

## England to India in a Triumph Herald Convertible

By Tarquin Cooper

In 1961 my late father drove a Triumph Herald Convertible from England to Sri Lanka. Sadly, he's no longer around to explain what motivated him to embark on this epic adventure. He died in a motorcycling accident in 1986 but he did leave behind a journal, the colour slides and his letters home. Through these, it's possible to retell his extraordinary adventure...

### LONELY ROAD

*On the very irregular diary of a man of this world by the name of Guy Hipsley Cooper, a rather self-important gentleman undertaking a journey of remarkable duration in this day and age from the land of mist and rain otherwise known of England to that veritable pearl of the East – Ceylon: written at the insistence of his mother and various other persons of lesser import.*



*Guy Cooper and his Triumph Herald Convertible in England shortly before embarking on an epic trans European and Asian adventure driving to what was then called Ceylon. Both look more kitted out for a weekend in the country.*

And so begins the diary of my father as he embarks on his epic drive on February 27, 1961. His car was a Triumph Herald Convertible built the year before. Its colour was 'Litchfield Green', although my father noted how that soon changed to a 'delicate shade of shit brown' after crossing the deserts of Persia. By today's standards it looks small and totally inappropriate for a long overland journey. At 6'2ft (188cm), my father was also tall which can't have made for comfortable driving. To make it even more cramped, he picked up two hitchhikers in Istanbul, Peter and Terry, taking them all the way to Pakistan. (He'd later blame their weight for the damage that would occur to the rear suspension and chassis.) But it did have one thing going for the Herald; the bonnet lifted off in such a way as to give good access to the engine. And my father would need that – a lot.



*How road journeys were done in #1961. Note: the shovel on the back of the car is for driving across the desert later on, not the snow.*

The first leg was a 140 mile (225km) "lousy drive" to the port of Dover on England's south coast where he got on the ferry for "the continent" the following day. By day three, he'd passed Strasbourg and made it to Munich where he bought a camera and two rolls of film for £25, about £500 (€635) in today's value. "It's bloody expensive," he complained "but very nice. I hope I have enough money to get to Ceylon!" The first shots show him at the Brenner Pass between Austria and Italy, then a single switchback road that wound its way through the Italian Dolomites. Needless to say, today it's a multi-laned highway, a gateway for sun-worshipping Germans heading to Lake Garda, Venice and Croatia.



He passed the cities of Padua, Venice (*"it stank"*) and Trieste before heading into communist Yugoslavia where the roads took a turn for the worse, there was lots of *"red tape"* but they were *"very helpful people"*, even if communicating was a challenge. Still, that could have its advantages as he discovered when he was pulled over by some cops for a minor transgression. *"Neither of us could understand a word each other said so we parted with me wishing them 'Buenos Dias', but no smiles from them at all."*

After crossing Bulgaria, and just one week after setting off, he made Istanbul, Turkey. *"I got through customs very easily thanks to a little man who complained about being married for every 25 years of his so-called happy state and advised me to stay single."*



*Terry and Peter. Are they still around today? My dad picked them up in Istanbul and drove them all the way to Quetta. He appreciated the good company but blamed their extra weight for collapsing the rear.*

My father was 21 when he undertook this journey. He'd left school and home three years earlier after falling out with his father who had forbidden him from attending the famed motor racing circuit of Goodwood. (He didn't want him mixing with the 'wrong crowd'). My father went anyway and was kicked out of the family home as a result! (This is back in the day when fathers were obeyed!) His mother managed to find him a job working as a tea manager in the former English colony of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka and that's where he went to work in 1959. We can only imagine how the idea for this trip came about. My father was on holiday back in England; he owned a car; he needed to get to Ceylon. Why not drive, just for the hell of it? The route, while wild and rough, was nonetheless well-trodden. It would be an adventure...



*Meeting Kurds in eastern Turkey in the shadow of Mt. Ararat.*

My father arrived in Istanbul on March 4, a Saturday to learn that, this being a Muslim country, everything was closed.

*"Everything has gone fine so far, no trouble of any sort," he wrote. "So far I've slept every night in the car and have covered 2,272 miles (3,656km)."*

From Istanbul he headed to Ankara over snowy roads that required snow treads. To get over one pass he got the two hitchhikers to bounce on the back. After meeting another traveller who warned of heavy snow, he decided to stay north for the next part of his journey, hugging the Black Sea coastline towards Samsun. The following day, they camped at over 1,200m and woke to a



heavy frost; peeing on the windscreen to de-ice it. After cleaning the spark plugs, he drove onto Trabzon and camped 10 miles outside the city. *"Turkish signposts very bad but Turks helpful and quickly point out the way,"* he wrote in his diary. *"Always get a crowd round the car when we stop."*

That night a heavy storm blew their tent over and everything got soaked; they spent the rest of the day in Trabzon cleaning themselves up before the ordeal ahead, a 2,000m climb to Erzurum. He wrote another letter to his mother: *"Everything is going well and I'm making very good time."*

The following day he drove over a couple of high passes without incident, sleeping in the car it was so cold. Another day and they passed Mt Ararat (5,152m) and entered what was then still known as Persia, today Iran. Here the roads were even worse than Turkey and the Triumph started to show the first signs of distress. First, the interior light short circuited, causing a lot of smoke and a 'horrible pungent smell'. More seriously, a bolt securing the locating arm of the near side rear wheel to the suspension sheared. It was easy to fix after securing another bolt from a passing lorry, but it was the first in a litany of mechanical problems to affect the car; Iran's hard desert roads were to take a brutal toll on the Triumph.



*On the road at 8,000ft between Trabzon and Erzurum.*

March 13th, the throttle sticks open, and so the mechanical issues begin in earnest. My father discovered an offending stone lodged under a control screw after taking off both carburetors. Then it was the petrol feed, and then a leak in the fuel supply, patched with some chewing gum

and insulating tape. More seriously, later that afternoon, while overtaking a large truck, a stone shattered the windscreen. *"Fortunately, I got my fist through the window before going into ditch,"* he wrote later.



*"Washing up breakfast, Persia." Note the lack of windscreen. He was unable to replace, which must have made driving through the desert an interesting experience. The rear suspension was also shot by this time.*

The guys removed as much glass as they could; then it rained. As if matters couldn't get any worse, my father then discovered the garage in Tehran hadn't topped up the radiator; consequently it overheated. The following day he replaced the top water hose – which was also leaking – and cleaned the petrol filter, the source of the original fuel blockage. *"I took the whole pipe out and found that the hole was so big that the pump was sucking in air through it and didn't even get any petrol out of the tank. Broke pipe at hole and joined together with plastic one. Should hold now."* But that's when problems with the rear suspension, caused by the extra load of the two hitchhikers, became known. The bolts on the rear suspension sheared and the off-side had collapsed, taking the hydraulic brake cable with it. There was nothing for it, but to find a garage in Rafsanjan.

With the car patched up, the brake feed fixed with a nail hammered into the pipe, he got going again but the car was underperforming badly. Whereas at the start of the journey he was getting



almost 500km on 40 litres, he now required 68 litres to cover the next 172km to Kerman. Then disaster really struck.



*"Rear suspension being repaired Rafsanjan." The rear suspension was a source of constant anguish, it did not welcome the presence of the two hitchhikers picked up in Istanbul (lying on ground).*

*"Did over 100 miles (160km) in good time until about six miles outside Bam, at 11.30 – wham! – some silly bastard literally jumped straight out of the side of the road, feet in front of me. He saw me coming and must have either panicked or tried to commit suicide. He bloody nearly did too and might still do so, judging by the way he's been treated."*

No one emerges out of the following debacle with much credit; not the local doctor who refused to help without payment and when none came, he left; not the local police whose only interest – it appears – was to extract some fines from my father; not my father, who lost his temper and refused to pay anything because he argued he was blameless.

At times he seemed more concerned with the damage to the car – the rear suspension had gone again. Eventually, he was allowed to proceed the following day after being found not responsible for the accident.

My father's relief at hitting the road once again was short-lived: it took eight hours to cover 150km; the water hose started leaking again, then the exhaust pipe went and then the shock absorber broke while the engine kept overheating. Then he slammed his finger in the door. That

night, he wrote in his diary: *"As soon as possible I'm hoping for better luck in the morning, it's just about due."*

It wasn't forthcoming; the litany of mechanical problems persisted, one was fixed with a tent peg. More seriously a fracture in the main chassis had now revealed itself. His only hope lay in reaching Zahidan where he could find a proper garage to carry out welding but he ran out of fuel four-and-a-half miles out. He pushed the car for half-a-mile before giving up and borrowing an ancient and decrepit bicycle from a passerby. It was even worse: *"Jeez, pedaling a bike against a strong wind with a gallon of petrol on board is the end."*

The garage managed to do all the welding jobs but couldn't replace the rear shock absorber. There was also no hope of getting the windscreen replaced, which was a pity as soon after setting off after lunch, they were hit by vicious sandstorm short of the Pakistan border. *"I couldn't see more than 20 yards it was so thick,"* he wrote home. *"However, as long as it doesn't rain, it'll be alright."*

But he made it through and got to Nok Kundi. He was now in Pakistan, having been on the road for three and a half weeks. He made it clear to the hitch-hikers Peter and Terry they would have to go as soon as was practical; the car simply couldn't take their weight.



*Driving through a gorge, Iran. Exact location not known.*



If he hoped the welding work at the garage was put an end to his troubles, he was to be disappointed. Again. It lasted a day before he was back to fixing the car with homemade solutions. In a moment of ingenuity, he took the radiator grill off and used the securing bolt to replace the one on the rear suspension. *"I got a bicycle spindle from road mender and did a better job than the garage."* A day later he was in Quetta where he bade farewell to his hitchhikers and put the Triumph in the garage. They did all the jobs but still couldn't replace the windscreen or shock absorber.



*Passing bus, Persia.*

He then crossed the Indus, which made for pleasant driving. *"Everything was green, which was a delightful change and there was an amazing variety of bird life."* Once over the Indian border, he drove down good tree-lined roads towards Delhi arriving on 27th March, exactly a month after setting off.

In Delhi he couldn't agree on the price of a new windscreen so continued without. *"Flies and other insects are a definite curse driving at dusk when they pour through."*

Still the Herald caused problems. During one incident on the way to the Ajanta and Ellora caves he spent six hours at the roadside after the suspension collapsed again, taking with it the handbrake cable and brake pipe. Prasad managed to get an offending item welded in town but then they had

a hell of a job trying to fit back in as it was too long on one side. *"Very hot, dirty, sweaty and annoyed by the end,"* he wrote.



*Approaching the Iran border.*

He headed south, first to Bombay and then onto Madras. The tail end of his journey will be familiar to anyone who has done a long expedition. The return to civilization offers a welcome respite; good food, a cold beer and the company of other travelers. But the magic of the open road is no longer there and my father finds himself battling bureaucracy trying to change money, collect mail and find out about ferries to Ceylon.

At Madras, fortune smiles for once. In return for some publicity and his feedback, *Standard Motor Products* (who built their own version of the Triumph Herald, and existed until 2006), agree to completely re-fit the car for free. In the back of my father's journal is the list of everything that needed to be replaced. It's long! But based on my father's advice, they agree to strengthen the chassis, increase the size of the bolts on the rear suspension and follow through on a number of his recommendations. By the end he'd covered 15,678km and driven across 11 countries. On Thursday April 13th, the car is loaded onto the ferry at Mandapam to Colombo, its eventual fate is unknown, most likely sold in Ceylon. Soon, my father would return to work.

There is no heroic finale in his journal and he rarely talked about the adventure. Fortunately, the photos and journal he left behind do a pretty good job at that.





The approximate route followed by Guy Cooper.

## CREDITS

Tarquin Cooper is a British journalist who writes about adventures sports and travel for the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Financial Times*, *The Independent* and for magazines like *Trail Running* and *Men's Fitness*; Tarquin is a Red Bull consultant and a noticeable athlete who loves running, MTB, hiking, skiing and any extreme sport. You can follow his adventures on his Facebook page and website: [www.tarquincooper.com](http://www.tarquincooper.com).

Photos by Guy Cooper.