

Peking to Paris 2019.

Camp 01 - UlaanBaatar 315km

As the sun rose over the first morning of camp life, so the slumbering crews stirred themselves from their tents and began setting up for the day ahead.

Breakfast was the first priority and as they had last night, the chef's and kitchen staff had laid on a fine spread for us with eggs, cereal, yoghurt, tea, coffee, fruit In fact, just about anything you wanted was on offer.

To add to the generally civilised atmosphere, the organisers had decided on a reasonable start time as well so, most of the rally had until at least of 9.00am to enjoy the food but, such was the excitement for the day ahead that most instead decided to get back to their cars to do some more spanner checks and to brush up on the navigational side of things. Today was all about the wilderness and no-one wanted to leave anything to chance.

Boris Gruzman was still out in that very same wilderness though. He hadn't made camp last night as he'd got bogged down in sand somewhere off rally route, so he and son Elliot had spent the night awaiting rescue along with the big silver Jag'. Salvation arrived soon after breakfast in the form of the HQ team comprising Gavin Bull and Alan McNaughton who hooked up their Hilux and pulled the big cat and its occupants free from the mire.

Once they'd left the vicinity of the camp, the rally was pitched straight into the Time Control sections which would define the day. Chris Elkins and John Spiller had between them devised a fast but realistically paced cross country route which also required no small amount of input from the navigator to keep the car on the right schedule and the right road. We saw almost no tarmac for 250km of the days route rather spending the day pounding over gravel, dodging rocks or scrabbling through sand.

It was a tough day though and consequently along the route, there were several breakdowns, some serious and some not so.

Rene Backx and Jef Augustyns lost the throttle linkage from their Bentley Speed 8 but found a pair of willing helpers in the form of fellow Bentley drivers Jean Vincent and Marcel Peumans who lost two hours of time for their troubles.

Pete Zimmerman and Jonathan Newhall's Buick Coupe ended the day on a truck headed for a workshop in UlaanBataar for some remedial welding work after the rear suspension mounts failed. And, a mere 5km down the road the pretty little Fiat 124 Spider of Enrico Paggi and Federica Mascetti sat waiting patiently for some assistance to fit new dampers. Nick Wade and Steve Borthwick feared the worst when they heard a "new rattle" from their Ford Deluxe Fordor but thankfully this turned out to be nothing more than a broken bonnet hinge.

Without any mechanical woes to deal with and, as if to prove that no matter how hard the rallying is there's always time for a bit of horse play, we saw Renee Brinkerhoff deep in conversation with a local man and was soon off riding his sturdy little pony over the steppe whilst her navigator, Calvin Cooledge sensibly sat in the car keeping an eye on the time.

The experienced crew of Mark Buchanan and Ralf Weiss suffered one puncture today, but this caused them little trouble and within minutes they were back on the road.

Nick Grewal and Dirk Burrowes were not so lucky and their 1940 Packard 110 Deluxe lost a rear wheel which in turn caused a ruptured brake pipe. This meant two lengthy stops to first repair the wheel and replace the studs and then, once they'd realised that the brakes were affected, to repair the hydraulic line. Jo Worth, whose Volvo had run out of fuel shortly before a filling station stepped up and offered some brake fluid so that all the crew had to do was get the line sealed temporarily before making a proper repair tomorrow.

There was heavy traffic on the run into UlaanBataar this evening which certainly didn't suit the White MM Pullman steam car, but it was seen chuffing steadily along the highway into the setting sun just as the rest of us were racing towards the buffet.

Our night halt is at the Blue Sky, a superb hotel in Central UlaanBataar and as tomorrow is a rest day, the crews are likely to make full use of its facilities as well as making sure that their cars are ready for the next few days which will likely prove to be challenging ones.

Syd Stelvio