. Eventually, an Indian compromise was arrived at and people in the hired cars now had to leave their cars in Leh and be driven by taxi drivers in their vehicles – and the cost would be about 50,000 Rs for each car load. Not a great outcome for those people who had come up to this place so they could drive themselves on the roads of the High Himalayas. However, our arguments about the car won and we were allowed to drive the 118. Phew.

And so at about 14.00, we set off again up the hills out of Leh towards Hunder and the Nubra Valley. The first major mountain we came to was Khardung La pass which at 5,359 metres (17,582ft) claims to be the second-highest drivable pass in the world. The little 118 got to the top a bit like the tale of 'the little engine that could', and having third gear back made the car very much more drivable.

Khardung La pass was very cold, very windy and very dusty; we stayed there about 1 minute before heading off down into the valley. I counted the switchbacks – with going up and coming down there were 78 on this piece of road – you have to work pretty hard in an old car to make progress on these roads.

What we could see now was that up to 10,000 ft of altitude there was some vegetation; grasses and the occasional tree. Above 10,000 ft there is no vegetation and the land is a desert with nothing growing at all; there is very little rainfall and the place looks like (because it is) a very cold, dusty, sandy, rocky desert. And, as there is no vegetation, there is almost no wildlife as there is nothing for them to eat. In some places there was snow, there were glaciers but it was all very majestic and very bleak. You don't want to break down alone up here.

Colin read the road for me and, now with an operating third gear, we made good progress and got down into the Nubra Valley before it got dark. In the Nubra Valley, there was some spartan vegetation but we started coming across long sections of un-made roads for the first time and this both slowed our progress and made the inside of the car, including us, really dusty. We didn't see any of the two-humped camels for which the area is well known but we did see the occasional herd of wild donkeys and lots of dogs roaming around.

When we got to Hunder it was just getting dark but we found our hotel, the Stone Hedge Hotel' pretty quickly, got checked in and had a shower to get rid of all the dust. Colin loved this hotel as it was all 1970s open-plan pine and steel girders.

It did have plentiful hot water which was great and the food was good too. There was, however, unhappiness from most of the 20 or so cars that had been forced to be driven by taxi on this day and for the next three. For us the 118 was running better than ever although the engine temperature had started creeping up which it had not done before – it had always been at 85C but now it was often running at 95C or even higher.

We put on our thinking hats and worked out that with the higher altitude the boiling point of water would drop, so even if the water temp was at 85 it could be boiling off the water. We checked it and found that this was exactly the case. We added about 3 litres of water and from then on added water every day to keep it topped up: it was not leaking water, it was just boiling it off at a lower temperature because of the altitude.

The altitude affected us a bit too. We were taking the acetazolamide tablets and that probably stopped the worst of the effects but we did get tired easily and, possibly (?) a little bit grumpy. Although alcohol is banned in Ladakh and is advised against acetazolamide, Colin and I did find that a couple of gin and tonics at the end of the day made everything seem to go a lot better. Early start the next day, meeting at the Indian Oil petrol station near Khalsar.

Day 7

Up at 06.00 to meet at Khalsar by 08.00. Dirt track roads and dust for breakfast we get to the petrol station meeting place on time (claimed to be the highest petrol station in the world – and the last fuel for 500Km) but there are not many others here yet.

Colin is driving today and I am on the maps. I haven't done rally navigating for about 25 years and I am thoroughly enjoying it.

We set off along the Nubra Valley heading east following the River Shayok and the roads are quite good and tarmacked for the first 10 km. However, after that we are on unpaved roads for the next 52 Km and, with many cars driving closely together we are constantly enveloped in clouds of dust.

However, the car was going well and as long as we stopped every few hours and topped up the radiator the engine temp was very happy. We got stuck a couple of times in soft sand or sections with very large stones but with a push from some other drivers, we always got out even if the 118 clutch got a hell of a battering.

We were driving along all day at altitudes of 12,000 to 15,000 ft and at that height, the poor little 118 had very little oxygen to breathe and was therefore way down on power. Colin and I had the same problem but fortunately, we didn't have to push the car along, only drive it. At some point, we must have hit a bigger-than-usual bump as the steering got knocked out of alignment on this section and the tyres at the front started wearing too much on the inside.

We decided we would fix it at the end of the day. Although the sky was clear and it was very sunny, the temperature during the day was about 4C and we knew at night that it would drop down to about minus 10C. So now we were quite keen to get a bit of heat back from the engine to keep us warm.

We got to Pangong Lake at about 15.00. The lake is sky blue and is the highest saltwater lake in the world and is the boundary between India and China: a disputed boundary as the silly British official who drew the map in 1947 used a thick pen that was 5 miles wide on the ground. Why either side would want to fight over 5 miles of dust, dirt and rock I don't know but there have been quite a few scraps between the Chinese and the Indians over this. It is worth saying a few words about BRO at this point (in fact, should have mentioned it earlier). BRO is the Border Roads Organisation and its job is to make sure that there are adequate good roads up to the border with Pakistan in Kashmir and with China in Ladakh to enable the army to travel up to meet any incursions. And there have been many incursions on both borders (why you may ask!!). We passed dozens of large Indian Army encampments near the borders – there is an agreement that they are no closer to the actual borders than about 20 Km - but there are lots of them with hundreds of thousands of soldiers involved – often on duty marching along roads or patrolling rivers. This also means lots of army trucks, and you can imagine that when you meet an army truck on a narrow road that thinks they have the right of way – yes, you got that right.

At Pangong Lake we were staying at a resort (???) called Pangong Serai which consisted of a row of yurts. The yurts did have beds in them and showers and loos but there was (initially) no heating or hot water. Colin and I decided to spend an hour or so fettling the 118 and so, after we had added water, checked oil, etc, we jacked it up, took the wheels off and tried to adjust the steering to get it back straight. We adjusted it one way – put the car down – worse. We adjusted it the other way – put the car down – better than we thought. It was dark by now and we were covered in brick dust. We were covered in brick dust as the car park was part of a brick-making plant – obviously! we should have guessed from the stacks of bricks we were parked next to. We got back to the yurt and asked several times for hot water and eventually got it and started trying to get cleaner. Supper is served in a central hall area and is pretty good. Interestingly, the people here look much more Tibetan (or Chinese!) than Indian but I suppose that is likely to be the case.

Colin and I go straight to bed, pleased that the radiator in our yurt is now pumping out heat. After I had been asleep for about 10 years there was a load knocking on the door; what could this be? Chinese army attack? No, it is instructions about where we are to meet in the morning and at what time. I forget the information as soon as I am told it and go back to bed – two steps away. A bit later I am woken by an icy blast – it is pitch black outside (some crazy fools had been planning to go out to look for the Milky Whey) – something caused our door to be wide open. I must have failed to fasten the bolt properly or the wind gusted particularly strongly. In any case, we were now freezing. Eventually back to sleep and then up at 05.00 to get going by 06.00.

Day 8

We get up and put on all our warm clothes, Colin finds breakfast – I don't fancy any – and we head off on the road to go to our meeting point for 06.00. This is the day when we are going up to Umling La – the highest pass in the world – so we had better be ready.

We are lined up as the second vehicle in line following DCO1 – one of the group leaders. Other cars line up and then we are off. The first 25 km is on tarmac road and there is quite good discipline about keeping in line but from this point onwards we are off-road on very rough tracks and un-made roads. It is like 'whacky races' for the next 61 Km of unmade-up

roads. The trouble is, we have a long day with lots of miles to cover so people want to go fast and get ahead. Each car throws up a huge column of dust that stops you from seeing where you are going and, in our case, causes us to be covered in dust. So everyone is trying to get to the front which just results in mayhem. There was a general stop at the Rezang La war memorial where a small contingent of Indian troops held back the Chinese army in 1962. In retrospect, we should have pushed forward at this stage to get ahead of the other cars and the dust – but we didn't.

When we set off again the road became rougher and rougher and with all the cars dashing past we often had trouble seeing the road/rocks. Suddenly the car swerves to one side – we stop and look out. Two flat tyres on the navigator side. OK, we can fix that, so we get out the jacks and take the wheels off.

We have two spares but we notice, for the first time, that one of the spares is a 13-inch wheel whereas all the other wheels are 14 inches. Oh well, it will still work. So we set off again until about 30 minutes later we are on a very narrow track and an army truck comes the other way and won't move across the road. We have to pull right into the side where a big rock is waiting for us and wipes out the driver's side rear tyre. Oh oh, no more spare tyres.

Fortunately, a couple of other cars stop; one of them has an air pump that runs off the car battery and the other car has some rubber worm-type things, some rubber compound and the tools to use them. Within 20 minutes we have the tyre pumped up and holding air even though it has half a dozen 5cm rubber worms hanging out of the side walls of the tyre.

When working on fixing the tyre the Indian guy doing the main work said 'You don't recognise me do you?' it turns out that he was one of the Leh taxi drivers who chased us up the hill and he was so tickled pink that he is now working on mending our tyres.

We are back on the road again but taking it very slowly and carefully as we have a long way to go. We proceed at a steady pace for a further 20 km until the engine speed suddenly rises. Hmmm, what is happening now? A further examination shows that the car will not go forward in any gear. Even further examination shows that the prop shaft is turning but the diff is all smashed up and is what is known as 'a terminal state'.

We can fix tyres and steering and distributors but we can't rebuild a differential and the nearest one is probably 1000 km away. Fini, end of driving the 118. One of the technical team SUVs stops and gives us a tow the 20Km to the Milky Way Café in Hanle where the Premier 119NE is pronounced 'dead' by all the engineers.

It looks as though our rally is at an end when we are only a couple of hours' drive from Umling La.

We are a bit depressed; cold, very dusty, tired, hungry and now, no car. We get lunch from the army in the Milky Way Café and jolly good it is too. And then Vaneeta comes up and says we can borrow her SUV to drive up to Umling La if we get going promptly – 2 hours up and two hours back and we will be back just before it is dark. OK, so we are off.

There are two ways up to Umling La, one on a new tarmac road over Photi La and the other off-road on a dodgy bit of mountain.

Rajan recommends the dodgy mountain route but we choose the tarmac. I have had enough of off-road for quite some time. Going up Photi La, then down the other side and up Umling La is a drive with over 80 switchback turns. But you know what? in an SUV with a powerful 3-litre engine, power steering, power brakes, air-con, a heater, comfortable seats and a great view, it was really easy. We made it to the top of Umling La in 1 hour 40 minutes. We spent 2 minutes there as it was minus 10C and blowing a gale; take the photos and get out! We go down to the bottom and Colin says, let's try Rajan's route going back – so we do.

Well, it was quite fun, it was off-road but it was not dusty and it was not too bumpy it cut out going up Photi La with all its switchbacks and we could keep up quite a good speed. All was fine until we got back towards Hanle and we couldn't find a way across the river to get to the

village. How deep was the river? Well, we didn't know. Eventually, after spending 45 minutes trying to find a way around the river we decided to go through it. We made it but as the water surged over the bonnet I was thinking that I was very pleased we were not in the tiny (and tinny) 118. We got back to the Milky Way Café just as it was getting dark; we took our bags out of the 118 but had nowhere to put them.

We were meant to be staying at the Hanle House Hotel and someone took us and our bags there – and then drove off. The owner of Hanle House said that she had no rooms for us and we would have to go elsewhere. Fortunately for us, some of the other cars there had pooled their booze stocks and we enjoyed several whiskies before someone came to take us to Juley Homestay. They took me there as Colin had developed a high field force attracting him to the whisky bottles. Juley Homestay was about 10 km away and when I got there I found that it had no heating, no hot water, lights off at 21.00 (ie in about 15 minutes) and no electricity in the morning until 09.00. The bed had had several previous inhabitants but I was so tuckered out that I didn't care and just went to sleep in as many clothes as I could put on.

Vaneeta, a pretty tough woman, had prodded me in the chest in the evening saying she would collect us at 05.45 and (prod) we had better not (prod) be late (prod). I got the message and so woke up at 05.00 having just about gotten warm by then, woke up Colin to tell him the good news and we got ready.

Day 9

05.45 came and went. All of our fellow Himalayan Challenge participants went. But at 06.30 a Toyota L200 pick-up truck headed down the track to pick us up. The pick-up was driven by a guy who called himself 'Alexander the Great' – he said that was the best translation of his Indian name and that he came from a fighting tribe in India. I mentioned that we had tribes like that in England; one of them is called Millwall Football Club. The other guy was Bala, a seventy-year-old Sikh whom we had met right at the beginning of our adventure. They would take us to Manali and then down to Chandigarh.

The first problem was to get into the pick-up. ATG had an enormous loudspeaker taking up all of the back seat space. It was only with the greatest of difficulty that he was persuaded to put it vertically so Colin and I could get in. And then he had such a pile of junk all around him that we ended up jammed in and not very comfortable – and two long days driving ahead.

We set off and ATG certainly wanted to go fast with little care for his passengers. After Colin and I had been bashed into the roof of the truck several times and/or had the 60 lbs of speaker bash into us I explained to ATG that he should go more steadily or his speaker would be flying out of the window – propelled by me. He took the message, up to a point.

The road from Hanle to Manali is about 450 Km, ie a very long way on broken or off-road conditions and it goes up and down some very well-known passes which were very beautiful as they were covered in snow.

But most of the time Colin and I slept as we had a lot of sleep and oxygen and rest to catch up on.

We got into Manali and checked into our hotel, very nice, ordered a couple of drinks and had a hot shower each. As tonight was the end of the Rally party at a posh hotel someway away. We got our shirts and jackets on, a couple of gin and tonics each had made us feel a lot better and we went to the party in a taxi. It was great to see everyone back together letting their hair down and having fun. I focused on collecting the names and addresses of all the people we most wanted to keep in touch with. We see Ragan and Rajiv who both expressed disappointment that the 118 had not made it.

I didn't bother to point out that a bit of better preparation would have resulted in a better outcome as I'm sure that they knew that already.

We went back to our hotel and went to bed. In the morning we had breakfast and waited for ATG and Bala – we will be ready to go at 06.30; don't be late were their last words.

We got going at about 08.30 and started on the road following the river to Mandi. Manali and Mandi both look very British Empire with lots of large bungalows set into the hillside. But the recent floods had taken a terrible toll on the towns, the roads and the people.

Eventually, we came away from the hills and back to the plains and suddenly the temperature was back to 37C again.

This time it felt great. We drove across the plain south to Chandigarh where we said goodbye to ATG and Bala and settled back into the Taj hotel – the best hotel we had stayed in by far.

Back to Delhi....and LHR

The next morning we had a long lie in and at lunchtime someone dropped us an SUV that needed to be taken back to Delhi. We set off and drove very steadily and arrived just before dark. Checked into the ITC Hotel Dwarka, ordered a taxi to take us to the airport in the morning and we were all set.

Virgin Atlantic wafted us back in Upper Class and great comfort which gave me some time to catch up on my jottings – I hope you have enjoyed them.

Linda came and collected us from LHR, what a hero and our adventure was at an end. It was a Challenge; it was a Himalayan Challenge; but we had done it.