

THE CHINA RALLY 2011

The general plan for the China Rally of International Classic Cars 2011 had sounded great. Pre-1970s cars would be shipped from all over the world to Tianjin, the port for Beijing. Following a sightseeing pre-rally tour, the cars would be retrieved from their containers and driven to the Great Wall, some sixty kilometres from Beijing, for the opening ceremony. Thereafter a six-day run would commence taking in scenic countryside, temples, acrobatic exhibitions etc and eventually finish in Shanghai, some 1600 kilometres to the south, to be followed by another sightseeing post-rally tour.

Australia was well represented with Buick Club members Alan and Lois Haime in their 65 Cadillac Convertible (because of the pre-1970 clause, otherwise a Buick would have been on the high seas) with Harold and Gail Hitchcock; Harold serving as navigator. Other Buick members were Ian and Margaret Baxter in their '46 together with Kevin and Melda Hadwen. Veteran Car Club members were Malcolm and Judy Powell in their '62 MGA. Another Aussie couple were Peter and Veronica Eaton from Clare, South Australia in their 1927 Whippet. The full complement of cars entered in the rally is listed in the table below.

Year	Make & Model	Country of Origin
1927	Overland Whippet Model 96	Australia
1929	Austin Seven	China
1929	Hotchkiss AM80	Belgium
1938	Horch 853A	Germany
1947	Buick Super Series 40	Australia
1947	Ford Super Deluxe	USA
1949	Zim A312 (Russian)	Netherlands
1950	Simca 8 Sport	France
1955	Rolls Royce Silver Cloud II	China
1958	Mercedes Benz 190SL	China
1958	Porsche 356A	Belgium
1959	Cadillac De Ville Two Door	Belgium
1960	Porsche 356B Roadster	Germany
1962	Dodge Lancer	Switzerland
1962	MGA	Australia
1963	3 x Porsche 356B	Italy
1964	Cadillac De Ville	UK
1964	Mercedes Benz 230SL	Switzerland
1965	Cadillac De Ville	Australia
1965	Mercedes Benz 230SL	Italy
1965	Austin Healy MKIII	France
1969	Mercedes Benz 280S	China
1970	Redflag CA770	China
1972	Shanghai 760	China
1972	Redflag CA770	China
1973	Shanghai 760	China
1975	Citroen 2CV4	Netherlands
1988	Lancia Thema 832	Italy



Proposed China Rally Route Map

The Chinese Redflag was an amazing vehicle. It looked as though it must have been designed by a committee, combining various cars to get a certain look. The '72 model and was even longer than our Caddy so must have been about 230" or 5.85m long! The backseat area was enormous and the car must have been made for ferrying politicians around. Even though China is a communist country and supposedly everyone is equal, some Chinese are more equal than others.

However because numbers signing up hadn't been too great, rules were relaxed and there were some 1970 + cars in the rally. It was too late for us as the Caddy was already on the way to China by then.

All the car crews were great people and a lot of fun. Some didn't speak too much English but we all managed to make ourselves understood. Very little English seemed to be spoken in Beijing and certainly not out in the boonies. If they were speaking English, you didn't recognise it.

When we were applying for our Chinese visas, we had to supply a list of hotels we would be staying in. When we reached Beijing we headed into the city in pouring rain to a completely different hotel than the one we expected to stay in. This set the tone of how things were organised from then on. None of the hotels we actually stayed at were listed in the pre-rally literature.



The Redflag limousines

An ominous sign at our hotel in Beijing was the fact that when Harold ordered his pre-dinner beer, it was warm, actually just off the shelf. The beer was a Tsingtao which was a nice beer and eventually we impressed upon the waitress that it had to be served cold. The staff only seemed to speak two English words - "very sorry".

Buffet meals at the hotel were pretty ordinary. Not many dishes were labelled in English and those which you supposed were a hot dish didn't have the little lamps lit under them. Some of the chicken dishes were knobby and chewy and we later found out were chickens knuckles!

However it was an opportunity to clap eyes on the rest of the rally crew and put faces to names. Despite China being a tea drinking country, you couldn't get a coffee or tea after your meal. Or anything else – it was a bit like Peter Seller's Balham cafe! Finally one night Alan and I went to the a la carte restaurant in the hotel where we had a superb Chinese meal and a great bottle of Spanish Rioja wine.

When we were driving around Beijing in the coach, there was much head-turning as modern Buicks were spotted everywhere. We saw the big Lacrosse, the smaller sportier Excel, a Buick 7-seater the Buick Escalante SUV. Another very popular car was the Chevy Cruze which I spotted as a Holden Cruze back in Australia. A Buick dealership in Beijing was huge with 100s of cars on display in the front yard.

I asked our tour bloke Yang (pronounced Yung) what the cost of a Buick Lacrosse was in China. He said about 250,000 Yuan which was about \$40,000 AUD. I understand they are cheaper than this in the USA - perhaps about \$35K. Obviously there are a lot of cashed up Chinese as the Buicks were numerous on the roads.

The pre-tour consisted of long (interminable) drives through Beijing (what an enormous city) to various sites such as the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, the Summer Palace, Tiananmen Square, the Bird's Nest Olympic stadium and the swimming cube. Beijing is a big modern city and credit has to be given to the Chinese for how far they have come.



Lois at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing

On Monday 12 we headed off to Chengde which was about a two and a half hour drive north west of Beijing. We hadn't left Beijing until 6 pm because of our guide (Jenny) being consistently late everywhere we went. The motorways were superb. They looked like what a motorway should look like when money is no object.

Chengde was a pretty place situated on a river. There was uproar on arrival because our guide had taken us to some eating place which was probably a breach of the Health Act. Half of us were taken to our hotel and the other half, perhaps hungry by 9 pm braved the restaurant. The next day we ventured out to see the Mountain Resort. This was like walking through scenery from a willow pattern plate, with curved bridges, temples and willow trees. After a lovely lunch (at a clean restaurant) we were taken to a Tibetan temple which was quite different to the Chinese ones, having prayer wheels and more interesting architecture..

After returning to Beijing the next couple of days were to be spent in Datong, a four-hour drive in the bus. We passed on this and spent the two days mucking around in Beijing. These long bus trips caused your life to flash in front of your eyes. We hadn't come to China to spend days on buses travelling to see more Chinese temples. Apparently the scenery at Datong was great but there was the usual bus breakdown etc which meant the group getting back really late.



Australian and Chinese crews

On Thursday 14th there was a meeting to run through the Chinese road rules and the structure of the rally. We were getting closer to the run and starting to get fired up!

On Friday we had the welcoming dinner. Earlier on all our measurements had been taken and a really nice charcoal grey man's suit and a lady's suit was delivered to our room. Alan's suit was accompanied by a shirt and a tie. My suit was lovely with a white camisole top, however the skirt was made for Chinese legs and the hem was about 10 cm above the knee. This was a very thoughtful gift and was accompanied by a bag of goodies. Again some thought had gone into this with everyone being given a chop (or stamp) in the Chinese horoscope character of your birth year and beautifully packaged.

Suffering from a Chinese lurgy, I missed the dinner which apparently was at the end of another long bus trip. Alan informed me on his return about midnight that there were major holdups with the cars! Perhaps we would get them on Monday! This was the start of the unraveling.

Sunday should have been the Day One of the rally with the cars being collected from the port of Tianjin some 140 km away on Saturday and driven to the Great Wall for the opening ceremony. We all went by bus to the Great Wall. At least this was an opportunity for people to walk on the wall which was very steep at this point.

A very nice BBQ dinner was provided and gave the rally members a chance to mingle and chat. It was then back on the bus for another long trip to the Ramada Hotel, arriving about 10.30 pm.

Confusion reigned. Perhaps this is why Confucius took this name (real name Kung Fu Tse), the Latin probably means multiple stuff ups. Some of the group wanted to return to the Wall to see the Chinese cars drive through an archway and head off down to Tianjin (which was pretty farcical), another group was going to take the short bus ride (about four hours). Alan and I together with the Americans decided to take a cab to the Central Railway Station in Beijing and catch the high speed train to Tianjin.

We thoroughly enjoyed the train! The station had obviously been built for the Olympics and was stunning. It looked space age! Out ticket cost 55 Yuan which was about \$8.00 AUD. The train took 30 minutes to cover the 140 km and we were soon tucked away in our hotel awaiting the others.

Tianjin is the home city of Zhou En Lai who actually kept China running while Mao ditzed around starving the people and chasing 13-year old girls. Many young people revere Zhou and think Mao was a boob but the older people still think Mao was The Man.

Rally shirts were given out that evening and we met the Chinese rally drivers who didn't speak English but were solid drinkers and were reputed to be fabulously wealthy.

Monday 19 was supposed to be the third day of the rally. Rumours were abounding about the Head of Customs being arrested for corruption and where the hell were the cars? Yang Li said a bus was coming to take drivers to the port at 2 pm. This never turned up. A bus was coming at 7 pm - this never turned up.



The Baxter Buick

A fiery meeting in the front of the hotel followed. One of the Italians, Giovanni, berated Yang in rapid, angry Italian for about ten minutes while Yang stood looking inscrutable. At one point I thought he might have lost it and became scrutable but he didn't. The Italians were convinced their Porsches had been nicked by the Chinese and flogged off.

On Tuesday 20th the drivers were taken to the police station in the morning to get Chinese driving licences. At 4 pm the drivers were taken off in the bus to the port. All navigators were given a GPS so your position was known at any time. While this sounded very caring, it is probably standard practice when travelling in a communist country. They like to know where you are.

The owners of the Horch and the Dodge Lancer decided at this time to just ship their cars back to Europe and fly home. One of the Belgian ladies said she had never spent so much on a holiday but found herself counting the days until they could go home!

On Wednesday 21st Alan and other drivers arrived back at 2 am with the cars after incredible rigmarole dealing with officials and starting cars with jumper leads. We finally started the rally at 10 am after a brief sleep and breakfast. Not a good start to a 600 km drive down the motorway at high speed together with half a million Chinese cars on the roads as well.



The 65 Cadillac at the start of the rally

That evening we arrived at a small city called Xuzhou (only about 2 million people) about 7.30 pm at night. The escort car took off through the lights and left everyone behind. The Hotchkiss was hauled over by the police but luckily another escort bloke sorted the situation out. We eventually arrived at the hotel which was right in the middle of the city and was definitely on the grubby side. The luggage bus arrived at about midnight which was a bummer.

The Yank, John from Montana arrived about 4 am as his car was some 28 km away from the other cars at the docks and there were all sorts of problems getting it released.

On Thursday 22nd we drove off in Xuzhou heavy traffic which was scary as the Chinese don't know the concept of keeping in one lane. We called in a museum to see the Han entombed warriors which were quite different from the ones at Xian, these ones were 30 cm high which wasn't too enthralling – they were more like the Leprechaun Warriors!



Not all cars are equal!

We followed the Redflag cars out of town. At least these blokes knew where they were going. As said previously, the motorways were excellent and the fuel stops were pretty good with 93 and 97 octane fuel readily available. We arrived in Nanjing (the old Nanking) at a reasonable time and a good hotel. Unfortunately there wasn't time to do any sightseeing at Nanjing which is a really old and historic city. All we were doing by now was driving flat out down the motorways. This wasn't what the rally was supposed to be!

Friday 23rd was the last day. We stopped out in the country somewhere for fuel, a lunch stop and a chat. The men's' toilets had the occupants coming out gagging which I thought they were putting on but this was genuine. Most of the blokes walked to the bushes instead of going inside. China certainly has a big gap between rural areas and the high tech end of town.

This was the last afternoon and all the cars took off for the last hundred or so kilometres into Shanghai. The suburbs of Shanghai start this far out, population being 25 million. The three Caddies looked big and awesome sitting on 80 mph down the road, the Italians were driving their cars with their usual Joe Cool, devil-

may care attitude, the little Citroen was right up there darting across lanes, the Whippet was thundering along in all its glory with its corrugated iron roof. All it needed was a couple of white leghorns in the back seat. The 46 Buick could be spotted occasionally through the traffic, definitely a stand out vehicle. Every Chinese car had to have at least one person hanging out the window taking photos of the cars. It was a miracle there were no bingles. The Europeans are very good at driving in heavy traffic and were changing lanes with aplomb.

The Chinese get good use out of their roads. The emergency stopping lane is regarded as a useful adjunct to passing on the inside and then whipping across to the outer lane with at least 2 cm to spare from your front bumper. Alan found that the Caddie has a very loud horn and used this to good effect and Harold flapped his arm to keep cars away as we changed lanes.

The cars wheeled into Shanghai and parked all safe and sound at a car museum complex. While dashing across to the museum toilets we had a quick look around. The museum was wonderful with some stunning cars on display. However true to the arrangement procedures on the rally, the museum was closed just as we arrived and we couldn't see anything.



The 27 Whippet in all its rustic glory!

All the cars had to line up and the President of the Classic Vehicle Union of China welcomed everybody to the rally finish. As the cars drove over the red carpet the driver and navigator's names, and the year and make of the car were read out. One of the Italian navigators (a bloke) had shoulder length hair and was called "Mrs". It was hilarious to hear the pronunciations, the lady couldn't even attempt Ian Baxter's name. All this was accompanied by a Chinese clarinet player tootling away with "Yankee Doodle Dandy".

We eventually left and hoped to head to our hotel which was located near the airport. As per normal, the escort cars whizzed on ahead and we seemed to drive aimlessly through the suburbs of Shanghai for about two hours. Eventually we were led into a park where there was a restaurant and a dinner laid on for us.

Uproar broke out as by this time it was approaching 9 pm and most people wanted to have a shower and a few drinks as these endless drives through Chinese traffic lights (which are only a rough guide) are pretty unsettling. Things were calmed and then Yang informed us that there was no room to park the cars at the hotel anyway! This was a car rally and we had been booked into a hotel which had no rooms for cars!. Anyway the cars had to be left in the park and were guarded by what looked like Chinese militia or storm troopers with dopey plastic helmets on. Everyone was eventually bussed to the hotel which was great, a Howard Johnson (or Ho Jo in the USA).

The next day we were told that the airport close by was not the one most of us were flying out of! This was really good planning. Most were departing from Pudong Airport which was a two-hour taxi drive away. The blokes were taken to retrieve their cars from the park area and then they drove to the port area.

Alan and I had at this time decided we had had enough sightseeing of Chinese temples and accompanied by an Italian couple, booked into the Marriott which was in the heart of Shanghai, the staff spoke English, we were on the 49th floor and had drinks and nibbles on the 59th floor. The shopping was great down Nanjing Road and we thoroughly enjoyed the Bund. Two really good days smoothed out the previous cock ups and anxieties.



Last day in Shanghai on the Bund

On the Monday, we took the Maglev train to the airport which took all of eight minutes. It was only travelling at 300 kph instead of the usual 434 kph but was certainly a great way to travel.

I think at the end of everything, the organisers meant well but they were totally out of their depth and really hadn't thought things out properly, especially dealing with government agencies in China.

At the moment the Caddie is still on the high seas. For another version of the rally please see the following website <http://www.collectioncar.com/blog/Guy/>.....

L M Haime (WA Buicks)