

'Bradfield to Bombay' for Support A Child in Need

So, we made it! It was sometimes difficult, always exciting and at times somewhat frightening. Here is our synopsis of the journey...

We set off on the 23rd September 2004 (see photo below), unsure of whether the Van (from here on referred to as the 'Old Girl') would make it.



We drove from Bradfield to Dover and caught a ferry to Calais. Driving away from Calais we hit our first problem – and we had only been on the road for a day! Oil was spraying onto the back door of the van. It was coming from a pin-sized hole in the casing of the back axle. We looked around for chewing gum, but eventually bunged the hole up with gasket cement and hoped for the best. Amazingly, the repair lasted the whole trip.

Soon we were in Germany - the Rhine valley. The bridge shown in the next picture (what remains of it) is at Remagen.

You may have seen the Second World War film "Bridge at Remagen". The bridge is destroyed but there is still a monument and American Tourists, as many GI's perished taking the bridge. We motored down the Rhine, past Koblenz, to Heidelberg. Trying to find a campsite in Heidelberg we got lost and finally, at about 10 o'clock at night, in exasperation, we gave up and settled for a Truckers site back on the autobahn.

The drive through Germany was very picturesque and smooth – as we all know how good the autobahn's are. Camping at Truckers stops proved to be easy and economical – restaurant's and showers were available all the way until Eastern Europe



In Eastern Europe and well into Turkey the stops were available, but the toilets got lower and lower until the hole in the ground became the norm! At one stop Alan came out of the toilet followed by two Turkish ladies in black gowns. You should have seen his face!



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Prague, via the medieval city of Ansback and then Nuremburg, was the first major city. The picture shows the astronomical clock on the old town hall tower.

Prague was a delightful city with most sites grouped within walking distance. A favourite of many people was the John Lennon wall – a tribute constructed by locals in memory of John Lennon. We parked by the river and spent a day walking around - with Goulash and Dumplings, and very nice beer, for lunch!

The next stop was Vienna. Vienna was the one and only time we stopped at an official campsite – and decided it was too expensive (22 euros). We caught the underground into the city with the help of an Austrian / South African doctor who bought our tickets for us, as we were fumbling around with the automatic ticket machine and instructions in German. She gave us all the info on the city and what to see, including the area where many male tourists go and are seldom seen again (her words)!

We took many night pictures, of which only a few have come out, but this one shows the Opera house, from where the New Year Strauss concert is broadcast.



We tried to peek into the hall but must have looked furtive to say the least, as we were eventually cut off by the attendant and had to beat a hasty retreat. Vienna is what one might call more majestic than Prague, with many grand buildings.

The buskers in the centre were the best we had ever heard, with violin and xylophone soloists and a splendid tenor.

We walked around Vienna, appearing to be nonchalantly looking for the area where men disappear. We are not sure whether we ever found it - the closest we got was a Guinness in a rock bar, served by Yvonne and ‘Antony’! This was the last Guinness that soothed our sinuses till we returned home. Still, the hotdogs were the biggest you will ever see.

We returned to the city the following morning to see it by day. The picture below shows the old girl parked by the City Hall. On the way out of Vienna we decided to avoid paying the motorway toll, so we took the normal roads – and ended up lost in the industrial wilds of the city.



We continued en route to Budapest. As we came up to the Hungarian border, to our amazement, there were border guards with sub machine guns scanning the countryside with binoculars. Was it the cold war or was it us? We were not rush’in, or me’andarin, or czech’in our weapons, so it could not be us!

Thankfully it wasn’t, so we continued through the border! We entered Budapest at night, having been delayed by a puncture, and parked by the Danube. As was our habit we decided to walk.

A certain party misread the map; we took a wrong turning and spent the next three hours going round Budapest – the long way. It was probably the most thorough site seeing tour of the whole trip, but it was worth it. Eventually exhausted we sat down to a dinner of – you guessed it – Goulash, followed by Hungarian sausage and chips. If you have not been to Budapest then you should at the earliest opportunity.

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The picture above shows Buda on the right of picture and Pest on the left. The bridge is the famous Chain Bridge over the Danube, viewed from the Citadel on top of the hill. At night the same view is stunning.

We drove on towards Romania. Got stopped by a stropky policeman with a lecture on dangers of not wearing a seatbelt! The Romanian border was full of dodgy gypsies selling all kinds of things, hitching lifts, anxious to change money etc. We did not linger! We camped at a roadside inn at a place called Arad, where there was a very friendly and very persuasive barman. Arad went by in a blur.

Romania started off rather shabby but as we approached the mountains the scenery became very picturesque. It was delightful to see horse and cart, instead of the usual car or tractor. The picture below shows a village market at which we stopped.



The roads were bad. At one point we actually had to turn back after travelling about five miles hoping that the surface would improve, but in vain.

However, Alan was happy as we met up with a travelling beekeeper with all his hives on the back of his lorry – selling honey on the wing!

The next picture shows a view in the mountains of Romania.



And so on to Bucharest. On the way we stopped at a small village for lunch where my generous companion continued his practice of giving away our mars bars to the local kids! By this time lunch, and every other meal for that matter, had changed from Goulash to Kebab. This culinary delight was to be our staple diet for the next few thousand miles! Bucharest seemed an ordinary city without the grandeur of the earlier capitals. We drove into what seemed like the centre and took some pictures of the Opera house etc. Then we suddenly came upon the Casa Popolurui (Peoples House, which must have been an old Palace) with the most fabulous fountains lining the boulevard.



The picture shows some of the fountains but there were many more, being switched on and off and changing colours. A most unusual sight and one that we were jolly glad we had not missed.

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We decided to return in the morning and explore further. However the roads on the way out to a camping berth were so atrocious that we gave up the plan, as the risk of a broken axle was too great.

We continued through Bulgaria and on to the Black Sea. The picture shows a rather interesting church. We had now travelled right across Europe from Calais to Varna.



Driving down the Black Sea coast (below) was more interesting than anticipated, with the countryside hilly and much greener than we had expected. We now had the choice of keeping to the coast round to Istanbul or taking a detour into Greece.



As we had some time in hand we chose the latter. At the Bulgarian/Greek frontier the old girl sighed and refused to go any further.

We had to push her across the frontier and administer healing balm, which took the form of tightening up the battery earth lead. She smiled and continued.

We were not long in Greece. Just long enough to have a look at the Aegean and to rest awhile after a difficult drive through Bulgaria due to some poor roads. The journey to Turkey passed without incident. However, on our first night in Turkey we stopped at a lay-by. In the middle of the night a policeman with a sub machine gun moved us on. We went peaceably. Not our only experience of coppers with guns and a little frightening.

And so on to Istanbul – the legendary crossing from Europe into Asia. And it did not disappoint. There was so much to see, the city was full of life and bustle, mosques and minarets everywhere, images of curved swords and crusaders, bridges over the Bosphorus, spice markets – and Kebab houses.

After a full days exploration we settled down to a nice meal. The menu was puzzling, full as it was with all shapes of Kebab's. All around us Turks were smoking the Hubble-Bubble and drinking Turkish coffee. A Turkish ex Covent Garden porter, rescued us and ordered the best Kebabs for us - and very nice it was too.



The picture shows the blue Bosphorus, behind a dodgy character. The next picture shows the famous Blue Mosque in Istanbul. The inside had beautiful blue stained glass windows. Photography was unrestricted, even though the faithful were praying in the mosque. Istanbul was full of grand mosques. With a few exceptions, the Turkish mosques were much grander and more decorative than those in Iran.

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We continued to Ankara, where the most important monument was Kemal Attaturk’s Mausoleum, which was impressive. The picture below shows his actual tomb.



Attaturk is the National Hero and his image is everywhere. Reading his life story is remarkable; a man who single-handedly turned his country into a secular and modern state.

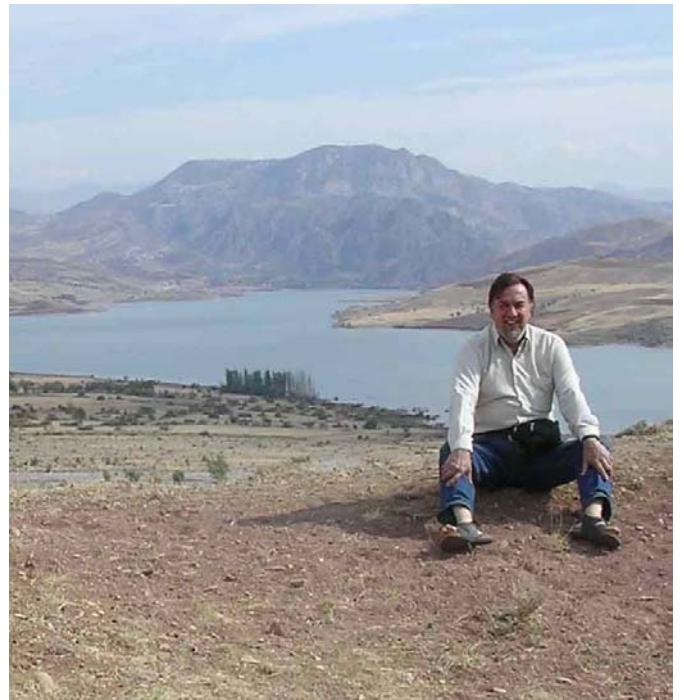
From Ankara we moved on to the region known as Cappadocia. The scenery here was very distinctive, craggy and rocky with numerous man-made caves cut into the cliffs. We tried for a long time to find one of the famed underground cities, dug out by early Christians.

In the end we succeeded with the help of an old peasant, who, it turned out had been one of the original gang of restorers.



He gave us a guided tour and the picture above shows the inside of the underground city. Many passages were much narrower. The lighting was makeshift and without it, the area would have been pitch black. If it had failed, I doubt if we would have found the way out. On our return to the van, village kids surrounded it, and my kind companion gave away our last two Mars Bars. From here on in, there was no escape from the local cuisine!

It was then our intention to head north to the Turkish side of the Black Sea coast. The scenery was very rugged and mountainous.



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The picture shows the mountains and in the background one of the mountains on which the route eventually proved to be one mountain too far. At 7000 ft the old girl gave up. She began to overheat and eventually the ignition coil burnt out. She stopped and, in running off the road, we had no choice but to end up adjacent to a cliff, parked on a built up bank of gravel and rock. The night was cold, we were on a slope so the beds were at an angle, and we had visions of the man-made bank giving way. Not much sleep that night, but it was a beautiful night.

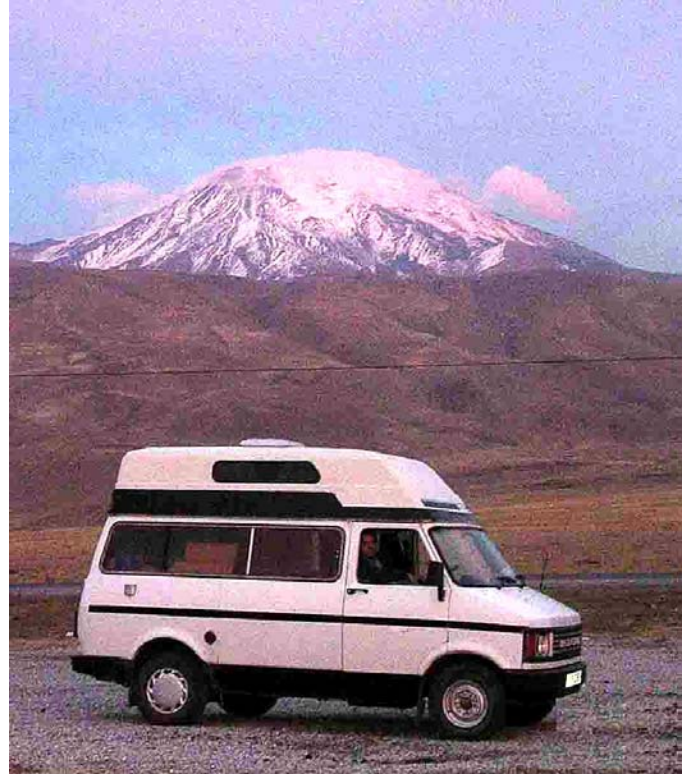
At that height the air was clear, vision was perfect, the stars were bright and the shooting stars plentiful. In the morning we used the spares that were kindly donated by Steve Henry of ‘A-to-Z Autoparts’ in Thatcham, Berks, to effect repairs...we held our breath. She started! We gingerly drove to the next village and did some further maintenance. This was a very scary episode, as we had no idea of what we would have done if she had not started. We would have been stuck with a disabled vehicle, 7000 ft up in a Turkish mountain range. We were only half way through the mountains at this point, but we decided not to chance it again, so we turned east instead and continued towards the Iranian border.

The next stop was a very pleasant University town in Eastern Turkey called Erzurum after which we continued on to the border area at Dogubayazit. The picture below shows an old castle on the hill overlooking Dogubayazit.



This was in the vicinity of Mount Ararat and we camped at the base of the mountain, as shown in the next picture.

We thought this a very pleasant and quiet campsite and settled down for the night listening to Roy Orbison. About an hour later two armoured cars, with gun turrets trained on the van, awakened us. We had camped on army property. However they were very nice – but we booked into a hotel that night for safety!



We crossed the border into Iran at Bazargan, in northern Iran, just below the Armenian border. The Lonely Planet suggested that there might be a five-hour queue at the Turkey/ Iran border. Since this was a twenty-four hour crossing point, and being no mugs, we decided to get there early, say about two in the morning!

There was no one there and the Turkish checkpoint official had to be woken up to stamp our passports. We slept in no mans land between the two countries till about six and proceeded through the Iranian checkpoint. Customs officials were still asleep and though our Carnet (the ‘old girls’ passport, so to speak) was stamped, our passports were not. Since there were no stops to our progress through the Iranian checkpoint we thought nothing of it and just kept going. We bought the necessary vehicle insurances at the border and entered Iran ground space. Such innocence was sure to be punished – and it was.

Our next destination was Teheran, via Tabriz. This part of the journey was accompanied by a marked awareness of our surroundings, as all of the advance planning had suggested that this might be the one area where we would run into trouble.

However we were met with courtesy and helpfulness everywhere. The roads were good; the signs on main roads had English translations, which we had not expected. It proved to be a very interesting, though long, drive.

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At Tabriz, we were recommended to stay at the Pars hotel. It was top class hotel with a revolving restaurant etc. We stayed one night only – for obvious reasons. From Tabriz to Teheran passed without incident, except for motorbikes travelling along the hard shoulder of the motorway – coming towards us. Teheran was a huge city, with traffic to match. The picture shows the two of us with the mountains surrounding Teheran.



We visited one of the ex Shah’s palaces and a carpet museum. As you know Persian carpets and rugs are top of the range and some of the older and most expensive were hung like paintings in an art gallery.

The picture shows the inside of the Shah’s palace. The ceiling is covered in millions of tiny mirrors, giving the impression of glistening jewels.



Below is a mosque, which is part of Ayatollah Khomeini’s mausoleum.



The way out of Teheran was interesting as there were no road signs to neighbouring cities, until one reached the edge of Teheran. So how did we get to the edge of Teheran? We cheated – we had a friend as a guide!!

From Teheran we headed south to what is one the most beautiful cities in Iran – Isfahan, an oasis in the midst of some very desert like countryside. There were tree-lined avenues, mosques and castles, bazaars and beautiful bridges. Here is another shady character on the way to Isfahan!



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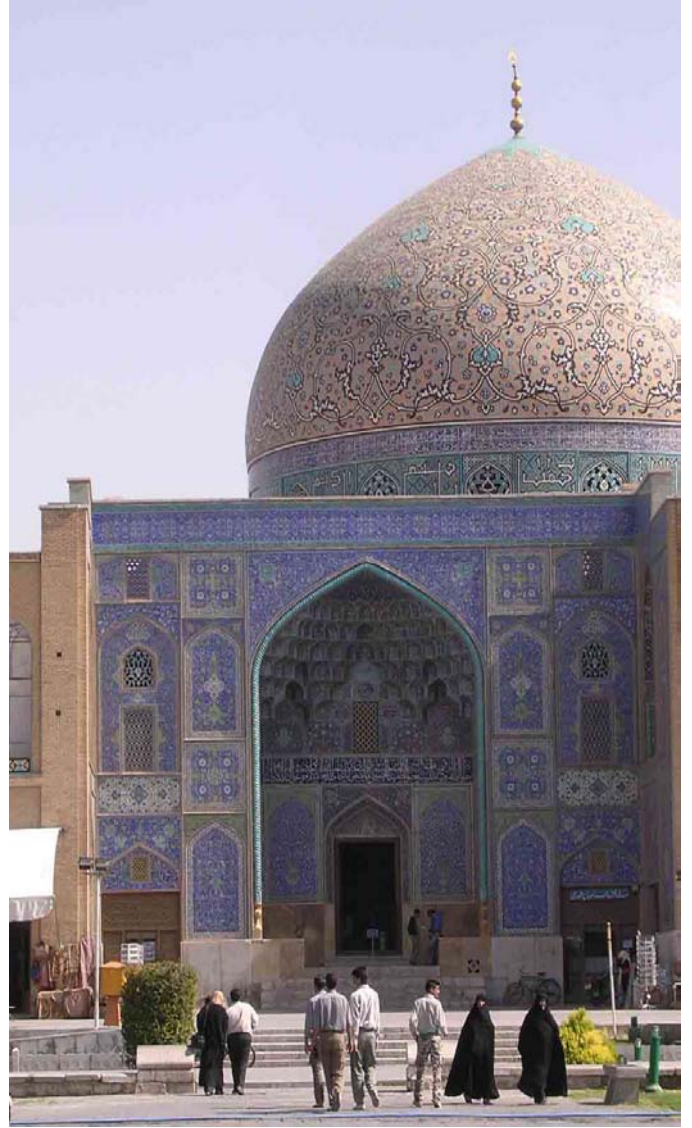
The picture below shows the gardens of an old Caravanserai, which is now a modern hotel.



And this next picture shows the unique Si-O-Seh Pol, which is a footbridge with 33 arches, over the river Zayandeh in Isfahan. At night everything is illuminated and the bridge is a very picturesque sight.



The Sheik Lotfollah Mosque in Isfahan (pictured right), built in 1602, is reputedly the most beautiful dome in Iran, situated in the Naqsh-e-Jahan Square – a big square and oriental market in the city centre. We lost track of the number of carpet traders who approached us – mainly from Shepherds Bush!



From Isfahan we motored to Shiraz. On the way to Shiraz there were three major archaeological sites. We missed one, the tomb of Darius, because they had built a new road, which we were on, and the monument was on the old road! However the other two are shown on the next page.

The first is the tomb of Cyrus the Great, Founder of the Persian Empire, around 500 BC. It lies at Pasagadae, unfortunately covered in scaffolding due to restoration.

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Then, just north of Shiraz, the ancient site of Persepolis, awe-inspiring, founded by Darius, the successor to Cyrus (below).



Persepolis, as you know, is one of the major world sites. Alexander the Great sacked it (what a vandal), in around 300 BC. The Persian Empire was stretched in its western boundary and the Greeks took advantage of it. It was, incredibly, almost without tourists, probably because of its location. It is a big site, an ancient city site, and one that is quiet enough to sit and let the imagination run. Not like the Parthenon, for example, where you cannot move for tourists and school parties. The area around Pasagadae and Persepolis marks the spiritual home of the Persian culture. The people are justifiably proud of this culture and many remarked on it to us, as distinguishing the Iranians from the Arabs.

On to Banda Abbas in the south of Iran. On the way we nearly ran out of petrol and luckily were able to buy it in plastic bottles from a local stall. A cop car, in the middle of nowhere, flagged us down, which is a little daunting to say the least, as anything could have happened.

However all they wanted was to have a look at the old girl. Nobody in this part of the world had seen a fully equipped camper van before. They were curious and we had a good old chin wag, as much as you can in broken English and hand signs!

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At Banda Abbas, the fact that our passports had not been signed at the Iranian point of entry caught up with us. We were grilled by customs for five hours in case we were illegal immigrants. At one point the chief customs man stopped the proceedings to pray, as this was Ramadan. A guard with a big bunch of keys came in, presumably to stop us escaping. We thought we were for the cells!

However the fact that the Carnet had been stamped, and that the Turkish official had also stamped, saved the day. At the end we were introduced socially to the band of inquisitors! We were now free to return to the ferry terminus and buy tickets. At the port we presented our tickets, only to be told that we could not proceed without a customs check of our baggage. We told them to go ahead. They replied that they could not as the main customs section was on twenty-four hours holiday. Furious that the ferry people had not mentioned this, as they must have known, we returned for the second confrontation of the day. We were greeted by the Head of the ferry company with the news that he had contacted the Head of Customs, who was now arranging a special customs check for us. Such was Iran, a mixture of frustration and the most generous hospitality. From that point we were able to just sit back and relax, the ferry company saw the van and us on to the boat. Except that they forgot to have the Carnet stamped! It had to be returned to Banda, from Dubai, and caused some worrying moments in Bombay.

Having negotiated all crises in Banda Abbas, we crossed the Straits of Hormoz, to Dubai.



The picture shows a rather beautiful mosque in Dubai. There was also some very interesting modern architecture, but Dubai was mainly a shopper's paradise. Dubai airport has the biggest and best duty free we had ever seen. A few Christmas presents were bought here and we went on our way to Mumbai, ie Bombay.

The picture below shows the Gateway to India, in Mumbai.



The van was a week late in arriving at Bombay and it took another week to overcome the paperwork of the Indian Customs. The Customs at Nava Sheva, Bombay's second port, consisted of three buildings. We had to get a stamp in one office, and then catch a Rickshaw to the next building for another stamp. So it went on for a week. Good fun! However, we finally conquered the Customs paperwork and drove the last lap down to Goa. The drive to Goa was very scenic, with the route over the Western Ghats quiet and on fairly good roads. The old girl is now in Goa, awaiting her fate. Having experienced the vagaries of Indian customs it could well happen that they insist the van is driven out of India. Which means driving back to UK.

Watch this space!

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The photo left (taken at the Gateway to India) is apt, given the nature of the charity.

And the last picture (below) is a shot of a Goa beach to warm you on these winter days.

Now all that remains is the return journey! Anybody fancy an adventure?

Finally we would like to thank all those who have supported us during the planning and execution of this adventure and all the fundraisers who have already contributed.

We hope that you have enjoyed our communications.

Look forward to seeing you on the Asian Highway!

Mike and Alan

