

THE ANNIVERSARY WALTZ

From Mumbai to Abingdon in a 1950
YT Tourer: three generations of one
family's epic MG centenary drive

Words James Elliott Photography Vinay Panjwani



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What's the longest trip you have taken in your classic car, with your entire family on board? Probably Milton Keynes to London in my case, and that was more stress than I could handle. Not fearing a breakdown in itself, but fearing their reaction if there was one. So can you imagine setting out from India to the UK in a 1950 MG with several members of your family? This is the story of Lal Pari.

Lal Pari, which translates as 'red fairy' (or angel), is a car by the way and, having been inspired by Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, it seems to be taking on the mantle of India's equivalent to Ian Fleming's fine four-fendered friend. Minus the flying.

Daman Thakore's family acquired the 1950 MG YT Tourer in the late 1970s, when he was age four. 'I had just watched the movie *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and my mother Daksha said I had such a broad smile on my face for the whole movie that she persuaded my dad to go looking for an old convertible that we could enjoy driving as a family.'

Daman's father found this little red MG YT Tourer, which was instantly dubbed Lal Pari after the hero of the bedtime stories that Daman's mother used to tell, Lal Pari being the character that always saved them whenever they were on great adventures. And so it went on to prove.

'I've practically grown up in it,' adds Daman. 'It has been part of our family ever since and we used it for all birthday parties, visits to the zoo, picnics. In my teenage years I used it to go to the drive-in cinema and then for family weddings. My Lal Pari has been to 15 or 16 family weddings!'

The car remains in Daksha's name but she stayed behind to look after the Ahmedabad JCB dealership the family has

run since the 1980s and wasn't part of the grand adventure when Daman decided to celebrate his 50th birthday, 75 years of Indian independence, the centenary of MG and a whole host of other things by having the madcap plan of driving Lal Pari back to its birthplace.

The scheme was conceived in 2018 when the Gujarati businessman set out to restore the long-serving MG YT using the mantra 'back to factory'. To begin with he merely meant original spec, but 'back to factory' soon took on a whole new meaning. That nascent plan germinated over two years of restoration, and then lengthy test runs around India, to Jaipur, Kutch and Mysore among others, cemented it.

The Thakores were already a very well-travelled family that, in the course of business, had traversed India many times, whether north-south or east-west, and visited 25 or 30 countries. Daman therefore had no trouble roping in co-drivers, initially (and principally) his then-75-year-old father, Deval, and Devanshi, 21, one of his two daughters.

While Daman spent six months meticulously plotting the route, his father and uncle, 73, toiled through the Indian summer to get Lal Pari ready for the trip and 'not once did they complain'. He allowed 200-250km a day and drew out a journey officially starting in Mumbai – itself 350 miles from Ahmedabad – and running via Dubai, Iran, Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Slovenia, Croatia, Switzerland, France and the UK.

That would all go out of the window pretty quickly, but this family is nothing if not adaptable. For example, their Tata Winger support vehicle – dubbed Lal Pari Ki Saheli, Friend of Red Fairy, and piloted by friends who joined for short stints, supported by Daman's wife Uditia, as well as





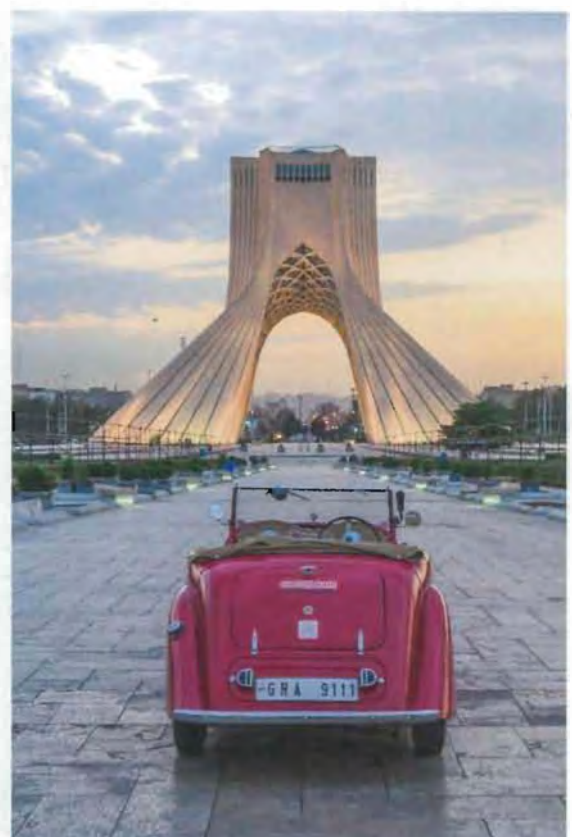
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Early stages of the journey varied from desert-like wilderness to dense urban traffic;
Lal Pari, the wonder years – Daman Thakore as a youngster with extended family.





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Lal Pari making excellent progress in Croatia, where the halfshaft needed to be replaced; close to the impressive Azadi Tower in Tehran, Iran; an Italian admiring a British car.



classic enthusiast Mukesh Bararia and videographer Vinay Panjwani – was not quite what it seemed. Stuffed with 100kg of food supplies – ‘you have no idea how hard it is to get spicy vegetarian food in Europe!’ – catering equipment and spare parts for Lal Pari, it left each member of the family with space for only three pairs of clothes for the entire trip.

In fact, having sourced a spares car for the trip in Canada, after shipping it to India at great expense – 300% import duty – they realised it was far too original and rare to break, so they kept that and found another to cannibalise for parts. ‘Now both my daughters can inherit one!’

Similarly positive was the message of love they were spreading, even if that got off to an ironically rocky start when the first part of the journey was completed by sea to circumnavigate Pakistan. On 15 August, India Independence Day, Daman’s team was flagged off in Mumbai by Mangal Prabhat Lodha, Minister of Tourism, Skill, Employment, Entrepreneurship and Innovation in the government of Maharashtra, and Nitin Dossa, executive chairman of WIAA, the Western India Automobile Association.

From there, Lal Pari headed for the coast and was shipped to Dubai and an overnight ferry to Bandar Abbas, from where the trip restarted in earnest on 28 August, not to leave dry land again until reaching the English Channel. The team had also grown by one permanent member, Daman’s wife Uditia. ‘She had decided she would be there at the start and then join us somewhere in the middle for a bit, but she enjoyed it so much that she stayed for the whole journey.’

In terms of motoring drama, that journey was almost disappointingly straightforward, though there were many hiccoughs en route. There were valve problems and ongoing issues with the spark-plugs, put down to fuel quality, especially in Iran: ‘At 7c a litre you get what you would expect; we were cleaning or replacing the plugs every day.’

The biggest issue was when a halfshaft broke in Croatia due to the elevation and terrain. Daman proudly fixed it

himself, guided over WhatsApp, and did it so well that just a few days later he felt confident enough to mischievously persuade his family that the easiest way to cross from southern to northern Switzerland was via the Gotthard Pass, at an altitude of 2106m.

His list of all the problems reads like one of those moodboards that certain business types are fond of: ‘Dubai, fuel tank side unit leakage. Clutch bearing adjustment. Wiring burnt. Glass cracked. Iran, fuel pump. Gearbox – clutch pressure plate. Bad fuel led to plug shot, multiple times misfiring. Fog lamp bracket broke. Carburettor Tehran. Alternator Zanzan. Axle and brake setting – sent. Croatia, 11 Oct, general check-up – oil, brake, plug wires. Verona, 15 Oct, head – 3rd valve, axle bearing and seal, coolant, plugs. Lucerne, 20 Oct, head – 2nd valve. Calais, head – 2nd valve. London, 1st Nov, head – valve and oil pressure pipe broke. Derby, 2nd Nov – engine oil leakage continuous. Rear axle seal – up to 20 Oct, wiper not working.’

The tolerances of the little MG were remarkable if you consider the differences in everything from fuel and road quality to 30°C variations in temperature. What remained consistent, however, were the welcome and the hospitality and the positive reaction to the equipe. They were greeted everywhere by car clubs and non-enthusiasts alike, a Swiss motor museum even helping them get specialist help. ‘Instead of raising money we wanted to raise smiles,’ says Daman. ‘And we did. Wherever we went Lal Pari would bring a smile to people’s faces, and there would be an instant connection. In one hour on a highway I counted more than 500 cars that honked or waved at us.’

The most challenging driving was near journey’s end in the UK, when Daman had to drive solo (without Lal Pari Ki Saheli) at 20mph for seven hours straight in pitch darkness, near-freezing temperatures and torrential rain with trucks thundering past at three times his speed on the M40 and M1. ‘I had three cylinders, no wipers and barely any lights.’

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Left, from top

With not so far left to go, landmarks include Rome's Colosseum, England's South Coast, Paris's Eiffel Tower and – within striking distance of Abingdon – London's Buckingham Palace.



Finally, in Abingdon on 31 October – Indian National Unity Day – the journey officially ended at the MG Car Club's Cecil Kimber House, where the adventurers were greeted by club president John Day and others. There was then a ceremonial handover of Lal Pari's specially commissioned silver Sardar Patel Statue of Unity bonnet mascot (bearing both UK and Indian flags) to Felicity Dick, Deputy Lieutenant of Oxford, in order to be passed on to King Charles III.

Lal Pari had covered 12,000km in 73 days, been driven for 8-10 hours a day (when not 'resting'), the amended route consisting of 14 countries, cruising at roughly 30mph with two people in the MG at a time for the most part. 'It's 46 horsepower; for every person you add, you lose 10mph.'

It must have been quite an experience, regardless of speed: 'In order to be able to do something like this, you must be very privileged. To be able to drive through Europe in my own car, through Switzerland, past Buckingham Palace or the Eiffel Tower... well, I didn't imagine that in even my wildest dreams. When we set off we didn't have bookings anywhere, but we had the entire route planned, where we would start and stop every day, even for lunch.



'As soon as we started we realised we were not going to be able to follow that because it was up to Lal Pari and what she wanted to do. It was that realisation that allowed us to relax and enjoy the experience, to make detours, to stop at places we liked the look of and to spend time with people we met. Or to have breakdowns. If you make time for yourself, the lack of speed becomes an advantage, it forces you to slow down, experience everything properly and connect with people.'

And the family got on? 'We have always travelled as a family, which means you can share the joy a lot more. And it stays with you a lot longer. It bonds you and keeps you connected. But 75 days is crazy! We survived it because we all put sticking together above our personal concerns. It wouldn't have been impossible without Udit, who was our glue and our shock absorber in keeping three generations together. Having clear roles and the family trusting me to get them home made it easier.'



And finally, I bet you felt pretty heroic when it was over? 'Briefly, but our achievement was constantly being put into perspective by the people we met. In Tehran there was Mr Omidvar, a 94-year-old who rode around the world on his Matchless in 1953 and somehow learnt the Indian national anthem on his way through 93 countries. He sang it to us and we were moved to tears. Or the German cyclist we met who was covering 5000km in a single month around Europe. There we were, pretty pleased with ourselves for doing something extraordinary, then there's this guy who has just picked up a bicycle and is going 5000km. And you just lower your head slightly and think: "Yeah, yeah, well, that's actually pretty intrepid."' **Carl**