

# **Peking to Paris 2019.**

## **Day 01. Great Wall - Hohhot. 595 km**

If anyone was in any doubt as to what day it was, the carpet in the elevators spelled it out to them in large letters. It was Sunday, and today was the day when it all was to begin. Peking to Paris, a rally adventure with its own peculiar motive force and one of the most life affirming, life changing journeys that anyone can make, rolled away from the Great Wall of China one more time.

There had been thunder overnight, with a bit of lightning and some heavy rain. This made for a restless night but, if nothing else it cleared the air so that when we walked to the cars in the pre dawn half light, the sharp cool of the morning snapped everyone into action before breakfasts were gulped down and luggage was secured to the cars.

An early start was the order of the day. The run from the hotel to Badaling was only 65km but no-one wanted to be late and miss their date with destiny. Within a few hours we would each be sketching out our own rough drafts of another epic chapter in the Peking to Paris story 112 years since Borghese, Pons et al set off into the unknown.

In addition to the rally, a troupe of dancers, drummers, acrobats and ceremonial lions had once again made the trip to the antique stones of the Great Wall to give us the send off we deserved.

As the 7.31am start time approached, the air was crackled with tension and emotion. The first car over the line was to be the Belgian three wheeler and five minutes before the flag was waved, Gonnissen turned and kissed his Inge, it's been a long way to Beijing for him and he's not underestimating the challenge of getting to Place Vendome, but with Herman Gelan his navigator up front, he's confident that they can do this and bring the first ever Contal from Peking to Paris.

The drum beat was incessant and rose to a crescendo as every subsequent car pulled up the line and was flagged away by the Hero MD Patrick Burke, whilst Tomas de Vargas Machuca looked on with due respect.

Ahead of these 105 intrepid crews lies the adventure of a lifetime and the numbers are astounding. In 14,000 km and 36 days they'll cover 114° of longitude, pass through 1,300 waypoints and 8 time zones whilst transiting through 12 countries.

Naturally there was a huge Chinese presence as well as the friends and loved ones who'd been bussed up the start and, as usual it was at times difficult to see the start gate through the thickets of selfie sticks and camera phones which always seem to spring up whenever the Peking to Paris rally rolls into town.

From the ancient environment of the start line, the way to Paris leads firstly along a modern expressway, which was a good way for the crews to settle themselves into the rhythm of the rally but, after a mere 4km however the crew of the White Pullman steam car had to take a break on the hard shoulder to adjust the burners.

For those not requiring this sort of attention though the only issues were the slow lorries which gradually thinned out the further we got from Beijing allowing us to appreciate the landscapes we were driving through. Vineyards, wind farms, solar farms and stands of newly planted trees rolled along the hillsides alongside us before we turned off the highway to a Passage Control on the outskirts of the walled town of Zhuolu. This is where the tempo of the day shifted and for the next 80km the crews were taken back in time on a selection of unmade roads, alongside well tended fields, through hidden villages and across fast flowing rivers.

Some veterans of the modern event said this this was probably the best opening day of Peking to Paris they'd seen.

All good things come to an end though and soon enough we were back in the modern world with a Time Control in a fuel station cafe in Yangyuan before a run to the first ever competitive section to be held in China.

Tim Guleri and Raj Judge's 1948 Bentley Bobtail however had to sit out the fun thanks to a blown crankshaft gasket on a section of expressway.

The *Up Up and Away* Test was a closed road hillclimb with expansive views over terraced fields and sections of the old wall.

Everyone who drove it loved it although Jo and heather Worth may be looking at a late night appointment with a panel beater after their brush with the concrete parapet on a tight right hander.

By the time the crews had reached the top of the climb, they were on the home run and for most it was plain sailing although Bruno Lang and Christopher Oechsle were slightly delayed thanks to a broken brake pipe on their Volvo Amazon P220.

The drive into Hohhot and the night halt was a spectacular one by any standards. Hundreds of tower blocks sat between brand new four lane highways perched on countless concrete pillars, whilst cranes and scaffolding marked out neighbourhoods not yet built. This city, if not the whole country seems to be building for the future and, given the traffic we encountered on the way into the hotel, some of us were glad of those sage words of advice given to us by the Traffic Police way back in Beijing.

Over dinner and a few drinks in the modern and well appointed Juva Grand Hotel it seemed that everyone had a story to tell. Whether it concerned a navigational "mishap", a mechanical issue or one of the incredible sights we'd seen along the road.

There's a slightly easier start for us tomorrow so the *reflections* on such an amazing day may well go on a little longer.....

Syd Stelvio