

Paris to Peking (in an M.G. Y-Type!)

Editor's note: Several years ago my friend Sid Beer, who sadly passed away a couple of years ago, asked me to convert some 8 mm cine films on to video for him. This I started to do, but was astonished to see on some of the films shots of an epic trip that was taken in 1978 of a journey from Abingdon to Peking!

S. J. Perelman, the noted humorist and writer who wrote many of the scripts for the Marx Brothers films, owned a 1949 MG YT Tourer car which he had purchased in Bangkok. Later he drove it to Paris and in 1978 decided that he would return to the Far East in the very same car!

This time Perelman decided that he would take along a couple of traveling companions. One of them was the renowned MG expert Sid Beer and Eric Lister a London gallery art director, who was also no slouch at engine maintenance.

– Ken Smith

Notes from Geoff Allen, Rectification Engineer, M.G. Cars

Sometime during the summer of 1978, our senior foreman, Jack Mansell, called Peter Duffield and myself into the rectification office where Sid Beer, Bob Ward, the works manager, and Jack Butler, MG paint shop foreman were in attendance. Bob explained that Sid J. Perelman, the scriptwriter for many Marx Brothers films was planning to drive his MG Y-Type tourer from Paris to Peking.

Where Peter and myself would be involved would be to prepare the car for such a trip and where necessary updating it to increase reliability. Ever since the 1930s as a spotty faced schoolboy sitting in a fourpenny seat in the Stirling Cinema at Kidlington watching such masterpieces as *Duck Soup* and *A Day at the Races* I had been a Marx Brothers nut, and have never missed one of their films to this day on TV. So, to be working on Perelman's MG was quite a pleasure and a revelation.

A few days later, Sid Beer arrived with 2C1-794 a black Y-type, 1¼ liter tourer. We had it in rectification for a couple of weeks and to the best of my recollection gave it a full service and also wired in a trailer tow bar cir-

cuit as the car was also to pull a two wheel trailer loaded with the necessary spares.

We fitted a new Lucas battery (the latest available at the time) and made up a custom wiring harness from scratch, with each corner of the car separately wired and fused. Late type headlamps with Halogen bulbs were also fitted. I recall that we also fitted an alternator to replace the dynamo and we also installed uprated rear lamps and fog warning lights.

Quite a lot of spares were also loaded into the MG, including a battery, fuel pump, headlamps units and a full range of spare bulbs. These were all to be loaded into the trailer later. I don't think we saw the trailer again until later, after the car had returned to be photographed outside the factory for the 50th Anniversary Celebrations of MG.

After we had completed the modification, Sid came to the Factory to collect the car on his trailer towed behind his MGB-GT V8. After being photographed by the press and others, I drove the Y-type onto the trailer while Sid took cine film of it being loaded, after which it then left Abingdon.

Our three intrepid travelers were commissioned to send a series of reports back to the *Sunday Times* who

were sponsoring the trip. One of the stipulations for entering China was that there had to be a Chinese driver, also a Chinese interpreter for the run into Peking.

Thus there was only room left in the car for Perelman!

They sent back several reports, but unfortunately, a strike in the news paper industry cut this part of the exercise off before the journey was complete.

Sunday Times

September 3, 1978: Perelman: Only 10,000 miles to go.

Roy Perrott reports from Paris on three men in an MG.

“THE GREAT Paris to Peking expedition, otherwise known as Three Men in an MG, got away to a smooth start from the Arc de Triomphe yesterday with S. J. Perelman, the noted humorist and traveler, comfortably at the wheel of his veteran car.

With an estimated 10,000 miles still to go, Perelman's sporty-looking canvas-topped tourer (a 1949 model, but still going strong) managed to take a wrong turn off the Champs Elysees on a too westerly compass course. However, showing the same dexterity with the wheel that he shows with words, the nimble driver soon swung back eastwards. “As the French essay, it was a retreat in order to leap forward the better,” explained Perelman in a farewell message, watched by a concourse of curious French pedestrians.

The avowed aim of this oddly gallant expedition is to commemorate a half-forgotten event, the Paris to Peking road race of 1907 when nine pioneer motorists took up the challenge of a French newspaper and

hurtled across Europe and Asia in a duel with time and hardship. One of their number arrived home with one replacement wheel carved from wood in Tibet!

As Perelman explains, he still needs to be bruised by experience. He can hardly fail to get the right abrasions on a route that will take him and two companions via Vienna, Istanbul, New Delhi, and then by way of either the Himalayas or Singapore to the end of the oriental rainbow. If they can gain permission to enter China, where foreign drivers are not allowed, it could be a significant diplomatic advance.

Like all the best journeys, from the Odyssey onwards, the trip clearly has the elements of uncertainty. Joining the trio on their tightly cramped vehicle for the London to Paris warm-up stretch, I was impressed by their nonchalance. The

windscreen wiper went “phut” in a heavy shower on the road to Dover, but Perelman was hardened long ago by years of scriptwriting for the Marx Brothers. A look of blank anxiety appears behind his gold-rimmed spectacles only when things seem to be going right – for too long!

Cruising at a steady 50 miles an hour, which is about the best this veteran MG can do unless pushed hard, the team continued to reflect on Perelman’s navigational strategy, that it might be necessary to slow down to miss the tail end of the Indian monsoon season.

However, the expedition has some solid experience beneath their light-hearted surface. The second member of the team, Sidney Beer is an expert on old MG cars, and how to fix them. Eric Lister, a London art gallery di-

rector, also knows his engines and the hazards of far-flung road travel.

“Months of dedicated planning are behind us,” claimed Perelman. We recalled that he had packed and repacked his two suitcases many times to get the kit absolutely right, but admitted that he still ended up like the rest of us with the last few bits and pieces in a plastic supermarket bag!

While the trio are clearly depending upon their unquenchable spirit, rather than any heavy or logistic sup-



port, they clearly have a few groceries behind them as Groucho might say. In the tiny trailer behind the MG are packed mosquito nets, sleeping bags and sun hats, as well as iron rations. Also oilskins – “For wear inside the car,” Perelman stresses, the canvas side flaps being suspect in anything above a heavy shower.

Indeed, in a light breeze the resonant flapping noise they make can be guile the passenger into the sensation of rounding the Horn in a square rigger. The team agreed that the absence of noise had made modern motoring by comparison somewhat drab.

“Sheer music,” said Perelman, hoisting the collar of his bush jacket defensively against the wind. Perelman and company will recount their adventures in the *Sunday Times* in due course.

Russell Miller in the *Sunday Express*: Perelman to Peking

Another epic adventure led by an American has reached the advanced planning stage in London. Mr. S. J. Perelman, the noted humorist and traveler could be found closeted in his hotel room in Kensington, checking his navigation equipment for the journey of a lifetime – overland from Paris to Peking in a 1949 MG Tourer.

So far his navigation equipment only extends to a few press cuttings and a slim volume which is alleged to include details of the roads between here and China, but Mr. Perelman is anxious to avoid the trap which befalls so many expeditions – over preparation!

Thus it is that his car, which he purchased some 30 years ago in Bangkok, (where else

would S. J. Perelman buy an MG Tourer?) is being tuned by a team of mechanics “drawing heavily on the inexperienced advice of sundry bystanders.”

On the provisions front, Mr. Perelman says he has already purchased some cans of iron rations and a bag of nuts and raisins for one of the party, who happens to be a vegetarian. In addition, he is ensuring that he is in the peak of physical condition for his arduous ordeal by strenuously avoiding press-ups.

Like all great adventures of our time, this one has not been without its setbacks. Mr. Perelman, who has reached the fine age of 74, originally selected as his traveling companion and mechanic, a blonde amazon from Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

“She knew zilch about engines

but she was a dazzling creature, six foot two inches of dimpled beauty,” Mr. Perelman explains. “I think she was in love with a white hunter in Kenya and hoped we might be passing that way.”

Unfortunately, this lady secretly proposed writing a book about the trip, a proposition that did not go down well with Mr. Perelman when he heard about it at a cocktail party in New York. The blonde was hastily replaced by two Englishmen – Mr. Eric Lister, a London gallery owner, and Mr. Sydney Beer, and MG expert – who are nothing like as pretty, but at least have no literary pretensions.

The three men in an MG plan to leave London some time next week. From Paris they will take what Mr. Perelman calls the “Southern” route across Central Europe to the Balkans, down to the Aegean coast of Turkey, into Iran and Pakistan, and then into China, all being well via the fabled Karakoram highway.

Mr. Perelman has visited all these countries before, but then, he has been everywhere. He followed up writing the film script for *Around the World in Eighty Days* by doing it himself and recorded his experiences in a book entitled *Westward Ha!*. Later, he went round the world the other way and wrote *Eastward Ha!* So far the only title Mr. Perelman has conceived for his forthcoming trip is the rather formal Anglo-American Paris to Peking Expedition.

He is confident of reaching his objective. “I have a perhaps totally unfounded belief,” he confessed, “that the Creator will look after me. I have been told that if the car breaks down, it should not be too difficult to repair, and I can’t see why anyone should try and hold us for ransom.”

“Should provisions run short, Mr. Lister, the vegetarian, can live on roots and berries. As for Mr. Beer and myself, I am told that worms are terribly good nourishment, if you are really driven to it.”

Sunday Times September 24, 1978.

Here’s an excerpt from one of Perelman’s telegraphic dispatches back to England written in his inimitable style.

Flies pursue Perelman on trek east.

“In spirited 15-day transit of France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Iran, fraught with non-incident, the Marco Polo Perelman trio arrived in Teheran with the gallant little MG dusty, but undaunted.

En route we paused for the weekend in the Black Forest to visit fantastic Schlumpf vintage car collection. Now operated as a chamber of horrors by workers to illustrate capitalist greed. Also drank Baden Baden waters to undermine constitutions for balance of journey.

Beneficent German friend bestowed six dozen canisters of orange juice to ensure vehicle be followed by a trail of flies across the former Hapsburg Empire. Confused in Vienna search for hotel, we spent night in Kongresshaus for visiting communist delegates, where staff clearly marked us for CIA agents!

Torrential rains in Budapest where we dosed down in the world’s most demented motel, with pointy little dog house cottages, which we crawled into, and left yelping pitifully the next morning. Balkan meals so unspeakable we were forced to fall back on chunks of compressed sawdust, oats and honey supplied by Eric Lister’s health food restaurant.

Beyond Sofia, nearing Turkish frontier, some complex oil feed in viscera of the MG, developed cramps worse than our own, demanding deep surgery by brilliant Sid Beer.

Our ensuing progress through sloping tortuous alleys of Istanbul, towing trailer, forever surpasses all vintage car rally records. The Sublime Porte, unhappy to relate, is less sublime than ever, polluted with noise, dust and heat. Our subsequent three-day jolt across Turkey’s unlovely highways loosened long cherished inlays in everyone’s teeth

Inching eastward cross-country towards Erzerum, we formed a company entitled “Reminders Ltd” which will retail a line of novelties designed to quench forever tourist appetite for auto travel in the Mideast. Such items as little flasks of indigenuous toilet odors, named Essence of Lavabo, and others containing whiffs

of carbon monoxide discharged by international lorries. Also laminated packets of broad beans swimming in oil and tainted shish kebab. The coup de grace befell us at the point where required formalities to stroll in this Persian garden, plumbed the depths of bureaucracy measureless by man.

However, as Algernon Swinburne or Dorothy Parker once said, “Time wounds all heels,” so we now press on towards Afghanistan’s mighty summits and the Khyber Pass.”

Following the conclusion of their trip the gallant little Y-Type was brought home to Abingdon to be featured in the 50th Anniversary celebration of MG cars, at the G Factory, and the *Abingdon Herald* reported thus:

This grand old lady came home to Abingdon last week after traveling halfway round the world, braving earthquakes, monsoons and all the other hazards of foreign motoring.

Thirty years old, but far from finished, the MG YT Tourer had just completed an overland trip to India. And anyone with a word of criticism about the famous MG name shouldn’t utter it within earshot of 60-year-old Sid Beer who was one of the trio who took the car on its epic journey last year.

For Sid has an enviable collection of vintage MGs among the 60 odd cars at his Huntingdon home, and the way the YT handled on the marathon epic has only increased his affection.

The YT was bought in Bangkok by American journalist S. J. Perelman and when he decided last year to travel from Paris back to Bangkok, he approached Sid for help and eventually companionship on the trip.

“The car went superbly, the only thing that needed replacing was the petrol pump. It went so well in fact, that we were ticketed for speeding at 70 mph in Hungary,” said Sid.

This was just on of the hundreds of offbeat incidents which made the trip unforgettable. The Hungarian traffic cop who stopped them was obviously intent on retiring early with the pickings he made on this stretch of road! But Sid managed to persuade him that the £800 speeding fine was a little excessive and that £8 might be nearer the mark!

The trio traveled across France and the rest of Europe through the Iron Curtain countries, to Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan and into India. The journey was only halted by massive flooding.

Sid and his companions had some incredible experiences, but his lasting

memory is that they were carriers of doom. "Everywhere we went we seemed to take trouble, as we drove into the Black Forest in Germany an earthquake took place, and when we reached Iran the same thing happened, along with the start of the civil unrest." And when they finally got to

India, they were stopped by massive floods.

The car is to be featured in a week of celebrations, beginning on September 2, 1979, and will end with a huge carnival procession through

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