

*“Under no circumstances should you drive in India!”*



# GLOBAL ENDURO

## SUMMER 2009

A personal anecdote by  
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**“O**kay,” said the doctor at the Tropical Medical Bureau. “So neither of you has ever been to India before.” “Well, apart from your medical needs the other bit of advice I can give you is that under no circumstances should you drive in India”.

On hearing these words the nervous anticipation of this upcoming trip went into overdrive! Should we tell him that the purpose of our trip is to complete a 2000km endurance rally? Prior to this my main concern had been getting through this ‘mad’ idea of a trip without my wife June breaking her leg for a third time. (For those of you not in the know we have had to reschedule a couple of planned trips previous to this due to June breaking her leg!) Along of course with avoiding the infamous ‘Delhi Belly’ and scorpions in the bedroom. Now it seemed we had another cause for concern. However, the trip was planned and no matter what we were going!





As we arrived at LHR Terminal Four and met our fellow 'Global Enduro t-shirt clad' car enthusiasts our trip truly began. The last chance to turn back had passed! We were about to embark on what would become the trip of a lifetime! We were a terrific mix of entrants- a farmer, two ladies of leisure, a redundant trucker, a Tornado pilot, a fashion buyer for Harvey Nichols in London, a baker from Ireland, a game park manager from Africa and a granddaughter of Paul Raymond who had just inherited £640 million. In essence we were a bunch of people all doing something we never thought we would. Global Enduro is a company that specialises in organising worldwide Endurance trips, their main focus being on raising money for deserving charities. Our group of thirty cars contributed over £130,000 divided between The Rainbow Trust and UNICEF.

Having flown to Mumbai we then flew on to Goa which is where our Indian driving experience began. We had a doctor in our entourage whose opening words on meeting us will stay with us forever: "When driving in India, unusual is the norm, the unexpected happens with monotonous regularity, and every day you will experience something you previously thought impossible". We soon learnt that there were no truer words spoken! In addition to this Indian surgeon was his wife, a University lecturer in Culture and

History who gave an informative daily talk on the area we would, or more correctly, should, be travelling through each day!

The organisation of designating cars got underway and as we were handed the documents for car number 13 I took this as a bad omen and protested strongly that in all my years involved in organising rallies number 13 was never allocated, I should have saved my breath to cool my porridge! Following this 'organisation' we were introduced to our cars and a fellow driver asked what side of the road we should drive on. The official answer was "the left, the right and the middle". Subsequently this proved to be correct!! Another piece of valuable advice was that "size matters, but regardless of size buses take priority, and if a bus has its lights on, it's coming through". And they do!

In 35 degrees Celsius heat and high humidity we were asked to check the 'map' of the bodywork of the car to assess any damage. More head scratching. Where do we start?! All the cars we were using were rented from locals and we were informed we would be paying for any damage done. We thought it would be more appropriate to check some of the following safety essentials:

*Handbrake* – a lever was where it should be (some cars were without). However it was totally seized.

*Air Conditioning* – a non-

functioning pump

*Power Steering* – a pump, but definitely non-functioning.

*Tyres* – all remoulds, probably several times over but once you had four in place, no worries!

We completed our 'extensive' checks which were followed by a group briefing on the daily checks we were to make. Oil, water and most importantly, HORN. Someone asked about lights and indicators to be answered by 'pardon' and many nervous sniggers. The cars were all Ambassadors or affectionately called 'Ambies'. Basically a Morris Oxford of uncertain age. Ours had an Isuzu diesel engine of 1500cc. We were soon on our way for a short 'familiarisation' trip. As June would have her head in a road book most of the time she set about the surprisingly difficult task of locating the seatbelt. We eventually found it, all be it very dirty!

Now to 'The Road Book' – a masterpiece drawn up by a local. We eventually learnt that 'straight through' a town actually means find a use a 'bypass'. This just being one example of the local's fine mapping skills! Let's just say we were glad to have brought a compass. A chase van carrying three mechanics and three medics took up the rear, in theory. More about that later. Driving this heavy, underpowered motor with a floor mounted clutch and a top mounted brake pedal my interest in

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agricultural machinery was re ignited! June also did quite a bit of the driving and managed very well. In India, the basic rules of driving are as follows: 3 – It is your responsibility to get out of the way, 2 – You must pass anyone in front of you and 1 – it is essential to pass anyone who passes you. For the average driver this may have caused some concern, but with a motor sport background, to us this just sounded like fun!

Even though we were mostly in the countryside, there were smiling, happy people of all ages everywhere. The excited faces and the cheers of these lovely people as we passed along will be in our memories forever along with the million magic moments we experienced. In many of the villages we stopped at the children loved to get their photos taken and were full of excitement when many, for the first time, could see their

picture on our little screens. We would be forever humbled by the joy this brought to these happy children. In one of our culture talks we heard 'Billy', the doctor's wife tell us that it would take two lifetimes to tell the story of India. This certainly seems true to us.

The longest day saw us driving 13 hours and covering a distance of 405 km. We averaged only 25km/hr due to the conditions, getting lost and stopping at the wonderful (once we realised there was no alternative) 'roadside' cafes. Here we enjoyed small sweet bananas (always something we could peel!), biscuits (wrapped), great chat and hospitality. We had been warned repeatedly to check the seal on all bottled water, as it was not unusual that bottles were refilled and resold. This is understandable in a country with four hundred thousand people 'officially'

living in poverty and earning less than one dollar fifty per day. Of the ten richest people in the world, three are Indian. It was interesting to see TATA on almost everything from trucks to sea plantations. They also own Jaguar and Land Rover.

There was a Royal Enfield mounted man whose job it was to try and round up missing Ambies. It was a thrill to follow him as much as possible and admire his weaving skills. He told us he had an MG and was thrilled when we gave him an MG shirt. It was always a wonderment to us how more people were not lost as we had no maps because they were only printed in Indian. One day we (well really June!) got what the organisers called 'stupidly' lost and we were awarded 'The Muppet', which one was required to display on their car for a day.

There were three awards, 'The







*Muppet*, *'The Skid mark'* and *'The Spirit of the Rally'* award. *'The Skid Mark'* was a huge pair of aertex underpants with horrible brown stains awarded for the scariest (witnessed) incident. These had to be worn over your own clothes for the day. I'm glad to say we avoided that one, but we did share *'The Spirit of the Rally'* award with another Irish crew. There were three Irish crews and two of us were the only two cars that waited while some other cars were being repaired. The repairs failed and we both ended up carrying another crew and their luggage for four hours in the dark. This turned out to be the most exciting evening. We were never meant to be out in the dark, but luckily our lights 'kind of' worked so we were able to see the trees or the potholes by dipping, but not both!

It was during this 'illegal' night drive that we learnt that about half of

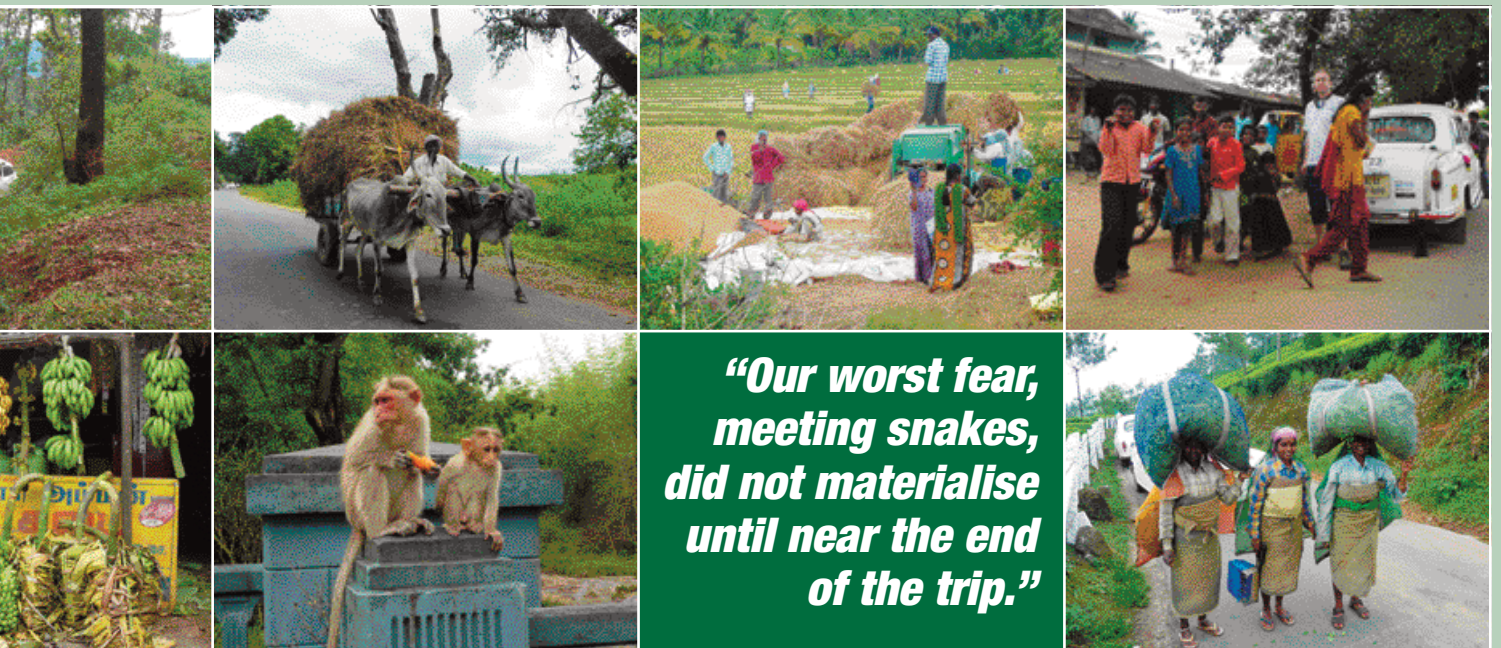
the other vehicles on the road don't use any lights. The other thing is that many of the cows are black and often lie on the only bit of tarmac. As we were told, in all seriousness, that if we hit a cow we should get out of India as quickly as possible, this wasn't good news. The two Irish crews in question ended up having a challenge match to reach the coffee shop that we had been told was en route. After a fabulous four hour drive in the dark, overloaded and on mostly unpaved roads with steep drops, hairpins and steep climbs we came upon the infamous coffee shop in the forest, on stilts. Here, in 'the best coffee shop in the world' we thoroughly enjoyed great coffee, omelettes, cakes and 'craic' in the early hours of the morning. This was as well as it was another two hours drive back to our lodgings and on arrival all the food was gone. Some mornings we were

required to start at 5am. Just as well the next day was not one of those days!

Our worst fear, meeting snakes, did not materialise until near the end of the trip. Although others did see some before this. We had been warned to keep all bags tightly closed. Our lack of snake sightings was probably due to being too busy looking out for 'decorations' for our car along the route as there was a prize at the end for the 'tackiest' decorated car. This, the truckers do with great success!

It wasn't long before we realised the importance of the horn. The drill is that on seeing another vehicle you blow your horn, they blow back and then you know they know you are there. It is said that Indian drivers blow their horn twenty two times per kilometre. It seems a lot more! Although alarming at first, the

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practice of using both sides of the road works very well, especially in cities at rush hour when otherwise one side of the dual carriageway would be empty. As we said everyone takes responsibility for everyone, it just works!

We were told never to use the indicators, it confuses everyone! Indicating in India means you are turning or I want you to pass! One lady driver in our crew unfortunately proved this as she indicated right into an upcoming fuel station. A bus behind her saw the indicator and thought the lady wanted them to pass. Just as she moved right the bus approached at high speed and was forced into a drain on the right. As it tethered on the edge the only thing that stopped it overturning was that all the passengers piled to the window openings (no glass) to see what was happening. This manoeuvre entitled this lady to *'The Skid Mark'* award the next day.

This trip through India was not called 'Enduro' for nothing and we had been warned that we would be tested to the limit at times. This was never truer than our night's stay in 'Beach Huts'. Looking forward to a shower, a cold beer and a meal makes a hard days driving worthwhile, but on this occasion the trickle of funny coloured water from a pipe in the wall changed our mind in our ensuite hut. Pigs getting through the gaps in the wall would not have been a problem, but any of the other 'wildlife' in the area would not be welcome. I see in June's diary entry that day that the toilet actually flushed, an unexpected event!

Regardless of hygiene, the beer and the fresh Naan bread cooked in a pot while we watched the cows

wandering up and down the beach made for an amusing evening. One of our lady crew learned the hard way not to go skinny dipping without someone guarding her clothes and bag containing her wallet, passport and other such important things. We abandoned the singsong around the campfire on the beach early that night as we had a 6am start. Having examined our bed with torchlight and inhaled the mouldy smell I decided it was time to call on a sleeping tablet, our own emergency sheet and our 'mossie' net. The best bit of breakfast was the sea view!

Two nights in jungle huts were wet and interesting and on our early morning safari we were the only people in years to see black bears. Just before we arrived at the safari there was a tourist who had left the radio on in their car. They returned to find it wrecked by an elephant who had hit it several times with his trunk, and when the radio didn't stop he turned it over.

Having heard this story, when we came upon a lady crew in the Tiger reserve with their car on fire June took the job of tiger lookout while I got them motoring again.

Overloaded trucks were the norm and as June drove a steep hill descent with twenty-seven hairpins I had time to see some of the amazing on road repairs. Axels, gearboxes etc. and a digger trying to pull a truck back onto the road, most of which was hanging over the edge. The smell of burning brakes added to the excitement of it all. From listening to our fellow travellers we learned it was best not to stop at any police checks. The most common request from the police was for an environmental certificate, which in fact does not exist. A cash 'fine' was required. We managed not to stop at

any of the checks. One such escape took us down a road off the intended route. We were lucky to find some fellow competitors later. Due to heavy trucks the coffee plantation roads were very rough. Our group burst seven sumps in one day; luckily we were not included in this. These were fixed on the side of the track by our travelling mechanics. I was amazed at how far these cars could go once the oil slick had stopped! Changing remoulds was a very normal procedure. We were all amused when Fritz, the racing driver, burst his sump and seized the engine. It's true what we rally lads say about racing drivers! Fritz's desire to always be out in front did not go unchallenged!

As we were told the unusual was the norm and from filthy accommodation and sometimes four-star hotels to stunning scenery in tea plantations high in the mountains life in India was always exciting.

Before we went to India we were told we would hate and love India in equal measure. This proved to be an accurate assessment, but with the passage of time the bits we loved are coming to the fore. Two thousand kilometres south along the west coast and fourteen days later we departed Cochin in the beautiful Kerala, exhausted but exhilarated. And so we will fondly remember our final driving moments, crossing the finish line full of highly charged and mixed emotions. As we pulled into our parking space beside a huge decorated elephant the local band added to the momentous occasion. This was a fitting end to a marvellous adventure. Dressed in local attire we enjoyed our last supper as a group and toasted the wonderful people, culture and memories that will remain in our hearts forever.