

# Peking to Paris 2019

## Day 11. Kochevnik camp - Aya. 450km

Our first full day in Russia was a truly stunning one. The Altai Republic is a genuine hidden gem. Because of its remoteness there's a real frontier feel to the region and the lack of development - roads; housing, roads and infrastructure - only adds to the special feeling you get as you drive through the mountains, down into the rolling valleys and along crystal clear rivers.

The villages seem not to have changed for a century or more and it would be easy to imagine that you were driving through the set of a Tolstoy novel; weathered log cabins, animal pens and gilded onion domed churches gave way to small stands of silver birch trees - the first of many that we'll be seeing over the next week.

Although the roads seemed to roll between ridges, summits and valleys it was literally downhill all day though as we dropped from the campsite at 2200m to the Aya hotel which sits at a hot and humid 220m and over the course of the day we enjoyed superb tarmac, well graded gravel and what the Himalayan Challenge crews would be able to describe as an *intermittent metalled surface*, which is best described as a series of potholes joined together with either tarmac, gravel or a mixture of both.

Despite the seeming lack of people in the area, there were plenty of enthusiastic rally fans lining the road as we passed by and when they weren't watching the clock, the crews were kept busy handing out stickers, postcards and, in some cases packs of coloured pencils to the children. There was even the odd invitation to step inside one of the cottages, to enjoy a cup of tea and a sweet biscuit or two.

The timing was a little more relaxed today so no-one was under too much pressure which meant that when Andreas Pohl and Robert Peil's Mercedes punctured, they were able to get it sorted by themselves and do bit of glad handing as well. There was even time allowed for a bit of sightseeing and 30 minutes had been built into the schedule for a quick visit to the Denisova Cave complex.

Sadly, Scott and Chance Perekslis have a bit more of a task on their hands tonight though. Their Chrysler's rear axle and diff broke within 30 km of the hotel and all that Jack Amies and Russ Smith could do was to call a flat bed truck for them. The Russian support crew, who are now with us, are masters of the impossible repair though so we don't think that this will be the last we'll see of them.

Tomorrow we push on through Mother Russia but tonight we get to enjoy clean sheets, flushing toilets and showers. We did take a moment to remember the plight of Andy Inskip and Nikolai Ishkov however, the selfless sweeps who stayed behind in Olgii yesterday afternoon with several cars which failed to make the border before closing time. So today's a holiday when the border is actually closed we don't expect to see them until Novosibirsk.

Syd Stelvio