

Panama - Alaska 2008

Just occasionally, a particular moment remains in your memory for ever. One such instance occurred for us during the long hot summer of 2008. I remember thinking "life doesn't get much better than this" as we relaxed whilst enjoying a cool drink in the balmy air on a Pacific beach. The end of another perfect day in our 1960 Austin Healey as we watched the Ocean rollers crash onto the sand and the huge red sun gradually set over the horizon. Only two weeks into the rally and we had already enjoyed so many varied experiences to last us a life time – and still we had another six weeks to look forward to!



Having been on many short competitive rallies and several long distance Classic Car events ranging up to three months per trip, I can truthfully say that the two month Panama Alaska rally in the summer of 2008 was the most exhilarating, enjoyable, eventful and enthralling rally I have ever been on. It was certainly well organised with an excellent and accurate road book where emphasis was not only placed on ensuring one could easily follow the chosen route for the day, but it included masses of information regarding 'not to be missed' sites en-route, restaurant recommendations and petrol stops etc. A great deal of work had gone into the planning and this effort certainly paid off.



A long distance rally is a completely different 'discipline' to a typical Classic Car competitive rally. Challenges are still there in abundance but they are different from the time keeping, map reading, constant speed and driving skills that are required in a competitive rally. Personally, I find these longer trips increasingly more enjoyable to the extent that I am now concentrating on participating solely in such ventures where the challenge is to keep the car on the road for a couple of months. It is also a challenge to find oneself driving in a tiny cocoon with the same co-driver for weeks on end - particularly if that co-driver is your spouse! But such rallies are really all about seeing the world, its people and its sights and marvelling at its diversity and interest.

For those who have never experienced such a trip, it is quite a peculiar and pleasing combination to be, on the one hand, part of a larger 'travelling circus' of like minded people in similar cars travelling through remote and often tourist-free routes. Being able to stop at lunchtime restaurants when recognising cars of fellow participants on the road outside in order to share stories and experiences of the day. To arrange to dine with another couple or two in the evening. To have the comfort of knowing that there are others to help out if things go wrong – in particular experienced mechanics and a qualified doctor.



Yet at the same time, finding oneself spending most of the day 'à deux'. Just the two of you in your own well loved vehicle, on an adventure where you can stop for sightseeing wherever you like, can pull in for a bit of shopping at local markets, decide to have a drink at a welcoming hostelry or, indeed do whatever you want in your own time providing you reach the rally hotel that evening and broadly keep on route so that the sweep car will find you if you have a break down.

It is this peculiar mix of independence and group travel that is such an enjoyable aspect and is virtually unique to this type of adventure.

The route for the Panama Alaska rally took us up the east (Atlantic) coast of Central America and thus largely missed the Pan-American 'motorway' which takes a constant stream of large lorries up and down on the Pacific side. After Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala (my favourite) we then crossed from Belize into Eastern Mexico and covered many miles of that deceptively large country from the Mayan sites on the Yucatan peninsula in the east through to the Pacific coastal resorts on the west and then up through Mexico City itself to the US border. In the States, rather than take the well travelled west coast route through California we drove through the lesser known but highly attractive states of Arizona, Utah, Idaho and Montana. The rally route then crossed the Canadian border and up to our rest and service days in the quaint town of Banff. We continued north through the vast Canadian provinces of Alberta, British Columbia and then the remote expanse of the Yukon Territory to the old wild-west town of Dawson City with its unpaved roads, boardwalks and abundance of saloons before crossing the quiet northern international border into Alaska where we drove up to Fairbanks near the Arctic Circle before heading south to the finish at Anchorage.

The scenery throughout was, quite simply, breathtaking, be it the amazing jungles and mountains of central America, the beautiful deserted beaches of both the Pacific and Atlantic coasts, the rock formations of southern United States or the huge areas of forests throughout western Canada;



But it was the sheer mass of so many varied experiences on this rally that made it so memorable for me. The breathtaking sight of Copper Canyon in Mexico or driving up the challenging Moki Dugway road in Arizona or seeing wild bears and a lynx cross our path immediately in front of the car in Canada or, indeed, any one of the hundreds of other experiences far too numerous to mention here. (See <http://mytripjournal.com/jennybrayshaw> if interested in reading our day to day blog).

Unlike competitive rallies when most days are spent with navigator bent double over speed tables, stop watch, maps and trip meter – the lack of what are called "regularities" (the staple diet of all rally competitions) allowed time for experiences one would never have time to enjoy in a competition.



These included a swim in the eerie crystal clear turquoise waters of an underground lagoon, a helicopter ride through the Grand Canyon, a visit to the USAF 'graveyard' of 4200 mothballed aeroplanes, zipping by wire in a harness over the tree tops of a Nicaraguan jungle, exploring the maze of underground streets in a Guatemalan town, being intrigued by the well advertised 'testicle festival' in Arizona and exploring the world's largest sea-plane port in Anchorage – to name but a few

These and many more similar attractions, occurring almost daily, are what added the great interest and the fun to this GRO organised rally and set it apart from the more typical competitive rallies.

And, in their own way just as enjoyable, there were the frequent simple pleasures of savouring delicious meals of local fare; of diving into the Ocean to cool off after a long hot day and meeting and talking to so many locals all along the route who were only too keen to make friends. Our Classic cars always attracted a crowd of interested onlookers yet despite the scare stories of lawlessness in some countries, the locals were unfailingly courteous and kind whenever we needed some help.



Virtually every day we enjoyed some new experience or other of the sort that takes you out of yourself and your normal routine, the moments that you will never forget for the rest of your life, the experiences that are, in short, perhaps what life should be about – seeing the 'real' world and all it has to offer.

David Brayshaw.



