

letters from abroad

1 Imp, 2 Guys, 3 Continents – Part One

14,000 kilometres in under 40 days!

Terence Tracey, Gauteng, South Africa

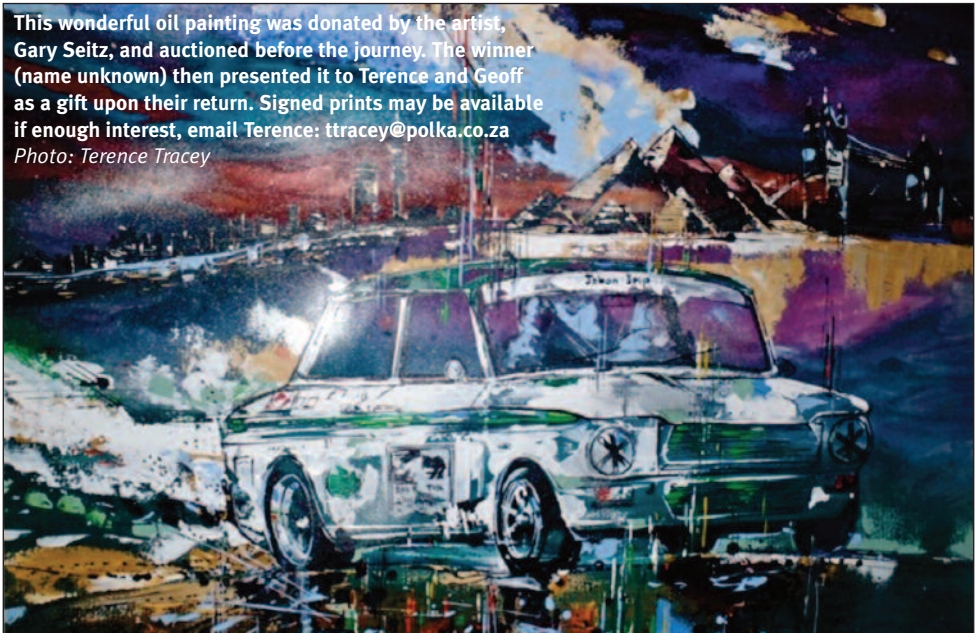
In March 2011 Geoff Biermann and I decided to present a South African built Hillman Imp at the 50th birthday celebrations of the Imp in Coventry, England in May 2013. In fact what the road trip did show us was a very expensive way to get to England!

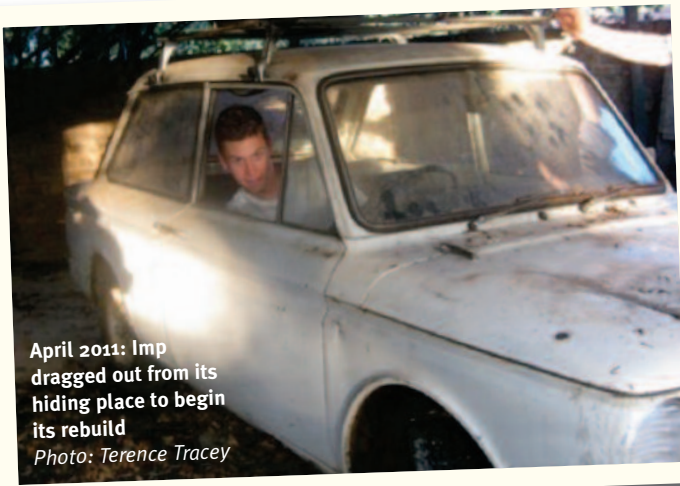
The car was stripped bare and fully rebuilt with a few modest mods to tolerate the punishment of the African roads. Higher springs, longer shocks, truck tyres on taller wheel rims all contributed to the upgrade. A big thanks to Roger Pearce for his invaluable advice on both technical and route information.

The rear seats were removed to provide extra luggage space, mostly tools and spares, as one can imagine might be needed when taking a half-century-old car through three continents. A skid plate to protect the gearbox and sump was hastily slapped on two nights before we departed. This was yet another last-minute task that was undertaken to make the Imp Africa-ready.

Jo'burg was left behind with both Geoff and I in high spirits but with a generous amount of trepidation on a number of counts. The car was not properly tested before the journey; actually it was only finally put together a few days prior to our departure and NEVER actually tested. In fact the engine that I had earmarked for the trip was a very nicely built curly-edge 875 that had been run and well tested in my race Imp a few years earlier but due to licensing issues we had to run with the engine of the Imp that I had driven with complete abandon for about eight years and

This wonderful oil painting was donated by the artist, Gary Seitz, and auctioned before the journey. The winner (name unknown) then presented it to Terence and Geoff as a gift upon their return. Signed prints may be available if enough interest, email Terence: ttracey@polka.co.za
Photo: Terence Tracey





April 2011: Imp dragged out from its hiding place to begin its rebuild

Photo: Terence Tracey

whose engine was both burning oil as well as pumping oil out of the dipstick, probably due to a build-up of crankcase pressure. This was also a standard and curly-edge block. Now to start out in a set-up like that was not necessarily the cleverest plan but it was a plan nonetheless. Lulled into false hope we began enjoying the journey tripping along the billiard table smooth roads of South

Africa, sending happy messages to friends and family as we passed meaningful landmarks: “Now passing Midrand, yay!” “Wow, we’ve reached Pretoria!” “Just turned west towards Molie Molie” Believe me, even though these milestones were hardly 150 kilometres from our home they were nonetheless as important as the final leg of the most amazing drive we have ever undertaken.

Incidentally, with all going tickety boo as we motored along on our first night drive we suddenly had complete electrical failure. No engine, no headlights and no idea. In a flash (‘scuse the pun) I had the Streamlight knucklehead out the open window offering just enough light for us to safely bring the car to a stop on the side of the, luckily quiet, country road. With all our headlights and extra spots on full beam the fusebox had simply melted around the fuse that was holding all the aces of power. For a while we assumed it was just another load-shedding effort by City Power. Ten minutes later our first roadside repair was sorted and we were mobile again but this time with no brights or spots which vastly reduced our vision. However, since we had a very secondhand 875 cc Imp engine delivering horsepower we barely had enough speed to become worried. Unconcerned we were – until we hit the first pothole: thump, ouch! NOT GOOD, and so early in the trip!

Well if the engine of the Imp was tired by the time we arrived at the South African Botswana border at Martin’s Drift it needn’t have worried much because it was about to have a major, albeit forced, rest. It took us over five hours to get through the border checkpoint. At the late hour of 4 a.m. we finally managed to extricate ourselves from the immigration stampede and found our way to the local campsite and within minutes we were camped and asleep.

Zambia and Tanzania seemed to us to have serious competition as to who can produce the most road fatalities as a result of truck and bus accidents. We encountered an inordinate number of wrecks along the roads of both countries. Thankfully they all missed us and our tiny Imp.

A wonderful ice-breaker and super focus diverter for us was the map of Africa with our planned route that we had stuck on the bonnet of the car. So, before the police at the innumerable checkpoints got too involved in our paperwork we chatted to them about our massive journey ahead. In fact our ploy never failed and through the 20 countries that we traversed we paid not one red cent in bribe money!



In the UK there are zebra crossings;
in Africa there are elephants crossing!
Chobe National Park, Botswana
Photo: Terence Tracey

Along the early part of the trip we had a few minor technical issues but nothing to write home about – so we didn't write home! Border formalities were time consuming, expensive and bothersome but with all our paperwork in order we were able to soldier on reward-less.

An interesting failure that our car suffered as we departed Johannesburg was the loss of reverse gear! We looked on this as a good omen and interpreted it as a sign that no matter how tough the going would get, *there would be no going back!* It worked; we overcame a multitude of meaningful challenges and realised our dream.

Kenya has a road locally known as the Hell road. Let it be known the name is as apt an appellation as you can get! First and foremost it is populated with bandits that feel no qualms about killing innocent folk who do nothing except to try and hold on to their possessions as they travel from Nanyuki to Moyale on the Kenya/Ethiopia border. The Chinese road crews are hard at work converting the 500 kilometres of gravel track into a fine wide highway. Roll on China!

The Hell road is a desperate track even in the dry season (which is almost always – North Kenya is lucky to enjoy a few scattered days' rain every two to five years). However, in the wet the road is no longer a road and the quagmire riddled landscape becomes all but impassable. And of course, when we arrived it had suffered heavy rain! We were holed up for almost a full week in Nairobi due to the fact that the Nanyuki to Moyale track was a muddy mess with trucks, busses and cars of all sorts stuck solid without hope of rescue.

To tackle the Road in north Kenya to Moyale in the dry season in anything short of the best 4x4 is insane; to attempt it in the wet season impossible and to dream of doing it in an Imp is certified insanity! Well Geoff and I had a date with destiny in Coventry and nothing was big enough to bar our progress. For Geoff and I, who had begun our trip with the end in mind, the impossible was only something that would just delay us a tad, but stop us; NEVER!

The Hell road tried hard though – the 20 kilometres from our forced two-day roadside camp to Turbi village on the north Kenyan desert that was now a verdant mudflat, took us no less than five hours of hard toil!

A fellow stranded traveller who had to abandon his truck hired a Land Cruiser and offered to assist us on our way to Moyale. Here is what transpired...

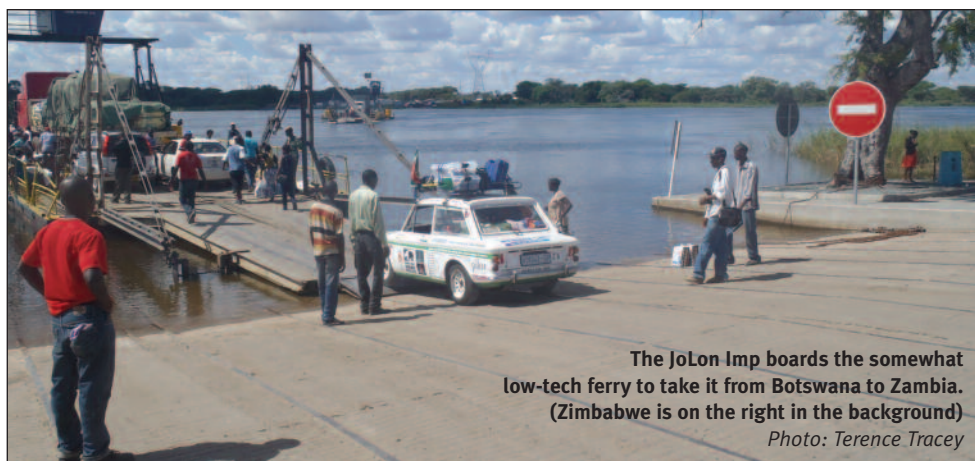
Being towed behind the Toyota through the first mudbath was dealt with quite easily and as we exited the hurdle we unhitched the 'Cruiser and went back to Imp steam, the 'Cruiser following close and watchfully behind. Geoff was in his element flicking the nimble Imp through the various

little mudbaths and then riding with one wheel up on the fast drying massive mud ridges left by the articulated and double- and triple-axle trucks so as not to cause too much damage to the underside of the car. I was excitedly whooping and lauding him on his consummate off-road driving skills as he sped through the easy spots yet sensibly brought it down to crawling pace for the tricky bits, and when the going got too sticky he would resign gracefully and have Eddie line up the Toyota while I hopped out in the mud and flood to hitch up the readymade tow hitch which was gathered loosely, ready and waiting in the passenger front footwell.

Our happiness soon turned to deep worry. We had managed to get through some quite tricky areas with the help of Eddie's consummate skill as a 4x4 driver and skilful tow-master but we then began having problems with the design of the Imp and in particular the fact that we had opted for 13-inch tyres with a high profile. Sure, ground clearance was increased but clearance between the wheel and the bodywork was almost non-existent. In fact my fingers would not pass between the tyre and the wheelarch! So, with the mud gathering it was bad enough because it was extremely sticky, almost like glue, but when the mud was then mixed with stones and gravel the wheels began to jam. At one stage we were barrelling along under our own power and all of a sudden the back wheels just started to spin without moving us forward! To remedy this we had to get out with the spade and vigorously dig the mud and gravel out of the little space between the tyre and the wheelarch. One or three stabs with the spade went slightly astray and the paintwork said a loud OUCH! But bodywork was not a priority at this juncture.

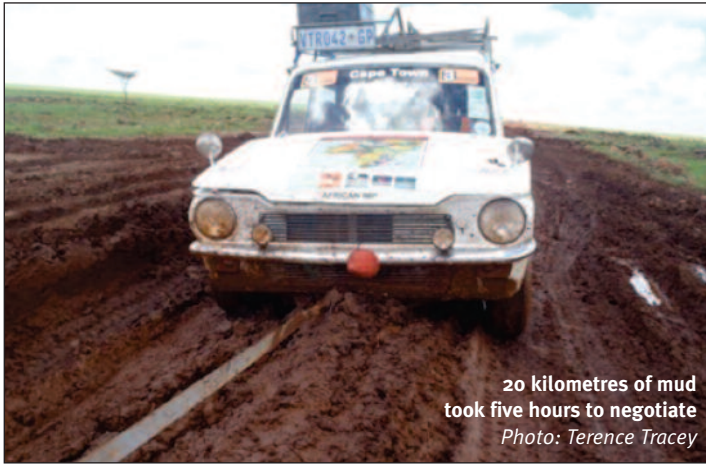
Take into account that the previous day a fully laden 44-seater bus came flying slip-sliding past the construction site where we were staying and had got stuck solidly in the mud not far from where we were and the next day when we eventually got to where it was still jammed we found the Red Cross delivering food and water to the passengers who had already been days on the road from Marsabit on their hopeful way to Moyale. I suddenly realised that the journey we had started as a fine adventure could very easily become a real case of life or death for us. We very quickly decided that we needed to ration our drinking water very carefully trying to gauge when we would next be able to purchase more provisions.

However, with the going getting tougher and tougher we were looking down the barrel! With



The JoLon Imp boards the somewhat low-tech ferry to take it from Botswana to Zambia. (Zimbabwe is on the right in the background)

Photo: Terence Tracey



**20 kilometres of mud
took five hours to negotiate**
Photo: Terence Tracey

more and more trucks being forced to remain stuck fast in the mud the inevitable was starting to dawn on us, and with about only six or eight kilometres covered in a couple of hours we hit a huge snag; the 'Cruiser also got stuck with no way out! So with a Hillman Imp stuck solidly half-

shaft-deep in mud preceded with a towing Toyota Land Cruiser also stuck up to its axles it was game over! Game over for normal folk that is, but for the likes of Steve and Eddie who were selflessly determined to see us through because without help we would have been sorely wanting. So, with the 'Cruiser and Imp ground to a halt, Eddie and Steve quickly negotiated with a massive tipper truck to come to our aid. With a three-way tow we were once again crawling forward towards Moyale.

Then proper disaster struck; while being towed the Imp took an almighty blow on the front underside that bent the trackrod almost in two necessitating another stop and delay while we jacked up the Imp and adjusted the arm out to the very last possible threads. Still the wheels pointed drastically in towards each other. Back to towing, however, as we knew it was our only hope; we still had over 100 kilometres of this monster road to conquer.

The next challenge was a massive dip in the track before Turbi where the bridge had been washed away and the only way was down an extremely sharp incline and an immediate ascent of an equally sharp incline. Edie stopped at the cusp of the precipice and, as I was about to get out of the Imp and admit that there would be absolutely NO WAY the little car would make this obstacle, suddenly the 'Cruiser roared into angry life and whisked us towards the deep ditch, as it can only be described, Geoff stoically stuck to his task of aiming the Imp in the general direction of the 'Cruiser's back bumper and, as we miraculously exited the mud hole, still in one piece, we levelled out behind the Toyota shaking our heads in disbelief at what had just happened. While we were catching our breath we watched in further shock, amazement and genuine fright that the 'Cruiser was now towing us straight through the one-and-a-half-metre-deep river. Well, we had no choice; Geoff simply followed and shook his head in further disbelief as he exited yet another unbelievable challenge. The following two-kilometre muddy section was an easy ride in comparison with what we had just had to endure.

The 20 or so kilometres had taken all of about five hours. So, with the Imp's steering in a very sorry state we decided to stay in Turbi to carry out the necessary repairs and plan our way onward. As the old maxim states, "A bad day on the road is better than a good day at the office".

To be continued...