

letters from abroad

1 Imp, 2 Guys, 3 Continents – Part Two

14,000 kilometres in under 40 days!

Terence Tracey, Gauteng, South Africa



Putting the Imp in a lorry made the Hell road passable – just!

Photo: Terence Tracey

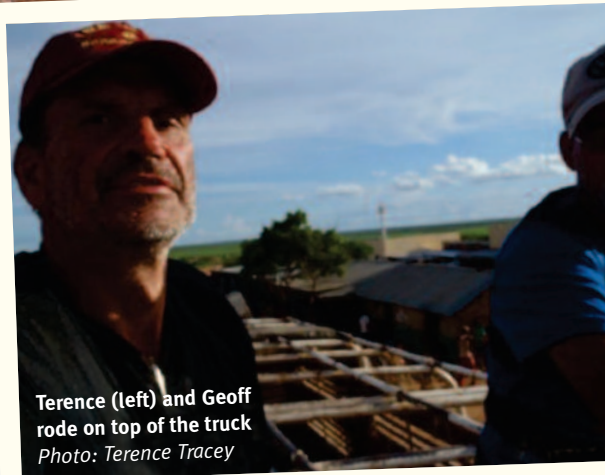
With the front end of the Imp rebuilt in searing heat at the Turbi Police compound without the tiniest bit of shelter from the relentless sun we settled down to a solid night's sleep to the sounds of a very close by hyena.

On inspection the following morning we found the hyena footprints only about 50 metres from our tent.

Reports that the road towards Moyale that we needed to negotiate was still in desperate shape and in spite of another full day of blazing sunshine and a decent drying wind the road was too far gone to be in any condition to negotiate with anything less than a Unimog or better. We went to plan B...

Through the extremely hospitable and helpful Kenyan Police who had become our hosts, we established that there was a truck that had just about enough free space to accommodate our Imp and they were headed to Moyale. We struck a deal – an expensive deal – and the truck was our Hell road redemption. There was just one problem, the truck had to come through the self same route that had all but wrecked our Imp the previous day. What scuppered 'our' truck driver's chances, however, was the fact that yet another truck had been stuck there for days already and it prevented Brian our truck saviour from getting past! So again we had to exercise extreme patience, waiting around and all the time conscious the Coventry clock was tick-tocking!

Our patience was duly rewarded and at 5.30 that afternoon, with Imp aboard Brian's cattle truck and Geoff and I perched on the crossbars on top of the truck, we bounced and trundled our



Terence (left) and Geoff rode on top of the truck

Photo: Terence Tracey

way across the Kenyan Hell track.

Finally even Brian's mighty Mitsubishi truck had to succumb to the mud track and at near midnight he took his place at the back of a queue of no less than eleven transport trucks who would only attempt the crossing of a particular flooded area in daylight for fear of failure. Failure at this point, 60 kilometres from the nearest habitation was not a good option so, even though we had to sleep in the back of the cattle truck (along with another 25 million mosquitoes and some very suspicious looking bugs) and yet a further delay, we had no choice and secretly we were glad that we were in the hands of these wise truckers.

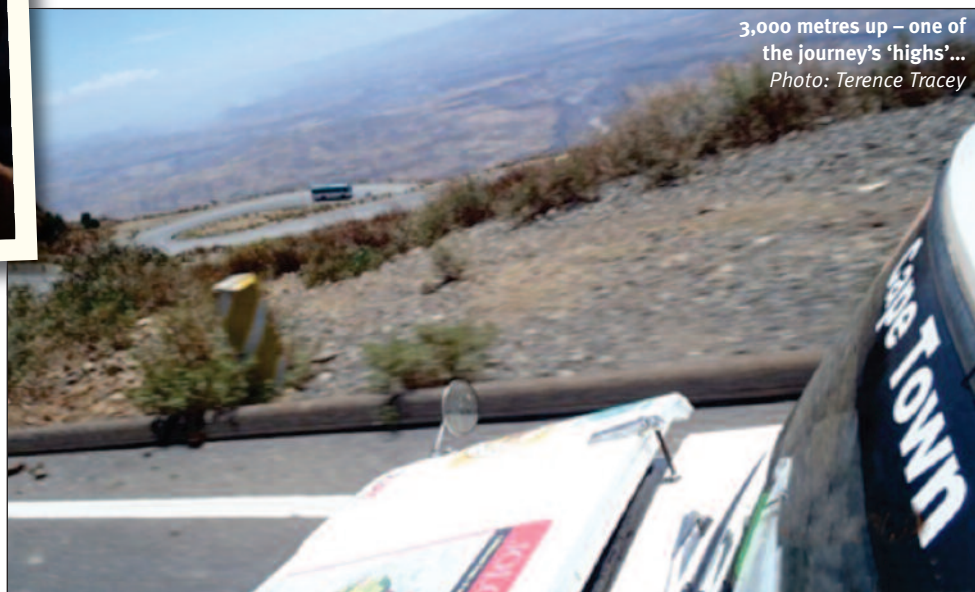
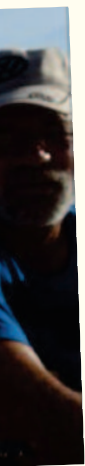
The following morning was bathed in bright sunshine but with massive cloud build-up on the horizon. We were very keen to get going but had to wait for the truckers to give the all clear to attempt the crossing. Eleven miracles saw the eleven trucks make it through without stumbling, although there were some very close calls.

The trip through Ethiopia (and getting used to driving on the wrong side of the road) was easy by comparison and even some stone-throwing youths and the bothersome begging Police didn't get us down. What we did enjoy was the cheap and good food and the mostly better roads, apart from a few hundred kilometres of road repair secondary gravel roads.

A surprise for us were the amount of people – just ordinary people – who wandered around with AK47 assault rifles slung over their shoulders, especially in the southern part of Ethiopia.

Reaching Addis Ababa it was time for some more car repairs, this time the roof rack needed restructured as all four legs had been broken off on the dirt roads. April in Addis is dry season, but guess what? We had some more rain, serious rain!

Addis to Bahir Dar in the north of Ethiopia and on to Sudan saw us go up to over 3,000 metres above sea level and back down again in sometimes very short distances. No wonder the Ethiopians can produce such fantastic Olympic runners! Just going to the shops, church



or school there must build such stamina and muscles, running against normal human beings would be a cinch! At one stage, the climb was so steep that at 6 kph in extreme heat our little car was overheating (even with its front radiator!) necessitating halts every five minutes or so for at least ten to fifteen minutes to let it cool down again, to be followed by a serious handbrake start on a near-impossible uphill. Rather than risk destroying our little 875 cc mill, we decided to flag down a passing tipper truck. The truck was actually going so slow that we could have hitched on to it without him even stopping. But in spite of his slow pace, he towed us slowly and safely out of the Rift Valley and we were able to set off under our own steam again.

But the damage was done! In spite of successfully covering massive distances from Addis all the way to Wad Medini in an effort to get to Khartoum to finalise our complicated ferry for passengers and barge for the car from Sudan to Egypt, we were carrying a time bomb of a mechanical failure that only manifested as we arrived in Wad Medini after midnight on the Saturday, three days before the weekly ferry was due to leave for Egypt!

A cold shower and straight to bed well after midnight in the Wad Medini International Hotel and out at 5 a.m. to head into Khartoum before the early morning traffic. FAIL! As we left town the gear change went from merely troublesome to seriously worrisome and an urgent examination with technical text messages to my friends in South Africa to help us understand our problem and to try to help us out of our predicament. A complete flush and bleed of the clutch slave cylinder did not help so we removed it, stripped it and found it to be A-OK which left us to conclude that our problem was in fact a more challenging one. With the slave back in place, we crash-gear-ed our way to Khartoum, amidst heavy traffic, driving on the wrong side of the road, in already blazing heat in spite of it still being early morning and being stopped at numerous police checks. This was an extremely challenging two-hundred-kilometre trip, but in the end we made it to our destination, the Blue Nile Yacht club. With the car parked and before the engine spun to a halt Geoff had spotted some shade under a tree where we should set up our 'workshop' and within 15 minutes we had the Imp ready for major surgery.

Engine out and it was evident that the clutch was badly worn but not yet slipping; the pressure plate however had collapsed. Now here is another miracle that helped to continue: as part of our

spares we had packed a brand new clutch cover and pressure plate! So, foregoing breakfast and lunch, and after a troublesome clutchless morning drive, your two non-mechanics replaced the clutch and pressure plate and put it all back together again. Unfortunately, while



...but one of the journey's 'lows' was having to take the engine out in sweltering heat – Twice!

Photo: Terence Tracey

testing the new clutch after reassembly we discovered yet another problem – one Rotoflex coupling was completely broken. How we ever managed to drive with the coupling broken right through in three places is a mystery, in fact another miracle without a doubt! Having changed the coupling we both showered the dust and oil and grime off our bodies and set up camp for the night. And then the clanger!...

“Terence, did you tighten the pressure plate bolts?” With the answer in the negative we had no option but to cancel dinner and remove the engine again, this time under the street light in the yacht club and tighten the bolts. This further delayed our meeting with the ferry ticket and car barge ‘fixer’ thus making it all the more improbable that we would get a place on either the barge or the passenger ferry to Egypt.

Yet another miracle! While the skies in Sudan had very few clouds, we were truly blessed to find one particular cloud with a lining, not of silver but of solid gold! You see, while we were in the middle of engine removal number two, yet another onlooker stopped by to enquire about our trip and was intrigued by what we were doing and asked if there was anything at all that he could do to assist us, to which we first politely said, “No thanks”. But then, as an afterthought we asked if he could direct us to an ATM so we could draw cash to pay the ferryman at Wadi Halfa. He replied, “Since the US sanctions we have no link with Visa or MasterCard so you will not be able to draw from our ATMs.” He went on to say that even if we went to the bank in the morning they would also be unable to assist us. But he said he would see if one of his friends could guide us on how to solve our problem and he would get back to us.

An hour or so later I was summoned to where he was sitting with some of his friends and he said that “there was no way we would be able to get the money from an ATM! So here, take this as a gift from the people of Sudan.” And he handed me the 300 US dollars that we were short to pay the transport to Egypt! I don’t mind telling you I had tears in my eyes when I returned to Geoff and explained what had happened.

On Monday we covered 982 kilometres of the desert road from Khartoum to Wadi Halfa with our new clutch. We arrived at 2 a.m. where Mazur our Wadi Halfa fixer was waiting for us. At 7 a.m. the next morning the mission to acquire the berths and associated paperwork for our passage to Egypt began. I am convinced the fixer managed to accommodate us at the expense of two other tourists that he seem to have had issue with. So, counting our blessings we had the car barged away mid-morning and by late afternoon we had secured our place on the night ferry to Aswan. Our car and the passenger ferry docked simultaneously in Aswan although the car barge left fully eight hours before the passenger ferry.

Three days of hard driving had us in Port Said where we had an interminable wait for the ferry to take us to Turkey near the Syrian border. Three days in a Port Said hotel is not a very pleasant



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The JoLon Imp on its way to Aswan

Photo: Terence Tracey



experience but the reward of getting ourselves and our car onto the ship that would take us to the road to Coventry was worth the hardship.

With time and distance totally against us, we had to make yet another alteration to our plan. This time we redesigned our route, choosing the

most direct road to England and passing up the planned visits to friends in Switzerland, Germany and Paris where I used to work. We also reorganised our kit in the car to allow us to convert the passenger seat into a makeshift bed so that while one of us drove, the other slept and *vice versa*.

Once in Turkey we wasted no time in getting to grips with the 4,500 kilometres between us and Coventry. Near perfect roads, very light traffic and very few border delays had us making very good progress until, that is, Geoff was refused entry into Serbia. We were sent back to the Serbian embassy in Sofia to get his transit visa but on arrival in Sofia at the Serbia embassy (again in torrential rain!) we found the Embassy closed for SIX DAYS! We had no alternative but to re-route yet again and with time really against us we felt our chances of making Coventry starting to slip away. To arrive in England *after* the Imp gathering had finished would have been a very hollow feeling indeed. Again we dug very deep into our reserves of energy and motivation to begin the journey across the mountains towards Romania. Arriving at the Blue Danube ferry crossing we just missed the midnight ferry and decided to eat supper on the wharf and jump into our sleeping bags next to the car but out of the rain and wait for the morning ferry.

With Geoff on wheel work and me sleeping in the passenger seat he woke me to say he was worried about a vibration in the back. So at 7 a.m. on a mountain road in Romania we found to our horror that we had split yet another Rotoflex coupling. This robbed us of yet another hour but with

Istanbul: bridging two continents, from Asia to Europe

Photo: Terence Tracey



Journey's End

Photo supplied by Terence Tracey



the repair carried out and a good breakfast under our belts we were rejuvenated and on the road again.

Europe blurred past us between driver changes and a fleeting visit to pick up a couple more spare Rotoflexes in Vienna from Imp club member Peter Rosenzweig and another coffee and cake stop, this time with family and petrolhead friend Herbert,

at a highway restaurant outside Worms in Germany.

We drove through Holland and Belgium without setting foot outside the car, only briefly touching French soil as we purchased our cross-channel ferry tickets, immediately boarding the ferry to to England. What a culture shock to find ships departing at the exact time advertised and the efficiency of the immigration and customs officials!

Once on board we managed a solid hour of shut-eye before arriving in Dover and the last leg of the journey before us. Geoff took us all the way to and around the London Ring Road and from there he took over the sleep-seat while I drove the final miles (yes, it was goodbye to 'kilometres!') to Coventry to a very special welcome just outside Coventry where we were met by a convoy of Imps who shepherded us to the Imp gathering. It was an extremely special moment that we will both remember with great fondness till our dying days.

A once in a lifetime trip

Murray Brown, Victoria, Australia



I recently attended some of the Imp 50th birthday celebrations in May with my fiancée Jodie. We live approximately 100 miles east of Melbourne in Australia. Two years ago we began to plan our trip to the UK in the hope that we could celebrate the Imp's 50th birthday. I was brought up on Rootes products and in particular the Imp. My father rallied Imps and I learnt to drive in his last rally Imp when I was seven. I just *had* to go to the birthday celebrations! To do anything else would have been rude wouldn't it? Our trip therefore revolved around the celebrations of the Imp Club. Up until this point we didn't know anyone from the club and believed we would quietly observe the birthday from the sidelines.

After contacting James Sinclair we attended at the Premier Inn at Linwood and found a table among members of the club. After being seated for about four seconds Gordon Ritchie approached us and asked us to join our tables together. It was lovely to hear about the restoration of Gordon's Imp which we had been admiring in the car-park only a few minutes earlier. We spent