

Peking to Paris 2019

Pre-start. Car collection day.

Welcome to the 7th Peking to Paris Motor Challenge, the showcase event of the 2019 season for the Endurance Rally Association.

Once again, we're staying at the fabulous Shangri La Hotel in modern, downtown Beijing, which has become the unofficial Chinese home of the Peking to Paris Rally since we first pulled into their carpark in 2007.

Crews have been arriving over the last few days for some sightseeing and acclimatisation time but the rally schedule kicked off properly yesterday afternoon when we were all summoned to attend a briefing by the Beijing Traffic Police.

Getting your temporary Chinese driving permit depended on this, so the room was filled to capacity and every one of the crews sat in silence taking on board some useful hints and tips pertaining to driving in China.

Today though was all about collecting the cars and, after breakfast, a fleet of buses took the 210 competitors the 40 km through the city to the customs warehouse where they were to be reunited with their pride and joy.

Beijing was hot today though; and with the mercury at 33°C, the atmosphere in the warehouse was febrile, suffused with the scent of gasoline and hydraulic fluid and was, as usual, slightly emotional.

Everyone knows that there's a hard road ahead of them but the the road to Beijing has also been a tricky one for many. Endurance rally car preparation is as much alchemy and art as it is engineering and no small amount of blood, sweat and tears will have been shed to get to this point so when the doors of the warehouse were opened the crews rushed in they pretty much ran to their cars. Except Tony Brooks of course, who limped up to Cadillac on the crutches he's still using following the Flying Scotsman carpark slip.

Today is when it all starts to get real, and the view across the serried ranks of vehicles, which ranged from 1907 all the way through to 1976 was an impressive one.

The biggest car was the 7668cc Rolls Royce Phantom I of Dom Bernaz and Juan-Carlos Torres whilst the smallest was the 700cc of the Mototri Contal of Anton Gonnissen and Herman Gelan.

Incredibly there was also a steam car driven by water powered enthusiast Mitch Goss and Christopher Rolph, a Ferrari 208 GT4 driven by Giorgio Schon and Enrico Guggiari whilst Gonnissen and Gelan have possibly trumped them all by bringing their three wheeler to the party.

Melvyn, Mark and Jeremy and Kate from Cars Europe had been in town a bit longer the rest of us and they'd dutifully unpacked every vehicle, cleared customs and completed the compulsory police checks so that all the crews had to do was arrive collect their keys, sign on the dotted line and turn the engine over.

After such a long sea voyage however, there were obviously a few non starters but the sweeps were quickly onto the problems and soon had them running with the pack.

Once they'd pulled away from the warehouse complex, the first test for the crews was to find some fuel and then to pilot themselves through the endless concrete canyons of Beijing, along rivers of tarmac running deep with traffic, back to the safe harbour of the hotel.

Along the route, our automotive dinosaurs stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb amid the throng of electric cars, scooters, hybrid taxis and bicycles though Mitch Goss's steam car was trucked back to the Shangri La for practical rather than mechanical reasons - such a car does not go well in slow moving traffic.

For the duration of our stay, the carpark of the Shangri La has been reserved exclusively for us, so the rows of Tiger Economy Audi's, Range Rovers and Bentley's were shunted to the side streets and over the course of the day their bays were filled with Endurance Rally machinery.

Once the crews and their car had reached the sanctuary of the parking lot they quickly go onto the inevitable sorting, packing and checking which as tool boxes, spares and luggage sat alongside their vehicles whilst the crews looked for weaknesses, oversights or omissions. Luckily there's not much you can't buy or have made in Beijing.

There was also the small matter of scrutineering to get through whereby the cars were checked for safety and compliance by the sweeps crews led by Tony Jones, Andy Inskip, Bob Harrod, Rob Dominy and Russ Smith.

There was also plenty of paperwork, practicalities and formalities to be completed and, as usual the ERA Office manager Eleonora Piccolo led the charge in the signing on department, alongside husband Alan and Sian Mills from the results team. Pete Stone, in a dark corner next to a power socket, was charged with programming over 100 Garmin GPS units with the all important waypoints and route information. Signposts and traffic directions are still a bit thin on the ground in some parts of Mongolia.

To finish off an extremely busy day there were drinks on the lawn in the evening, under a magnificent Beijing blue sky, followed by a traditional dinner where the Chairman of the Hero Group, Tomas Vargas de Machuca formally welcomed everyone to the rally after which the rally adjourned to the bar where discussions re rally strategy and planning went on till late.

Whilst we were busy living the high life and getting ourselves ready for the off, Dick Appleton and Chris Mills - the 48 hour car - left us this morning and we won't see them again until Ypres, we wish them bon voyage and hope that they don't have too much to do en route.

Tomorrow; no doubt there'll be more last minute alterations and adjustment. The clock is ticking and the tension is building.

Syd Stelvio