



## VIETNAM TO MYANMAR ... AND BACK!

Robin and Charlotte Morrison drove their Aston Martin DB6 mk2 8,700km around the more remote parts of South-East Asia through Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Thailand and Laos.

The ambition of every Vietnamese is to own a motorcycle. Nearing a village, we would start to overtake small, heavily laden bikes carrying goods and the entire family to or from the local market. We soon learnt to negotiate junctions and roundabouts with ease. The key is to drive slowly but never to stop. If everyone continues on a predictable path, then it all works - rather like two shoals of fish passing through each other in different directions. Welcome to driving a classic Aston Martin in Vietnam!

We all fell in love with the city of Hoi An, where we started, with its old houses, narrow lanes, great food and tailors who will make you a jacket and a dress in 24 hours. However, after a day to check out the cars and driving the famed Hi Van Pass, we were ready to head south to the Central Highlands with its lakes, waterfalls, steep rooved 'Rong' houses and coffee plantations.

We enjoyed the deserted twisty road descent to the coast: just about keeping up with the 1969 Porsche 911 round the bends. Fortunately we were behind as my brake light switch had failed. During our rest day at the beach I rigged up a temporary, manual switch before we skirted busy Ho Chi Minh City, where a friend, coming out to

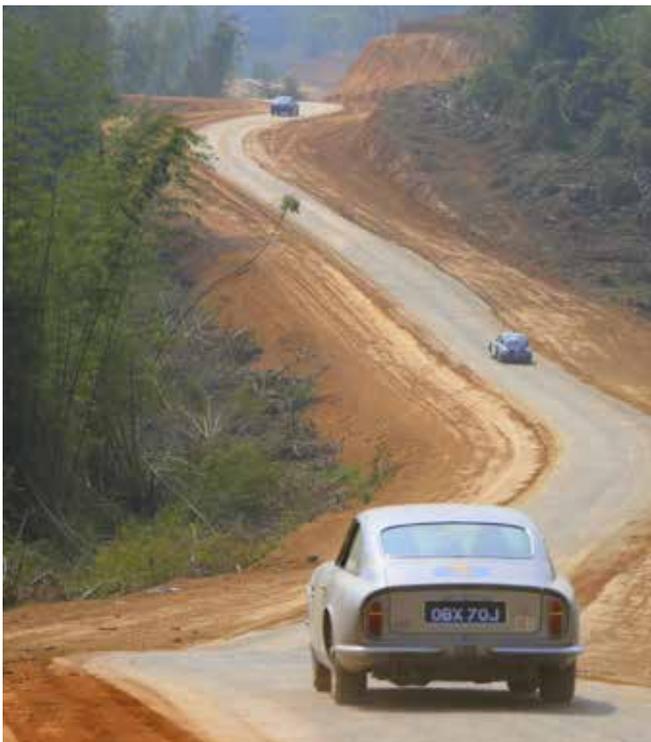
join the 1959 Austin Healy 3000, brought a replacement. After two ferries and a floating market we drove through the Mekong Delta's network of tiny streets and canals which separated the fertile paddy fields and plantations. There is a dramatic variety of scenery in this dynamic and fast-growing country.

Sobered by a visit to Ba Chuc where Khmer Rouge forces from neighbouring Cambodia massacred the entire town as recently as 1978, we crossed into Cambodia not sure what to expect. The pace of everything slowed dramatically. It was like turning back the clock. Determined to avoid the traffic of Phnom Penh we stuck to the coast, with fresh crabs to eat at Kep and a climb on perfect tarmac to a stunning view over the Gulf of Thailand.

In order to reach Siem Reap – home of the temples of Angkor Wat, we had to cross the sparsely populated Cardamom mountains. We knew that the road would be tough, so we divided the fourteen classic cars into three groups with a 4x4 in each in case we needed to be pulled out of the mud or ruts. Progress was slow and the sump guards earned their keep, but all the cars made it under their own steam. Dusty but proud, we took a well-earned day off to explore Angkor's historic sites by tuk tuk and enjoy dinner in a beautiful Temple.

Thanks to Bruno Leunen from Destination Rally and his team of local logistics companies, everything worked impeccably and swiftly at each border crossing and soon we were speeding north through Thailand.





What a change! We were now in the developed world of major highways, long traffic light cycles, smart shops and clean toilets. However, within a day we were driving empty roads in the hills along the picturesque border with Laos: perfect roads to enjoy the power steering of a DB6mk2. We broke the journey for a dusk or dawn visit to the ancient capital of Sukhothai before taking a brand-new road through the mountains to Myanmar (Burma). We had driven in rural Myanmar in 2015 with Neil and Olivia who brought their Jaguar XK140 drophead again this time. Our original idea was to drive the length of Vietnam – a long thin

and mountainous country - before heading west and finishing in Myanmar. Research on a motorcycle blog showed that the most exciting driving for our classic cars would be found on the mountain roads of the far northern extreme of Vietnam. However, when the weather is good there, it is either raining in Myanmar or there might be a tornado further south in Vietnam bringing down bridges and stopping us in our tracks. Back to the drawing board! Global Rally Organisation was founded as a non-commercial organisation in 2005 to drive a three-month 29,000 km route from London to Sydney, Australia. Our subsequent four rallies had each been seven to eight weeks in length, so fortunately, we were not too constrained for time. By my calculations, leaving Hoi An in central Vietnam in early February and taking a clockwise route through the other countries, we could finish in the far north of Vietnam five weeks later where spring would just be starting. We had a winner of a route: we would drive from Vietnam to Myanmar ... and back again!

Our immediate welcome to Myanmar was a long stretch of road works, negotiating rough ground, streams and the dust of other vehicles. Soon, however, all was forgotten and forgiven. The morning processions of young monks, the bullock carts with huge wooden wheels and yet another halt for a group of untethered cows to amble across the road made us appreciate the wonders of this country. Thailand's traffic light delays were exchanged for being flagged down by colourfully dressed locals, rattling silver bowls to collect for the local Buddhist temple. Since buying her in 2001 we have driven over 200,000 km in our car and we have enjoyed many great days in the less well travelled parts of the world. When you fly into a country, you will almost certainly arrive at the most international part of it, but when you drive into a country you are immediately among the local people in the remotest parts. They all want to know 'where do you come from?' 'Where are you going?' and of course turning up in a classic Aston Martin car is a great opener for a conversation.

We took time to experience the tourist sites of Bagan, with its four thousand temples and the picturesque fishermen of Inle Lake, but then it was off the beaten track again into the heart of the Shan region of eastern Myanmar. Setting off in the early morning we



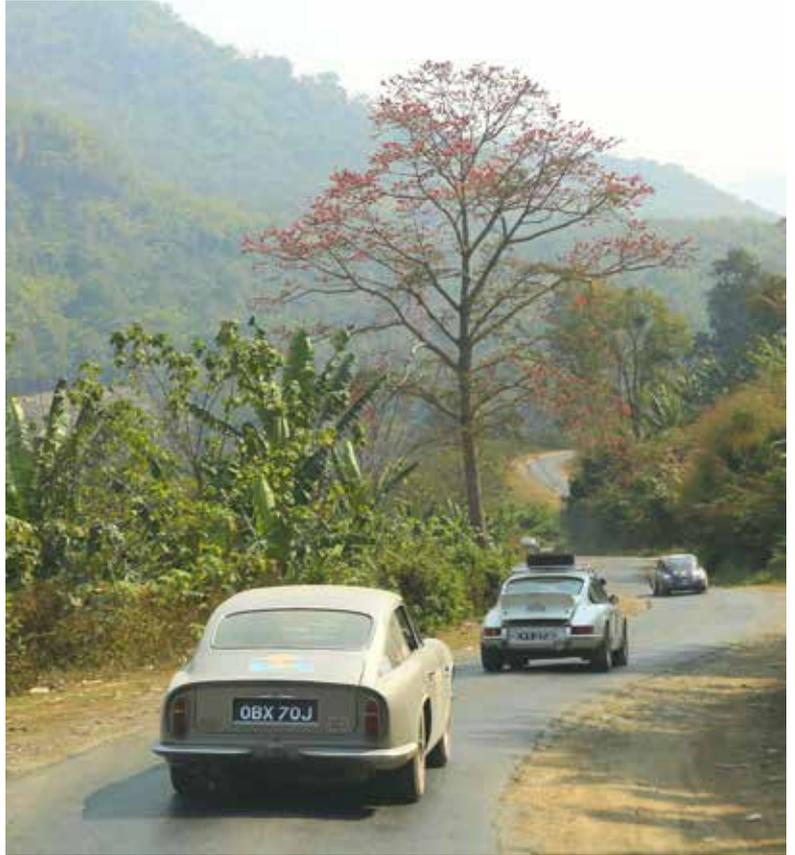




were fortunate to encounter the ethnic people of Silver Palaung. It is easy to mistake the boys, with their long hair in pony tails and slim figures for girls: especially as everyone in Myanmar wears a wrap-around 'longyi'. However, when we met the ladies with their many rings of silver around their waists and gold painted teeth, bejewelled with rubies, all became clear. We had no words in common, but it seemed that they were as intrigued to see us, as we were to see them. They did not hide or run away but were happy to say hello and show off their silver attire and their babes-in-arms. In Myanmar it is the women who repair the roads. This area was no different and after the villages we passed local women tossing basketfuls of stones onto the roadway, still dressed in their colourful clothes and silver bands.

The rest of the day was slow and difficult, with seemingly endless road works through the mountains. Earth moving equipment perched precariously on the dusty mountainsides with steep roadside drops. However, no-one was complaining. It had been a magical day and Myanmar would be a tough act to follow.

Fortunately, Luang Prabang on the banks of the Mekong in Laos has lost none of its charm, despite now definitely being on the tourist circuit. We paused to explore the mighty river, the decorated temples (Wats) and to give food to the orange-clad monks at dawn. Crossing back into Vietnam at Dien Bien Phu, where the French were defeated by the Viet Minh in 1954, the mountain scenery changed dramatically. Small Laotian roads, climbing up and down



modest hills, gave way to mountains with steep rice terraces and roads clinging to the steep slopes. The further north we went the more dramatic it was. For the most part, there was very little traffic and the road surfaces were new and well maintained, but as we got beyond the developed tourist town of Sapa there were stretches where we had to pick our way slowly around potholes and boulders. Our Aston has been raised by one inch. The suspension is soft and she rides very well on the rough sections. The only other traffic was cows and the odd motorbike. The plan worked out, though: in the far north, spring had started. Ready for a break and a photo, we stopped to see rice being planted. The whole village was involved, with the women at one end of the terrace and the men at the other. We took off our shoes and joined in!

As if we had not seen enough, with just two days to go, we crossed the fairy-tale landscape of the Dong Van Karst Plateau and our cars

climbed the vertiginous Ma Pi Leng pass. It was only on the last day that we caught up with the traffic and bustle of the outskirts of Hanoi and Haiphong. The faithful cars were taken to have a well-earned six-week rest in a shipping container and we celebrated our brilliant journey aboard a boat in Halong Bay.

Although the only Aston Martin on 'Vietnam to Myanmar... and back', Robin and Charlotte Morrison in their 1970 Aston Martin DB6 mk2 previously travelled with Roger and Margaret Carey in a 1959 DB mkIII. They were jointly awarded the Victor Gauntlett Trophy by the Aston Martin Owners' Club in 2008 for driving from Panama to Alaska with Global Rally.

This Global Rally Event for fourteen classic cars and three 4x4s was run by Destination Rally. More information at [globalrally.org](http://globalrally.org) - [destination-rally.com](http://destination-rally.com) and [robinandcharlotte.com](http://robinandcharlotte.com). «

