

Essays

On The Road

From Peking to Paris in a 1932 Plymouth.

BY MARK WINKELMAN | **One hundred and six automobiles have ignited their engines next to the Great Wall of China, and a comedy of testosterone is breaking out.** Some drivers are revving their Packards or Ford Model A's and burning rubber on the tarmac, like drag racers itching for 10 seconds behind a wide-open throttle—which would be fine, if not for the placement of the finish line. We have 9,000 miles to go to Paris.

I'm driving a 1932 Plymouth PB3 coupe. American cars of this period were made to handle American roads, which is to say, not very good ones—a manufacturing standard that should come in handy as we traverse the Mongolian steppe. But whereas the metal body plates on Chevrolets and Fords of the late 1920s were typically attached to ash wood, this Plymouth was one of the first of its era with a steel body. Just as importantly, it has four hydraulic brakes and mechanical systems that are easy to fix. I'm not such an expert—though my father owned a garage in the Netherlands and I grew up around cars—but this model is simple. Even a blacksmith somewhere in Kazakhstan with a hammer and a screwdriver should be able to fix it if it breaks down. With the exception of a modern suspension system, it is authentic to its period. I did take one additional precaution, though: the hood ornament will not be along for this ride. It's a lot easier to repair a bent rod than to replace a vintage flying goddess statuette.

The flag drops, engines roar, and the rally begins. People fly out of the starting gate like lunatics.

It takes four weeks to make our way through Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran. I can't remember ever having been so exclusively focused on one relatively narrow objective for such a long time.

On a flat road like the Pennsylvania Turnpike, this car would max out around 55 or 60 miles an hour. It might reach



Elsewhere



65 if I push the pedal flat on the floor, but everything is shaking and moving at that point. When you are on a desert track, you're doing well if you can manage 30 miles an hour without getting stuck in loose sand, or having a wheel fall off in a giant rut.

Mongolia resembles what the western United States must have looked like 150 years ago: dry plains and vast prairies, no roads, endless vistas with mountains in the distance, and no rivers to speak

of for days and days. We encounter very few people, and those we see inhabit a mesmerizing middle ground between the nomadic and the modern. Setting out from moveable tents, people run up to our car on camelback, trying to capture the unlikely sight with the snap of a cell-phone camera.

In Iran, these encounters take on a less friendly edge. Boys by the roadside whoop with excitement as 20 cars pass, but by the time the 25th comes along they have found a new game, which is an attempt to wreck your windshield by throwing rocks at the passing cars. Their elders bristle with aggression, starting at the border crossing, where every conversation veers into confrontation. Things happen that would have been unimaginable in the places we've just come through. One of our competitor's cars is robbed in the middle of the race. Young men on motorbikes simply

side up at full speed, open a back door, and take a bag right off the seat. Some make a similar attempt on our car, but my navigator tries to punch them in the face and I, with adrenaline boiling over, aim our car directly at their speeding motorbikes.

As the Islamic Republic disappears in the rear-view mirror, my partner and I are in third position in the pre-1941 vehicle class. For a car that was designed for ordinary people in the United States, not racing, it's a remarkable performance. Having nearly crossed the whole of Asia, we can start to smell the finish line—but then realize there are still almost two weeks to go, driving as much as 500 or 600 kilometers a day without rest days. Can we keep our machine—and ourselves—going?

In eastern Turkey, an elderly farmer apparently lacking in driving instruction tries to answer that question for us. On the patchy asphalt of a narrow country lane, he comes straight at us on the wrong side of the road, and makes no move toward the right one. I slam the brakes, swerve out of his path, and land in a ditch by the side of the road.

We pull the Plymouth out of the ditch to discover that the front wheels are pointing in different directions. Our tie rod, which is supposed to keep them aligned, has bent. So we're standing by the side of the road, no hammer-wielding blacksmith in sight, as rain pours into the mud. Race clock ticking, we take out the tie rod and try to bend it against the bumper. It's slow going. A passing competitor tosses us a pipe. We slip it over one end of the tie rod for leverage, and finally muscle the thing more or less straight.

We've lost two-and-a-half hours, dropping about 10 spots in the standings, by the time we climb back into the car.

Our handwork gets us all the way to ... eastern Greece. The crash has taken a hidden toll on the differential in our rear axle, and it catches up with us when a tooth in the crown wheel breaks. This is a problem to foil all the blacksmiths and probably half the mechanics on the Aegean seaboard, no matter how many hammers and screwdrivers

they can muster. Losing your crown wheel means having to find a new one, and enduring a complete standstill until you do. For us, that means calling in for a replacement from Portugal, getting it onto a plane to Thessaloniki, and working through the night to make the Plymouth whole.

We don't win, but we make it to Paris in time for the Place Vendome finish. After seven time zones, 11 countries, and all manner of roads and ruts, the Plymouth is in one piece, while the driver and navigator have lost more than a few pounds. We finish with an official time of 287 hours, 24 minutes, and 8 seconds logged at the steering wheel. That's 34 hours behind the winner, but good enough to beat more than half the cars in our class.

And for my wife and family to rest assured, as they spray me with champagne, that I won't do it again next year. ♦

Mark Winkelman WG'73 is a University trustee who lives in New York. Though his Plymouth PB3 doesn't have a bumper sticker to say it, his other car is an Aston Martin.



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