

Andrew English meets a fearless foursome planning to drive from Peking to Paris in 77-year old Austin Sevens

In 1959 John Coleman set out in his 1925 Austin Seven from Buenos Aires en route to New York. That he made it to New York, against almost overwhelming odds, is in part a testament to the remarkable qualities of the amazing Austin Seven.

Introduced in 1922, it was one of the first proper small cars, as opposed to the crude cyclecars that preceded it. Designed in absolute secrecy by Sir Herbert Austin and Stanley Edge, the Seven proved unbelievably popular and by 1939 some 290,000 were in use. It was exported around the world and built under licence in France and Germany, where it became the first-ever BMW. It has also provided the basis for many an intrepid journey, including that of the lovely Mrs Algernon Stitch, heroine of Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop*, who drove her Seven down the stairs of the gentlemen's public lavatory in Sloane Street.

None of which explains why we are standing in a Chertsey courtyard with two 1930 four-seater Austin Seven "Chummy" models and an unbelievable amount of stuff: spare parts, tents, sleeping bags, boxes of food, a toy monkey and a set of bagpipes.

A better explanation might be found in the fact that this year is the centenary of the infamous 1907 Peking to Paris race, a motor extravaganza prompted by an appeal in the pages of *Le Matin* newspaper that year: "Will anyone agree to go, this summer, from Peking to Paris by motor car?" Luigi Barzini's book *Peking to Paris* sits between *The Riddle of the Sands* and *Rogue Male* in any standard library of schoolboy literature. The exploits of this *Daily Telegraph* journalist, who accompanied Prince Scipione Borghese and his chauffeur, Ettore, in their massive *Itala* as they faced the perils of collapsing wheels, Mongolian river crossings, revolting coolies and Sakhalin highwaymen, are gripping stuff indeed - enough to have inspired 134 participants in the Peking to Paris Motor Challenge, which will be flagged away from Tiananmen Square on May 27.

Raising the stakes by a couple of shark-infested lagoons and a bottomless pit are four people who will quietly leave Tiananmen Square some 10 days earlier, with a great deal less fuss, in two 77-year-old Austin Seven Chummies. In the red car will be Sebastian Welch and Annabel Jones; in the blue car will be the husband and wife team of Kip and Carmen Waistell. But why?

"I've been wanting to do this trip for 25 years," explains Kip, the instigator of the adventure. "Back then we couldn't get sponsorship; it was the same when I tried again in 1987. In 2005 Carmen and I rode two scooters back from Kazakhstan and I started to plan a trip for this year." In a complicated arrangement, the journey is sponsored by DHL on the proviso that all money raised will go to Unicef - they hope to raise enough to buy more than 3,000 mosquito nets for children in Kenya. And the bagpipes? "I've piped all over the world and even piped a cobra out of a basket in India, so this will be another tick in the box," says Kip.

The two crews and cars have an intriguing mix of competences - although, happily, only one plays the bagpipes. Annabel is one of the best navigators you could wish for; as a friend once remarked, "she can navigate you to a win in the worst car on the event". Sebastian is an experienced trials competitor and his Austin Seven is suitably modified with a pressure-fed crankshaft and shell bearings.

Kip's car is much more original, and slower, but has the advantage of plodding reliability - although its lovely patina is unlikely to survive the rigours of Chinese roads. Unlike their fellows, he and Carmen have experienced the sort of roads they are likely to encounter. "We will not be driving after dark," he says before recounting a horrific collision with an open manhole that Carmen survived in 2005: "You cannot avoid what you cannot see." Annabel and Sebastian have attended the Royal Geographical Society's Far From Help first-aid course and their medical supplies are impressive, especially the emergency dentistry kit. Annabel has allowed two months for the journey, aiming to arrive in France for Bastille day on July 14, but freely admits they have taken enough time off for the trip to last three months.

"People have been incredibly helpful," says Sebastian. "When you tell them what you are about to do, they help out in the most generous ways, almost as if they want to be part of it." According to Annabel, they will cover 7,500 miles in total, and the route will take them into the southern part of Asia's largest desert, the Gobi. I once flew over this chilling wilderness in a jumbo jet.

At 37,000ft, there were no visible signs of life for about two-and-a-half hours: no towns, no villages, no farms, no roads... nothing. It was very beautiful but as barren as a piece of shoe leather. Thinking about this, I say farewell and walk down the long Chertsey driveway. Looking back, the two Sevens seem too tiny and too flimsy to attempt a crossing of such an inhospitable ocean of sand. As I walk on, they get ever smaller and more gossamer-like, until they are hardly there at all. It seems a mighty task for such fragile motor cars, but no doubt that's what John Coleman thought, too.

- You can donate to the Unicef appeal and follow the team's exploits via their website: www.pekingparis.co.uk.
- As we went to press we received news of yet another attempt to drive from Peking to Paris in an Austin Seven, although as Vince Leak claims his 9,500-mile itinerary will follow the original route through Mongolia and Siberia, the Chinese shouldn't be too confused. He and his two colleagues will leave Peking in their three Austin Seven box saloons on May 10.
- Watch this space for news of their progress.

The kit

Red car: Sebastian Welch/Annabel Jones.

Blue car: Michael 'Kip' and Carmen Waistell.

Navigation kit: maps and Rough Guides to Russia, China, Mongolia and Europe, satellite picture printouts, clipboard, GPS unit, binoculars, compass, pens/pencils, calculator.

Record keeping: digital voice recorder, camera, memory sticks, video camera, notebooks.

Communications: satellite phone and charger, mobile phone and charger, walkie-talkies and charger, 12v DC to 240v AC inverter.

Documents: passports, car documents, driving licences, international driving permits, photocopies and translations of all the above, invitations, travel-insurance details, credit cards, travellers' cheques, cash, address list.

Security: padlocks, money belt, lockable compartment, cable lock to secure both cars together.

Essentials: Swiss army knife, Leatherman multitool, sewing kit, LED lamps, batteries for everything, clingfilm, freezer bags, Ziploc bags, cable ties, string, duct tape, bungee cords, watertight plastic boxes, collapsible ski pole (to ward off rabid dogs and to use as a splint).

Clothes (per person): three changes of underwear/socks, swimming costume, long trousers, zip-off trousers, base-layer trousers, fleece-lined trousers, shorts, T-shirt, long-sleeved shirts (x3), base-layer top, microfleece, fleece jacket, waterproof jacket, waterproof trousers, shoes, sandals, boots, gloves, sun hat, fleece hat, bag, big pack, day packs.

Car (per car): SU fuel pump, distributor, rear halfshaft, front stub axle/hub/bearings, spare wheel, carburettor parts, dynamo (one between two cars), inner tubes (x3), inner-tube liners, gasket and emery paper, fuel hose, fuel pump, bulbs, distributor cap, rotor, geardrive, points, condenser, coil, regulator box, clutch lining/springs, wheel bolts, shackle pins, studs, core plugs, battery, engine gasket set, fan belts, connecting rod (blue car only), tool kit, foot pump, tow rope, puncture repair kits, hydraulic jack, axle stands, warning triangle, tyre-pressure gauge, petrol can, funnel, metal epoxy, Loctite, duct tape, gaffer tape, Radweld, insulating tape, plumber's tape, hose clips, Araldite, Superglue, Vaseline, LM grease, WD40, gasket-sealing compound, jointing compound, split pins, nuts, bolts, washers, 40-monograde oil (blue car only).

Camping: tent, sleeping bags, airbeds, multi-fuel stove, trowel, tarpaulin, electric lamps, hand torch/head torch, sheath knife, continental plug adaptor, more bungees, lighters/matches, cutlery, mugs, plates, bowls, tea cloths, J cloths, kitchen paper, aluminium foil, washing-up liquid, scourers, bleach, water bottles, water filter, pans with lids.

Food: 24-hour military ration packs, instant noodles, dried fruit, soups, breakfast cereals, coffee, tea, chocolate, tinned fruit, sardines, cereal bars, cooking oil, herbs, Worcester sauce.

Health/hygiene: sunglasses, lip balm, sunscreen (SPF20), soap, alcohol hand sanitiser, towel, personal washbags (toothbrushes, razors etc), insect repellent, travel washing liquid, no-peg clothes line. Aspirin, Co-codamol, Ibuprofen, paracetamol, general antibiotic with separate antibiotics for chest/gut/dental infections, Bisodol, Germolene, Dioralyte, Imodium, Movicol, anti-histamines, anti-emetic, Bactroban, Hydrocortisone cream, ear drops, eye wash, antiseptic cream, adhesive plasters, baby wipes, antiseptic wipes, crêpe bandage, zinc-oxide plaster, micropore tape, gauze, swabs, various dressings, burn dressing, triangular bandages, disposable latex gloves, emergency dental kit, dog repellent, tweezers, nail clippers, mirror.

Toys: monkey puppet, blow bubbles, party blowers, Biro, balloons, power balls, yo-yos.

Self-defence: bagpipes (blue car only).

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/motoring/2746821/With-a-skirl-and-monkey-the-adventure-begins.html>