

Carrera Sudamericana 2006

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The Preparation

After driving in my first long-distance rally- the London to Sydney Marathon - in 2004 - I've since developed a strong desire to compete again in a similar event. The 30 day event might have been tough, driving up to six hundred miles a day over rough roads but at the finish every competitor who made it to the Sydney Opera House was overwhelmed with high emotions and a sense of achievement.

It was inevitable that when I heard about the Carrera Sudamericana I wanted to enter

The event is due to start in Buenos Aires on 6th May 2006, travel through Argentina, Bolivia, Peru and finish in Quito, Ecuador three weeks and 5000 miles later.

Entrants are promised rally stages at 16,000 feet above sea level in the Andes and roads that follow the spectacular route where Fangio started his legendary motor sport career. The route passes Inca archaeological remains, Spanish colonial towns and we are to experience contrasting scenery from canyons, waterfalls, deserts, forests to coastal roads overlooking the Pacific.

Now what car would produce suitable power to endure the tough road conditions, many at extremely high altitudes? My choice of car for the London to Sydney Marathon was a very unlikely vehicle – a 1970 Morris Minor – but this time I wanted to compete with something more modern and powerful. The solution was resolved with the offer of a V8 Jeep Grand Cherokee. Although I have a tendency to drive ‘unconventional’ cars, at first I felt slightly uneasy about competing in a ‘conventional’ 4X4. When Nicholson McLaren Engines offered sponsorship by converting the Jeep to LPG power I could hardly contain my excitement – we would be the first vehicle to compete in a long-distance rally using LPG. That is definitely not ‘conventional’.

As a newcomer to LPG, I was surprised at the number of negative remarks I heard from the unconverted (pardon the pun). Comments such as ‘loss of power,’ ‘unreliable,’ and ‘very few filling stations,’ seemed to be the most common which didn't contribute to my confidence in finishing the event.

Once Nicholson McLaren Engines had finished the LPG conversion using the Teleflex SGi LPG dual fuel system, it was time to put the Jeep through its paces to convince myself (or not) that I had made the correct decision.

My co-driver Trevor Hulks and I headed off to Wales on a crisp, clear morning to try to emulate driving conditions and roads similar to what we expect to encounter in South America. Well…it was difficult to find mountains to equal the steep roads of the Andes at 16,000 feet above sea level to test the Jeep's performance level at high altitude, but we experienced a variety of road conditions from motorways, traffic jams in towns to a narrow, rough mountain track. Using petrol for the 257 mile round trip, the Jeep averaged 18.87 m.p.g. at a cost of £56.77. I must admit that I felt relieved at that stage that I did not own the Jeep as I usually average over 20,000 miles in a year and the cost of petrol would be horrendous.

Three days later we headed off to cover the same route, this time using LPG. The result was an average of 15.39 m.p.g. and the cost a favourable £35.50. That would provide a considerable saving over a year and convinced me that, from the financial aspect, LPG is the way to go.

And, the ‘loss of power’? In my view a myth. I tried fast acceleration from a standing start, gradual acceleration, fast cornering, on the flat and up the mountain road and I could not detect any difference in power between petrol and LPG.

Before the cars are shipped out to Argentina the Jeep is being fitted with the specialist rally equipment such as roll-cage, mesh cover to protect the radiator from stones, fire extinguishers, rally computer, brackets for extra spare wheels and extra pockets to place maps, note books, pencils – there must be a place for every bit of equipment so they can be found quickly. During the competitive rally stages it can be a very emotional experience with tensions running high between the crew as they endeavour to achieve the best results.

A co-driver's task on the stages is somewhat demanding as he has more than one job to do at a time. He has to keep one eye on the rally odometer and the other on the detailed road book and to inform the driver in good time of the relevant instructions. To stand a chance of featuring in the results the car has to be driven as close to the average speed set for that route. The co-driver has to determine by means of speed tables, calculator, stopwatches, average speed indicator, and mental arithmetic whether that speed is maintained throughout the route. To add to the co-driver's anxiety the location of timing points is secret and penalties are based on seconds late or early at check points.

With several additional test and practice runs under our belt we are well prepared for the start of the Carrera

Sudamericana 2006 and I can honestly admit that I am now a LPG enthusiast.

{mospagebreak title=The Event&heading=The Preparation}The Event

Seventy cars lined up along the waterfront at Rosario, 200 miles north-west of Buenos Aires. An early pre-dawn start but the excitement was contagious as the first of the seventy competing cars was flagged away to start the Carrera Sudamericana, an epic 5000 mile long distance rally that passed through Argentina, Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador. Driving a Morris Minor in the 10,000 mile London to Sydney in 2004, I must admit was hard work and I had convinced myself that driving a modern Jeep Grand Cherokee fitted with comfortable seats, air conditioning, masses of power and more importantly LPG powered would make the Carrera Sudamericana a doddle. How wrong can one be!

To get to the first competitive stages involved a run of over 300 miles through flat and largely uninteresting farming country. The roads were mainly straight with light traffic but mostly consisted of slow lorries sometimes with five or six bunched together making overtaking difficult.

But it was worth the long trip, the stages were recently used in Argentina's round of the World Rally Championship and provided us with a variety of conditions on unmade roads, rocky outcrops, water crossings, hilly climbs in sandy and some mud holes – all highly challenging as well as enjoyable. A short run of 60 miles and we were in WRC rally country again this time in the mountains. Some rain had fallen and provided more excitement than we were looking for. Extra caution was needed on the narrow roads some with a pronounced camber and deep channels on both sides. Having covered the majority of the stage as I came over a rise ready to descend a steep muddy slope we were confronted by a build up of three other competing cars trying to control their cars without sliding into each other or the bank. As I braked, the wheels locked in the thick mud and the Jeep was slewing from side to side and not slowing down, fortunately we stopped within feet of one of the other cars.

Heavy rain followed us for the rest of our stay in Argentina but once we started the long climb up the steep roads into the Andes and Bolivia the sun started to shine. The further we climbed the temperature kept dipping and finally at 12,500 feet to -8 degrees as the landscape became much more barren.

During our first stage in Bolivia we suffered a major tyre blow-out which ruined our chances to do well in the competition, but at least the mountainous scenery was spectacular and the LPG functioned perfectly in the high altitude.

The next day as we wound our way through the small Andean villages I was drifting nicely round a corner when the back end started to sway – another rear tyre had demolished itself. With no spare tyres we had to proceed to La Paz over 400 miles before our evening stop. The road changed to cobbles, which continued for over a hundred miles, was slippery and extremely rough in places. As we continued to climb up the mountainous road suddenly the back end started to behave strangely. If this was another tyre blow out then we had no spare left. Miles from anywhere, and still at 12,000 feet above sea-level we discovered that both rear shock absorbers were leaking oil. Helped by a rally service crew the spare shock absorbers were fitted and we once again set out.

Most of the 300 miles was tortuous. It was difficult trying to overtake the hundreds of Bolivian lorries on the pot-holed winding road, some travelling at just 15 mph and without rear lights, spewing out toxic fumes as they climbed to over 12,000 feet above sea-level.

Eventually, there nestling in a natural basin, surrounded by mountain peaks, we could see the lights of La Paz – we had arrived intact just before midnight. After our setbacks we were rewarded when we first sighted Lake Titicaca the highest lake in the world at over 12,000 feet above sea-level. We could see local fisherman venturing out in their traditional reed boats. And to add to our joy, all the rally cars were transported across the lake on motorised wooden rafts, two cars per raft, with their 5 h.p. outboard motors stretched to the limit.

In central Peru the scenery changed to grey, barren mountains devoid of vegetation. All day we descended and ascended sometimes passing through desert like plains with small villages. It was hard to imagine how people could endure and live in such a stark environment.

After several days of trouble free motoring I was beginning to think that we might be lucky and not experience any more difficulties with the Jeep. Our results in the competition were improving and for two days we were leading the third leg of the rally. Travelling on a 50 mile stretch of extremely rough road which was once the route of a railway line and consisted of loose stones, projecting rocks, large potholes and many narrow tunnels through a Canyon, I was holding my breath everytime the suspension bottomed. Then with 20 miles still to go before we reached tarmac, my worst fears were realised – the back end started clunking, signifying another damaged shock absorber. After crossing the border from Peru into Ecuador for the final leg of the Carrera Sudamericana, we once again started to climb high into the mountains but this time the vegetation was tropical, lush and green. The surface was mainly smooth but often sections of the road had deteriorated and consisted of deep potholes and ruts. At times just as we turned a corner there would be one of the rough patches and not enough time to slow down sufficiently to allow the Jeep to gently pass over the holes without the suspension bottoming.

I was relieved when we drove through the finish at Guayaquil on the Pacific coast after a 200 mile drive on pot-holed

roads – at least the Jeep was all intact with no dents after its 5000 mile marathon.

I am grateful to John Nicholson, Mike Pearson and John Waghorn of Nicholson McLaren Engines for giving me the opportunity to contest the Carrera Sudamericana. I can honestly state that the LPG dual fuel system works perfectly in all conditions and altitudes and did not miss a beat during the entire event.