

Peking to Paris 2019

Day 18. Balkashino - Kostanay 588km

It was a chilly, damp but sunny start to the day and, as we packed up the tents with frozen fingers and tucked into a superb Krgyz breakfast, some of us reflected on the fact that we're at the halfway point now. And, by lights out tonight, slightly more than half of the distance of the rally will have been covered, as well as half of the amount of days ticked off from the route book.

It's an odd feeling. There's relief at getting this far and overcoming some of the "impossible" but there's also a certain sadness with the realization that all good things do indeed come to an end.

The day itself was another epic cross-country blast with three Time Control Sections thrown into the mix just to keep the crews on their toes.

First up in the route book though was one tight, tarmac lap of a biathlon training center which rose and fell through dense woodland. For the vintage cars in particular, this section required some deft footwork and some serious hauling of the wheel to get around the circuit in the best time.

Then it was back onto the open road and into the care of the Kazakh traffic police, whose diligence and understanding of the Peking to Paris Rally must be commended.

There was once again some serious mileage to cover as Kazakhstan itself is a vast country and one with massive differences in infrastructure, from the modern and cosmopolitan Nur Sultan right through to the traditional wooden villages we saw this morning. One thing's for sure though. Wherever you are, you're never far from a fuel station and, for the price of a beer in the Shangri La Hotel in Beijing you can fill your tank here.

In fact, compared to the petrol, buying lunch seems quite expensive but, the cafe at the Chelgashi Time Control did a brisk trade in chicken noodle soup and meat pastries which Alain Lejeune and Christian Chavy declared to be delicious and worth every penny.

Some of us suffered though with mechanical gremlins along the way. Anton Gonnissen and Herman Gelan's Contal suffered a broken chain early in the afternoon but this was easily repaired.

Alex Vassbotten's Alvis though finished the day on a trailer after its gearbox started making a strange noise shortly before the lunchtime Time Control. We're all hoping that he and Randy Marcus can get the silver bullet repaired quickly and will rejoin us somewhere down the road.

Andreas Pohl's Mercedes had a brake pipe failure but Alan Smith and Rob Kitchen rode to their rescue and refined the hydraulics.

David and Jo Roberts suffered more of a setback today, however. Their Sunbeam slid into a ditch just after lunch and also ended up on a truck.

Thanks to Nikolai Ishkov, our Russian speaking sweep, the car was safely collected and tucked up in a workshop by sundown.

David and Jo will probably not start tomorrow, they'll be busy looking for suspension and steering components.

For the rest of us we're heading back to Russia.

Syd Stelvio