



All dirt tracks lead to Coventry

A WA couple were determined to join the Riley celebrations in England. **Dennis Lingane** reports on their hair-raising journey.

BEVERLEY couple Chris and Wendy Gilbert travelled to England this year to join Riley enthusiasts world-wide to celebrate the Riley centenary in England. They decided to do it the hard way and drove their 40-year-old Riley Pathfinder through the Middle East in what they described as a five-week nightmare.

The couple were among 12 Riley Car Club members from WA who headed to England for the July centenary celebrations of the Riley Motor Company at which more than 500 Riley cars attended.

With a budget of \$20,000 for the trip to England the Gilberts could have flown first class and stayed in luxury hotels, but they chose to ship the Riley Pathfinder to Madras and drive it 16,000km through India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Bulgaria, Italy and France to their final destination, Coventry, England.

They bought the Riley eight years ago for \$200 and restored it.

When they decided on the marathon trip Chris overhauled the engine, installed an air-conditioner and added roll-down blinds to the windows so they could sleep in the car.

He didn't need to do much else to prepare the car for the marathon. "We were the only Australians to take a car, and we thought it would be great to drive it there," they said.

Wendy had to be swathed in a black night-shirt and scarf when travelling through the Muslim countries, but that didn't stop one policeman from grabbing her breasts. "I felt very threatened the whole trip," she said. "They are very strict now about women covering up. I was even forced to queue with other women at passport control while Chris queued with men."

"We drove from England to Australia in 1973 and thought it would be fun to retrace our steps 23 years later."

"It was pretty straightforward the first time, we had good roads and white women were not expected to cover up. "We didn't realise how the Middle East has deteriorated," said Chris.

"Then there were 500 million people in India. Now there are more than 900 million. We wouldn't do it again as a couple. You would need a group of people for safety."

The Ford Zephyr on that trip was impounded at the Indian border because they didn't have the right documents and so they travelled on with friends in a Kombi van.

"The Zephyr is still in India in the pound waiting for us to reclaim it," Wendy said. "We did plan to go and have a look at it, but it was so awful in India that we just wanted to get out of the place as soon as possible."

They took all their own food in cans, but it didn't stop them getting sick in India.

But Pakistan and Iran had their own version of hell for Wendy. "I wasn't allowed to drive the car, and when we stayed in some grotty hotel I had to use the back door. They wouldn't let me in the front door. It was hot as anything but I had to be covered up in black all the time."

The Gilberts said that while the rest of the world was moving on things in the Middle East were going backwards.

"In Pakistan, to get from Maultan to Quetta we had to drive along a river bed because there



was no road. We started at 5am and didn't get to the city until 9pm. We couldn't travel more than 5kph it was so rough. The car was almost shaken to bits."

How did a 40-year-old motor car stand up to the trip?

"Not a problem," Chris Gilbert said. "I had every confidence in the car. We had only one mechanical problem, that was the brakes which is a weakness of that model. We had the spare parts and fixed them in Quetta."

The couple shipped the Riley from Fremantle

to Madras and the adventure almost ended there. It took them six days of battling bureaucracy to get the car off the ship. Then they headed into the mayhem of Indian roads.

"The car was like a magnet," Wendy said. "Every time we stopped we would be surrounded by crowds of people. We had no privacy which made going to the toilet very difficult."

Chris said that driving on Indian roads this time was frightening.

We were having two and three near misses a day," he said. "The truck drivers are completely mad."

From India they drove through Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Bulgaria, before getting on to the civilised motorways of Europe where they could make better time.

The odometer on the Riley told them the trip was 10,051 miles from Madras to Coventry which took them just over five weeks.

But when they reached Coventry and were singled out from the 500 other Rileys for star treatment for their efforts it was all worth while.

The press and TV coverage made them personalities and the great grandson of founder of the Riley company, Victor Riley, arranged for the Rover Motor Car company to pay for the Riley to be shipped back to Fremantle.

The Pathfinder arrived back in Fremantle this week none the worse for its cross-continental adventures.

● Chris and Wendy Gilbert survey the dirt track on their journey through Turkey.



● A pleasant respite in Sofia, Bulgaria on the way to the Riley reunion in Coventry, England.