

Peking to Paris 2019

Day 15. Novosibirsk - Irtysh Hotel. 630km

Today was the longest day of the rally so far and there was a border crossing to negotiate as well but, perhaps because it was a Sunday morning, the drive got off to a good start on excellent and empty highways.

Siberia however has something of a fearsome reputation so, even after the warm (and sunny) welcome we'd received in both the Altai Republic and Novosibirsk, we should not have been surprised, to see this so far benign region, bare its teeth and remind us of its more savage side.

The day had dawned dull, damp and drizzly but there was no sign, as we left the sanctuary of the Marriot hotel, of what exactly was to hit us by midday.

All of yesterday's washing, cleaning and polishing was to be undone in but a few short hours and, by the time we rolled into the night halt most of the cars - and some of the crews - looked worse than when they'd left Mongolia.

Given the way that the rain was falling by lunchtime, the cultural highlight of the day, a visit to a German Village, where they were celebrating the start of summer, turned into the ironic highlight of the rally so far. When we arrived in this neat little town, we found hundreds of revellers sheltering beneath tarpaulin sheets, under gazebos and inside open fronted marquees. It was dark, it was wet, and it was gloomy. There was no sign of any summer to celebrate.

Hovering around the Time Control waiting for the clock to tick over, we could see that Alex Vassbotten's sheepskin flying jacket was soaked through and probably weighed as much as he did. Bill Cleyndert however couldn't believe his luck as this was the first time he's been in a car with a proper roof for many a rally.

From the German Village, the route book then told us that the road turned to gravel. But that was before the weather made the entire section much more entertaining by turning it to mud. And, any rally fans brave enough to face such a deluge were richly rewarded by the sight of almost every car slipping and sliding its way along a 5km track. Such was the viscosity and abundance of the mud, that both drivers and navigators were at times required to reach out and clean the windshield in addition to carrying out their more usual roles.

Thanks to the conditions then, it was a filthy set of rally crews who presented themselves at the Kazakhstan border by mid afternoon but, as usual the Kyrgyz Concept crew of helpers, had done the hard work for us and we all breezed through with the absolute minimum of fuss.

As well as the fun and games though in the dirt though, there was naturally some hard work to be done and, early on in the day we saw a soaking wet Brian Scowcroft struggling inside the Chevy's engine bay, to repair a broken throttle linkage.

Serge and Jacqueline Berthier were supposed to be 'enjoying' their first day back on the rally after their Jensen failed in Mongolia. Sadly though they spent some of the day being towed by the ever helpful Arkadai of the Russian Motor Federation, after their alternator

failed before arriving at the night halt with a battery borrowed from one of the Organisers Hilux vehicles.

Shortly after the Kazakh border, a soaking wet Graham Goodwin was seen sat by the side of the road desperately looking for a reason as to why he'd lost the oil pressure in his Bentley. As the leader of the rally, Graham's blood pressure must surely have been rising as quickly as the gauge was falling away but, thanks to his knowledge of the car and the attention of the sweeps, a blocked oil filter was diagnosed and the problem was quickly sorted.

After such an epic day most of the crews would have been happy with a bowl of soup and an early night, but the buffet spread which the Hotel Irtysh had laid on for us was superb and coupled with the ample bar, gave most of the rally a pretty good excuse for staying up a bit later than usual.

Syd Stelvio