

2009-10-05 Halls Creek Herald the News Paper

2009-10-02 Palm Spring

Our lovely New Zealand host took us for a drive with their two boys Troy and Jesse to Palm Spring for swimming and looking out for freshwater crocodiles. It is a beautiful oasis in the middle of the desert. Kaye our host is an ex racing lady – therefore we got the fasts km done in Australia so far. It was dusty but good fun.

We went to a nice BBQ the other night with her work mates from the local hospital.

2009-09-30 Crazy – Tough pushbike rider

We met a nice courageous and spirited man in his 80ies, who decided to travel with his bicycle from Perth, Broome, Katherine Gorge, Alice Springs and back to Perth. He had the same reason to leave Perth like us – it was too cold at the time.

When we overtook him we stopped on the roadside to take photos with him. As soon as we got back in the car we had strange noise like a waterfall coming from the bonnet. Not worried by this noise, we continued the drive to stop at Halls Creak to fill up petrol. We did our normal checks and opened the bonnet and saw a hole in the radiator hose. After changing the stuff we found a second one at the knob connected to the radiator. We fixed it as well. 2 People asked us if we needed some help. They tried to find a solution for us and invited us to camp in their front yard. There for we could do a proper check with VOLVO – Premier Motor in Perth to get their opinion on it. They decided to fly in for us a new radiator from Sydney.

2009-09-29 Meeting the local Radio – Kimberly ABC

We got invited to be interviewed at the morning show for the truckies and the locals for WA. Then we hit the road with the plan to make it as soon as possible across the country to the east coast to Townsville. First stop was Fitzray Crossing.

2009-09-27 Chicken – Coralie the new co-pilot

We met in Carnavon where Coralie worked in the vineyard. After several phone calls she decided to participate the VOLVO challenge adventure all the way to Melbourne Cup. The day after her arrival was no time to relax. While getting organized she did not realize we received a call from Xavier, Win TV reporter in Broome, to shoot a sequence of our travel. We met him at the Visitor Centre for interviews and went after outside of Broome for doing active driving for his report. He told us it will be on the 6:30 p.m. News at channel nine. Instead of watching it we decided to enjoy the sunset at Cable beach. Friends of ours taped the News and we could pick it up the next day. This was the family from eighty mile beach offering us their BBQ.

2009-26-09 One more goodbye on my trip

My sister departed to Sydney by Qantas to make it back to Switzerland on time. We had the best time together travelling along the west coast. We followed the sun and took time – time for life time - sister and brother relation ship – thinking back in the childhood when we had to share the room or when we went on holidays camping and we did not like to sleep all together in the same tent. Today grown up – at least we believe so - we do it on in our own will in a roof top tent and we love it. Getting spoiled be the well experienced African safari “cuisine” by Sabine we had from day one on other campers and backpackers queuing for leftover’s.

When an Australian asks you to have a look at your engine you have to be careful. Especially in my case not having an idea about it. Opening the bonnet his went straight in to the weakest hydraulic tube and broke it off. We fixed it temporarily to make it to the next workshop and I had to fix it for good Remote Area A\$.

2009-09-23 Bush camp

Karaijini National Park invited us to do tracking and bush camping. Climbing down in the canyon and swimming in the Circular Pool's cold fresh water is an oasis. Tracking on for hours to Fortesue Falles and Fern Pool in this natural environment was mind blowing. At night we found along the Milky Way our star sign as a secret for my sister and me. At Eighty Mile Beach you walk and walk and walk – it will never finish. We did not understand why all the fishermen are fishing so close together like there is not space for all of them. We had a blast watching their fishing lines tangling up together. We guessed it is the way to make friends pulling each others fishing line out of the water.

For dinner we got ready for our BBQ – but the beef did not fit in our cooking utilities. Our neighbours had a good giggle and offered us their proper Australian BBQ. While chatting along they told us that their son would like to have a photo with the left hand drive car. Early morning before we hit the road - it was time for the photo shooting with the youngest VOLVO challenge pilot so far. It made his day while honking the horns and starting the engine.

2009-09-19 Track driver Mr. Spotless

In Tom Price at the petrol station we had people approaching us and wishing us all the best to make it to Melbourne Cup on time – we were surprised and ask them how they know about it. Mr. Spotless put a big smile on and mentioned – not lots of VOLVO's are on the road and the News at channel ten was talking about it.

2009-09-18 VOLVO challenge meets Kailis fishing company

Alex and his family invited us to stay at their fishing company in Exmouth and to enjoy the biggest Prawns in the world. In the morning getting up for the sunrise and looking out for whales and having a coffee on the veranda, this is a dream and – yes we are lucky – we see them passing bye. Walking for hours along the beach, keeping an eye on Pelicans and all the exiting creatures living on the beach is phenomenal. Having a talk to the gardener and getting the advice to climb for sunset up the canyon. That was funny too – on the top we finally had after days, mobile phone connection and we had a quick talk back to our brother – he was the one who organised the contact with his friend Alex.

2009-09-14 Heading fast north

Stopping and camping along the east cost brings us from Dongara to Carnarvon where we met my later on “new co-pilot” Chicken – Coco – Coralie Chanel and on to Coral Bay. At night it was still getting cold and the water was very refreshing. The Reef offers the most colourful underwater experience. Fish literally swim between your legs while walking along the beach in the water. They start nibbling on your legs and feet.

2009-09-12 CONTINENTAL – VOLVO Premier Motors – channel ten

I contacted Continental to let them know about the top quality of tires they put on my VOLVO back in Switzerland. I did a 26'000km with the same set, never had a flat one and the profile is still good enough to drive across Australia. CONTINENTAL in Melbourne decided to supply 4 brand new of the latest light track tires “Vanco 2” to get us a bit more ground clearance and for a good run across to make it to Melbourne Cup. We did a fantastic Pit stop CONTINENTAL Barbagallo at Osborne Park. Just finished we went across the road to VOLVO “Premier Motors” to say goodbye and to finalise the interview with Network Ten “channel ten”. All very happy and exited, my sister and I decided heading north and then across because of the cold weather - and - she would like to return to Switzerland with a suntan.

2009-09-11 Arrival of my car packed in a 20 foot container

Actually my car was shipped to Fremantle. I was well prepared with all the necessary documents for quarantine and custom to clear the container. It all came different.

First at all it was not possible to get an address of the custom office at Fremantle port.

VOLVO “Premier Motors” stepped in to help me out. Finally we got it from the Government in Canberra. Surprise!!! While arriving at the port I find a closed down building with a sign “we moved to the airport 12 month ago” – “??????” different country - different habits - different custom - different stage of knowledge – it is all a part of my trip to experience this. I would not be surprised if the employees are still on pay roll – I guess I should apply for a job! Because of all this circumstances I got “Global Transport” a clearing agent involved. I handed them over my car key and all the other keys such as my set of documents, Carnet de Passage en Douane, from VOLVO Singapore I had service documents, steam cleaning documents for engine, under body, the inside of the car and so on – I felt that something is going wrong.

I ask them such as the Government and Custom people if I could join when the quarantine staff members search my car. The answer was a dozen time NO. I explained to them that it is a private vehicle with all the equipments for my challenge and I was the one packed and lashed the car. Further it will be necessary to have me on the spot to open up everything required professionally and carefully. The idea of being helpful and faster such as cheaper for me did not work. The answer was again - Mate you are in Australia - we know what and how we have to do. Nobody is allowed to go near the quarantine. These are the words by Global Transport such as by the Government and Custom people.

Global Transport did a real fast job – but – I tell you in a minute.

My sister Sabine arrived from Sydney and we went together to Fremantle to get the VOLVO back on the road. We met up with the Quarantine officer a nice helpful professional. He pointed us in the direction where we have to pick up the car – it was pouring at the time.

What a sad surprise – a big mess - we find the car in front of us - pulled apart, the roof top tent hanging down on the side of the car, all the electronics, charger and all the expedition equipments hanging out of the car and a part of it thrown back into it. Soaking wet and quit damaged - the spare tire was thrown back in to the car on top of every thing else – it looked like in a war after bombing. I turned around went back to the quarantine officer and had a good talk to him. I told him it is not acceptable. He explained me that they would have loved having me at the quarantine check helping them out because they did also not get a supervisor of the clearing agent.

Yes I was disappointed. My sister and I had a good love when the quarantine people offer us to drive the car in the quarantine hall “big sings nobody behind this yellow line” and we could repack the car. At the same time we called the responsible from Global Transport in and showed him the mess and the lack of his information and that he is too expensive for the quality of work they do.

We find an agreement and drove off to Padbury.

2009-09-08 Arrival at the red Continent - Radio 6PR

Meeting up with friends in Perth after my arrival was fantastic. My host Bec gave me and later on my sister a very warm welcome to WA. In Fremantle we caught up with my dear friend Althea while checking out the port, custom, quarantine houses such as having a good wonder at Kailis Pearls. Later on we got invited for the best prawn dinner we ever had – very fresh taken home by Alex from work. Next day we met Tony of Radio 6PR 882 for an Interview. He showed us the studio and gives a fantastic inside of their entire business. Easily I could spend more time in Perth to discover more of the area.

2009-09-03 Singapore border crossing with excellent help of the Swiss embassy at 10 p.m.

We lined up with the Swiss Club, the Swiss School and with VOLVO several Press Media Event.

To keep up with the schedule we had to involve the Swiss Embassy to get us across the border.

This felt really nice getting with in 30 min the best support possible to get us in from Woodland Checkpoint. You find the detailed story in the press releases. We arrived after midnight at the Embassy. The consular was waiting for as offered us a beer and "birchemuseli" and accommodation. It was one of the longest day on my trip. Next day Sebastian was sleeping on the poolside at the Swiss Club. It started to rain and rain – he slept as a rock and did not get bothered by the rain. In the meantime I got an invitation by Swiss to bring our laundry and or to stay with them. We ended up with this wonderful Swiss family. I felt sad when I left – I was like

Shipping to Australia Perth – missing signature in the documents of the custom officer, bad weather condition forces us to take a later ship to Perth.

2009-08-19/21 Kuala Lumpur

Continue visiting Sebastian's friends, actually his ex neighbours, from Switzerland did spoil us again. For me it was still unbelievable after all the countries I passed through before being back in such an environment. Big city and all clean made me feel like in a hospital. The city spirit was almost too much. The time we had was spent on night explorations and on daytime working on events in Singapore.

2009-08-17/19 Crossing the border, ferry to Langkawi

Getting across the border from Thailand to Malaysia was quit fast and uncomplicated.

Getting the Insurance sorted out for bough countries Malaysia and Singapore was fast and good value.

My dear friend Sebastian prepared a big surprise for me. Hopping on a boat and shooting across to Langkawi and spoiling me at the Sheraton for three days. We are visiting his friends and going on river cruise with them. We are visiting his friends in fish farm, a nice setup with and interesting potential for the future. Getting local inside and learning of his kids they have to do mathematics in Chinese was more then impressive. Meeting the night live with wild dancing locals and lots of good win we had a great time on the island. On the way back to the ferryboat I released my wallet is missing. In the Resort they did not find it and we had to jump on the ferry after we missed the first one. When we mad it back to the car it was sitting in the dashboard. Released we started the engine and started driving south.

2009-08-15/13 Ra Ra the elephant by Sheraton Krabi Beach Resort

Panu the editor of Esquire arranged for us to visit Krabi and to talk to school kids. Just before we arrived he cold us and announced the change in plan. The address provided of him was Sheraton Krabi Beach Resort next to the Kings residence. At arrival we got introduced to the Manager and the team such as the journalist waiting for us. This unique opportunity of "Ra Ra" having a close look at the VOLVO and having her in front of our NIKON lens was fantastic. Then going on with interviews and exploring all of the dream world at Sheraton Krabi Beach Resort. No motorboats are allowed passing by, no anchoring, it is possibly the most peaceful place on earth. The chef cooked us for every meal a different cuisine "fine dining" and putting on weight, I love it. Swimming in the pool takes you visually out to the sea. They planed following day for us to do an island hopping trip with a local longtail. Particularly we decided not to visit all the tourist islands, we focused on hidden spots and they are all over the place.

This is one of the most beautiful regions of Thailand. For every demand - you will be spoiled. Active sport experience all the natural hotspots visiting temples, having a wonder in town and getting closer to the spirit of the culture – it is magic. The resort is a place to fall in love – to fall in love with it. Bringing your kids along or recharging your own batteries, for the first

or second honeymoon or an escape of your daily life, it is the place. Certainly for people who wish to visit their many and believe it is cheaper in north Malaysia for holidays have to learn better. I will go back to the resort and stay for longer. A big thank you - to the Sheraton Krabi Beach Resort to have us and taking so good care of us. It was the first time on my travel I had a total chill out.

2009-08-08/12 Courtyard by Marriott, Surin Beach - Phuket

After an opulent breakfast, which involved hundreds of delicious pancakes we have received a warm welcome by the GM and their Team. After a short introduction we have decided to explore the hotel and the surrounding beach more extensively. The Courtyard by Marriott at Surin Beach is a new resort, located at a quiet street on Surin Beach. It offers 256 deluxe rooms and suites and is ideally situated for those privileged tourists, who desire a restful weeklong vacation with fine white sand, crystal clear water and verdant landscapes. The hotel restaurant offers a delightful dining experience. That can be enjoyed throughout day and night. It is on-site, Kids World offers a variety of children's activities, including the outdoor pool and waterslides, guaranteeing hours of fun for all. The workout equipment and the view from the fitness centre is one of the most breathtaking we've ever seen. While enjoying the pool, I could watch Sebastian fogging up the window front at the workout. Its proximity to near Jungceylon Mall, Patong Beach, Phang Nga Bay, Cherngtalay & other popular destinations makes it the ideal place for a stay in Phuket. It is a fantastic family hotel.

Dubbed 'Pearl of the South' by the tourist industry, Phuket is Thailand's largest island encompassing 810 square km. Based on what we have seen, we think that it must be of the wealthiest provinces in the country.

Lying in the Andaman Sea of Southern Thailand's west coast, the islands terrain is incredibly varied, with rocky beaches, long, broad, sandy beaches, limestone cliff's, forested hills and tropical vegetation of all kinds. Great seafood is available all over the island and several offshore islands are known for good snorkelling and scuba diving.

Surin Beach, is although popular with tourists is not a busy resort town, it's more like a coastal village. Fine white sand and turquoise water has ensured that the picturesque beach is very popular with tourists and the Thai population alike. The whole area is awash with high end hotels and housing which in turn has created opportunities for high end restaurants and wine bars such as for instance the Catch Beach club where we frequently enjoyed our Chang Beer while watching the spectacular sunsets.

2009-08-07 Looking for gas

Heading out for breakfast to our preferred cold coffee provider, 7eleven, we passed along the morning market in Chumphon. Among a variety of things we noticed to pig heads lying on a table and waiting for a hungry customer. We hardly managed to resist the urge to indulge ourselves this treat. Lukas mentioned the possibility to make some pictures with the two heads in reference to the global outbreak of the swine flu, but we forgot to carry along the camera and ultimately had to focus on having our cold coffee and some dry pieces of cake. Once we left Chumphon and headed to Ranong a rare event took place: the start of heavy rainfall. Within minutes the roads were washed-over with mud and smut, we had to reduce our average speed considerably. While driving on the road, we felt the sudden impulse to make some sightseeing and took off the main road to visit the nearby Bokkrai waterfall. At the entrance we met two locals and some folks from South Africa and the US were sitting at a table and chewing some Sapodillas or Lumut fruits. They later followed us to the waterfalls to have their morning shower. We took some pictures of one of the guys with his densely haired rasta-look. Really impressive! It's bombastic – very fantastic Mr. DJ of BKK.

We continued our journey down to Phuket. Near Phuket we noticed that we were running out of gas. In the northern of Thailand that wouldn't have been the basis of any concern to us as there was a galore of brightly lit up gas stations all along the roads. But in the south, it seems, the provinces (not as affluent as in the north) have to save energy to guarantee a stable

supply during the day. After looking unsuccessfully for a illuminated gas station we have asked a local car driver, where we can find gas. He told us to follow him. We did not know if he really realised that we were desperately low on gas as he kept driving on and on. But, we finally made it to one that was open and he seemed to be as happy as we were once we all arrived there. When filling the fuel tank we noticed that only two litres must have been left in the tank. That was a close frisky risky thing! Late in the evening we have reached the Courtyard by Marriott in Surin Beach and enjoyed some nice dinner along with a great Argentinean wine.

2009-08-06 Goodby Bangkok

After a late check-out, we keyed in the new destination in our NOKIA GPS and hit the road. Once again, and most probably for the last time during this trip, we had the pleasure to enjoy Bangkok's amazing road and bridge system and were asking ourselves how on earth anybody can find his or her way out without the help of a reliable navigation support. We just strictly followed the instructions given by the male voice with a whiff of a British accent. As we started our journey in the late afternoon the darkening evening did not give us a good chance to get a feeling of how the Eastern coast of Thailand looks like. Fruits such as pineapple and fishing are the main livelihood of the Thais living in the provinces along the upper part of the Gulf of Thailand peninsula. Along the Gulf coast are a variety of small seaside resorts, most of them very low-key. At times huge hotel complexes are visible from the main road that runs along the Gulf. Via Samut Sakhon, Hua Hin and Prachuap we headed southwards and decided to stay the night in Chumphon, before switching the coast side next morning.

2009-08-01 Swiss National day with the Swiss Society of Bangkok

We got invited to spend the evening together with the Swiss Society organised by Daniel of ThaiSri our insurance angel. The evening it self was indeed very Swiss. We somehow felt slightly embarrassed by the speech of the Swiss Ambassador. He does not look happy and is not proud at all. It's good he finishes his term in about two weeks time. While then the party was rolling they called from the hotel my number plate because of parking troubles. Finally I ended up having a speech about our trip. The crowd, especially all the Thai's have been most interested in my ZH 443 986 because 986 were the three winning ditches of the Thai-Lotto on that day. It would have payed good dollars what I would have spent on petrol.

2007-07-27 The new crew

Up north, next by to the golden triangle in the jungle of Chaing Rai. We experience the limit of my VOLVO Polar while approaching Akha Hill a tribal village. Driving along the muddy jungle road up the hill the earth road turns into a washed out riverbed, pretty much unpassable. It looks like we have to make use of our Scobamat. The monsoon stopped. Our well used Continental winter tyres (with more then 20'000 km) keep up with traction. The final squeeze was the last bit to Akha Hill. Surprisingly it was a kind of concrete but a clime of more then 35 degrees. A new feeling, driving the narrowest and steepest road ever. Suddenly in the first gear the power is not enough to get us further, the tires still with full grip, getting slower and slower – switching the AC off – just an other 5 4 3 2 1 meters to go. We felt the freefall backwards down the hill in the jungle already. To see in the front where the road takes us was impossible and the ground clearance of the VOLVO is sucks like half a food – no way to stop or to go backwards down the hill.

We just made it with zero speed and no horsepower left. The locals get together and welcome the strange number plate and the only non 4x4 at little "Switzerland of Thailand". We where more then confused to learn we arrived in little Switzerland. After explaining we drove the car from Switzerland to here they got all much exited. The humidity up like standing under a waterfall was inviting enough to get first a beer. While drinking it I got rely worried of thinking how to get safe back down in a day or two. If we get rain it will not be possible

except we tow the VOLVO in front of a 4x4 and let it slowly down the hill. Actually I was thinking of having one in front and one in the back to make it on other parts up and down on jungle roads.

2009-07-26 And again insurance

For once we understood along our trip what Insurance document we signed. It feels great and it is hardly to believe all in English. It was my best Insurance experience in my life so far. The perfect third party insurance for Thailand by ThaiSri. Please see to story written by Daniel Wyss, Manager FR/SME, International & Corporate Business, THAISRI Insurance Co., Ltd. Bangkok. A big thank you to him.

2009-07-24 To get the VOLVO ready for Sebastian

WEARNES Automotive put up their service team. They pampered and massaged – good reason to get jealous, but than the engine was running smooth like never before. It was the result of bad petrol along the way. They got us on time - back on the road – (faster than Schumi into the cockpit).

2009-07-22 Massage – Massage – Massage

Clearing the container by my self would be one thing. While pondering over the best way to do so the Swiss Embassy as well as WEARNES Automotive (this is the biggest VOLVO dealership in Thailand), gave me a foretaste. Money: it cost – easy USD 2'000 -3'000.— or 350% of the car's value. Timeframe: for a private car which will be used in transit – after arrival up to 2 month.

I closed a deal with my feeder Vessel agent Mr Chersak of T.C.C Service Co. Ltd. and we agreed to a total “all-in-fee” – with strong focus on the terms ‘All-in’. He organised for me the custom clearing agent Royal Star Shipping Co. Ltd. Mr. Viroj Pitisakulkiat Royali.i@hotmail.com.

At Custom: All documents ready for clearing the container at the port. The “Carnet de Passages en Douane” is not useful for Thailand at sea port, except it is authorised and endorsed by Chamber of commerce in Switzerland together with the Thai chamber. After finding out all of that they had to go for a long lunch time and the day was over. The Swiss Embassy helped me out and pleased the custom with a stamped copy of my Original Carnet. With all the support I had the VOLVO back on the road after 48 hours. Driving back in town “BKK” it felt nice and good. The sound of the engine was no good. Every single diesel engine is not making this hammering noise while accelerating or driving slight up. It was time for an experienced professional massage with happy end at a VOLVO dealership.

2009-07-16 It has been an experience

The last I saw on the ship tracking on the web the car was just a red dot, in the middle of the ocean half way to Singapore, a stop it has to make before being transferred to another ship to Bangkok. I am sitting in a hotel in Istanbul waiting for friends to come home from work, and enjoying the relaxing lifestyle. After bragging about not getting sick once on the journey I have succumbed to a cold and a dose of Delhi belly all at once, but was it worth it? For sure. The itinerary might have been overly ambitious mostly because of needing to get back to work, but the journey for me has been complete, even if missing out on the last few miles through SE Asia. I am sure Lukas will do justice to the story of the journey by doing the miles and experiencing yet another 3 countries people, cultures and flavours.

I would like to thank all the people who helped us along the way, those on the journey, and those back home keeping the fort, the good friends we made and the experiences they gave us. Thank you to the partners Lukas got involved for their contributions and support. I also thank all the people who have been reading my comments on the blog, and I hope that I have managed to make the things we have experienced along the way entertaining enough to keep some of you interested in staying connected.

I know already what is going to be the hardest part of relating stories of the travel which

some people have already said they want to hear, and that is the most asked question so far, “What was the best place you visited?” and I already know I can’t answer that one. Every place has its own distinct attraction, ambiance, experience, but most of all people. While there have been some moments of less than favourable outcomes, such as bombings, shootings or civil unrest, for us these have been insights to another side of some of the countries, but pale against the warm friendly people we have met. While everyone is always interested in what the rest of the world thinks of their country and asked us as much, I hope that our travel has proven that it is only the small minority that have this destructive urge and the many other travelers we have encountered would tend to agree that it is only a poor reflection of the places we have visited, but sadly the mostly promoted part by the media. The troubled countries probably have the most humble people, a real bonus to travelling in such places.

I can take away with me a new outlook on all the places we have visited, and with any luck I can adopt some of the better attributes of the many cultures into my own life.

I want to thank Lukas for many things, for the “bloody Volvo”, for having the tenacity to share the same experience as me, for his part in the planning and his company along the way.

I have learnt just as much about my friend as I have about everything else along the way. I wish him well on the rest of his journey and hope to see him (and the car) in Australia soon. What a journey, what an experience, what memories! Carpe Diem!

2009-07-08 Plan B

With nothing more able to be done towards convincing Myanmar to let us in, we headed off to Chittagong in the hope of seeing the longest beach in the world, Cox’s Bazaar, which we hoped to get to after sorting out what to do if Myanmar was off limits. The Monsoon set in as soon as we arrived in Chittagong and the rain reminded me of a hitch at work in Gobe, PNG. Plan B was to ship the car around Burma to Bangkok, where Lukas could meet the car and continue on. With no word back from the Myanmar consulate, the decision to wait any longer was taken from us and the back up plan was put into action. Unfortunately for me the time to ship was going to put me out of time and work was beckoning again. After a day of talking to shipping agencies we settled on one, and started the process of getting the car on a ship. Customs formalities were quick, then the waiting game began, We quickly repacked the car with what was not needed for the interim and what I would take with me, and headed back to the agency where we waited and waited for the other paperwork to be completed. Keen to finish in a single day we headed off to the container terminal only to find we had to wait there for the customs officer to arrive and clear the car for export. All very simple processes, but in Bangladesh time, we finally stuffed and lashed the car in the container, and the seal was put on at 10pm.

Next to the problem of finding a way out of Bangladesh, having entered by land we need a change of route permit to be able to fly out, another simple process which so far we have worked out requires a form and 1 or 5 passport photos. My latest photos, done in Dhaka were typical of an emerging country getting used to technology, stretched to fit the right size, my head now looks more like that of a front rower in the Wallabies. Getting a flight itinerary out of Bangladesh was relatively easy and with the help of a local travel agent it was a pleasant surprise to see the price. I was able to back track to see some of our new friends in Turkey and get back to Australia cheaply, but, there is no way to pay for foreigners with out the bank’s intervention. Bangladesh is very modern when it comes to who can accept credit cards and businesses all over have no problem with it, but for some reason the government has deemed that travel agencies are not able to accept them from foreigners, who would have thought that overseas tourists would need to use a travel agent. Taka, the local cash is accepted, but only with a certificate from the bank, which incidentally are closed just when I need them and of course the certificate will cost you! We will see what happens.....

2009-07-04 Down in Dhaka

In between all the administration there was time only for a couple of local tours of the neighbourhood. Our dinner at the home of the Swiss consulate ended with a ride back to the hotel in a rickshaw, lacking exercise in the last few days, Lukas decided to try his hand at being a rickshaw waller. I already knew what he was in for having given it a go myself in my last visit to India, he found that they just aren't designed for efficient cycling. They are heavy, the brakes don't work, no lights means you can't see the pot holes and if you push too hard on the pedals the chain slips around the cog. He didn't give up though and managed to negotiate the unlit streets back to the hotel, and the passengers, me and the bike owner were satisfied with the ride.

For a break from the paperwork, I and a Chinese marketing manager staying at the hotel decided to take some time out to see the lake. We walked to the police check point, marked on the road by concrete barriers and road cones sporting advertising for banks, and turned right to see one of the lakes dotted around the city. Green water, rubbish and a smell not unlike the roadside sewers, there were boatmen waiting for passengers, people tending to their tiny gardens dug into the very narrow and steep banks and children of all ages from 2 to 14 playing all along the path, unattended and scarcely clad. Most kids on the street are somehow able to stay alive with so much danger about them, They have an ability to keep out of the way of cars, rickshaws and policemen all while trying to get a dollar out of the foreigners, a skill that is learnt very young. It is normal to have 1 to 10 children latched on to you as you walk anywhere, all wanting money and not giving up for any reason. It was good to see that they at least looked healthy, though how they managed being so young and left to their own devices until all hours of the night was hard to fathom.

Brightly lit food stalls operated until midnight, and the fruit was cheap, but not if you were a foreigner. Another tour took us to the market, where we ventured further in to the stalls. Vegetables were all laid out looking good enough to eat, but there was no guarantee of exactly what type of fertilizer they had used given the human waste treatment along the lake, it wasn't worth the risk in trying the local fare. Rounding a corner in the middle of the veg stalls there was a cow, which appeared to be lying down, not an unusual sight, but a 2nd look and our Chinese friend wheeled about and left immediately. There was a butcher wielding a knife and skinning the cow on the floor, his stall right next to the drain where all manner of waste was flowing

2009-07-01 Well connected

The last few days have been soaked up with tracking down the part for the car and meeting with people, servicing the car, chasing visas and permits and shipping agencies to cover all bases. Before I tell of the drama of getting the part out of customs, I really should put things into perspective. The turbo, which was sent to Turkey for us some months ago, took 14 days to clear customs, with all the efforts of the Anwar Group, a large family owned company and owners of the Ford dealership, and new found friends of ours, the part only took 5 days to get past customs, as well as a hefty import duty, about 3 times the cost of the part. A service of the car was done and a few other small problems were attended to, such as the leak in the vent panel which caused the floor of the driver's side to fill up with water. A problem not noticeable in Switzerland, more snow than rain, and definitely not a problem through the deserts of Iran and Pakistan, but evidently much more noticeable in the Monsoon in Bangladesh! Entertainment wasn't in the form of sightseeing this time, no time for that, but we were well looked after by the people of the Anwar Group, lunches, dinners, endless cups of Cha and information were all provided continuously and were well appreciated as we waded through the red tape of customs and consulates. An invite to visit the Swiss consulate was also well appreciated and later an invitation to dinner at their private residence was a welcome change. You could not imagine a more removed place to discover good Swiss red wine!

Our last chance at a visa for land crossing into Burma took us to the Myanmar consulate. We were welcomed by a very friendly secretary, who was sympathetic to our plight, but couldn't offer any more than a promise to lodge our application. Apart from the help he gave in the way of precise instructions on what we needed to submit, he was able to offer an insight into the process as well. Our application was in the hands of a committee in the Dept of Foreign affairs. We gathered all the information necessary, submitted the application and crossed our fingers. We now had a tight deadline, as if the visa was able to be granted we had only 3 weeks before I needed to leave to get back to work. We needed to have a plan B.

2009-06-26 Driving to new levels

One would have thought that we should have seen most of the driving conditions you could encounter in the world by now, but it was a new experience crossing the border to Bangladesh. The problem probably lies in the good roads, if the roads weren't so good, then the busses wouldn't be able to travel so fast, and then they may not be able to overtake on blind corners and need to suddenly fit 2 busses going in opposite directions as well as the truck and us that happened to be using the road normally, 4 abreast on a small country highway. The busses have right of way, they say so, and the scars on their sides are testimony to the battles they have endured proving it. It is not uncommon to see a bus with no paint left on the side at all and the once smooth panels now fully corrugated from top to bottom from dices with other traffic. Just following a truck, minding your own business did not mean that you were free from the wrath of the busses, we were squeezed off the road more than once by a bus which found that there really wasn't enough room, but there would be if that damn Volvo wasn't there. No damage, but the mirror was rotated a few times by busses looking for more room. And I used to think that Adelaide drivers were the worst, maybe just the worst in the western world.

The border crossing went without a hitch, probably the fastest yet, with formalities on both sides just taking an hour. Interest in the foreigners also took on a new dimension. Bengal people seem to be more interested in the funny looking car and the foreigners. A new record was reached when we pulled up for a drink at the border town in Bangladesh. I stopped counting when the crowd that came to see the car reached 60 people. The whole road was full of people and even those that couldn't speak English were trying to get in on the conversation. All of them were well meaning, either trying to satisfy their own interest or trying to offer directions, drinks or help however they could. When we managed to get to the car again through the throngs we were back on our way, heading for the ferry town, deemed to be the best route. Obviously the country people hadn't read the news as there was a brand new bridge just opened the other way.

2009-06-25 Political detour

The temporary fix of the gearbox mount had us underway again. There was no need to plan a slow drive to where we could fix the car properly, we were once again in India and all highway driving is slow. Just when you get up to 70kmh, you have to slow down for a broken down truck, a bullock drawn wagon or a bus coming at you on the wrong side of the road. With the problem now identified the plan was now to get to Bangladesh where we were sure the part could be imported. We had the support once again of Volvo Switzerland, who put us in touch with Volvo India, who arranged a contact with the Ford dealer in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Everyone was so helpful, the part was ordered and should arrive in Dhaka about the time we did. Any attempt to get through a land border in to Bangladesh didn't help us though as we found we had to drive almost to Calcutta before we found a border tourists could use for overland entry. The drive of some 500 km took us 2 days. The second night's accommodation in Ranaghat was one of the hardest to find. After driving through the small streets of the town and driving out of town twice following directions of well meaning locals, we eventually got directed to a cheap hotel, but to get there we had to negotiate a street corner which was full of people on chairs and standing around all listening to the local

politician who had a microphone linked to a loud speaker on every 2nd power pole through the town. We Made our way through the crowd in the car slowly, with people laughing, smiling and moving chair, rickshaws and vendor carts and us looking very apologetic, while the speaker continued unabated pounding the ears of the town with his rhetoric drone. Our hotel had no parking, so the car was left in the street, next to the open sewer and next to our street level room also with open window and no air conditioning. At least we could see the car as well as feel the mozzies, breathe the heat, smell the sewer and when the power was on surf the 90 channels on the fuzzy tv. When the power was off you couldn't hear the tv for the portable generator which was in the lobby. The diesel exhaust providing some relief from the other ambience wafting in from the street.

2009-06-23 The Volvo mongrel

All sorts of help was now flooding in to help get us on the road again. Information was also coming in regarding the parts that go together to make a Volvo as well. Where we had already found out that our turbo was in fact a Mitsubishi, we now found out that the transmission was also used in Toyotas and other cars. This was going to be good news if in fact our strange noises were coming from down below. After doing some research and getting better equipped for a decision if the car was in bad shape, we headed off to the local Ford dealer in Bagdogra to get the car on a proper hoist to see underneath. It would seem the almighty crunch we heard when detouring around one of the many bridges out in Nepal, had damaged the mount on the back of the gear box and that had caused some other alignment problems and created more noise for us to worry about. The guys at the Ford dealership again looked after us very well, and as we got down and dirty under the car we were brought coffee and water, and the whole staff was there to help. The manager was even under the car working to find a solution. A check of this and that, proved that the problem lay in just one mount, which after some pleading a temporary fix was effected and we were on our way again. The test drive was one to forget, after leaving the dealership down the typical Indian highway, the Manager wanted to drive to check that the noise was not from somewhere else. I wish I was somewhere else and nearly was! On the bonnet! Automatic cars are definitely not the norm in India and left hand drive was something new to him. 2 footed driving, braking and accelerating, and attempting to overtake without being able to see down the road had me left with squashed glasses from head butting the windscreen and no nerves left from trying to stop my side of the car, which was incidentally a shared seat with the mechanic out of the path of oncoming trucks. No payment was required even though the whole staff were off duty helping us for a few hours, but we did manage to slip a hefty tip for beer (?) money to the mechanic to share around.

2009-06-22 Practice for Myanmar

Apparently the border at Biratnagar is closed. Someone should have told us that on our way through! Knowing the border was somewhere around where we were, we stopped at an office that had customs written on it, thinking that we needed to clear customs in Nepal, only to find out that it was the Indian customs and we had already crossed the border. The Indian official was most helpful and sent us across the road to the Immigration office which was an interesting feat between all the trucks, cars, rickshaws, bicycles, and pedestrians and we found it was not manned. After working out that we were in India, when we asked for the Nepal Immigration we were pointed back in the direction we came. Leaving the car on the Indian side as it appeared impossible to turn it around, we walked back to Nepal.....only to be told that there was no immigration at this border. Now we were in Nepal and the car was in India! Sneaking back across the border seemed like the best approach. While I stopped what seemed like the entire population of India and Nepal going about their normal business at the border, Lukas turned the car around and we waved and smiled our best "I don't know anything" tourist look and scuttled out of there to the next border crossing hoping that it was open to foreign nationals.

Driving along the west of Nepal it was interesting to note that the traffic got a lot thicker and the scenery changed quite a lot. There were an abundance of graves continuously along the road and even a funeral pyre burning and putting out black smoke, attended by a group of people adjacent to one of the long paddock grave yards.

2009-06-20 What goes bang, grind, clunk?

Our mission in Kathmandu completed, it was time to get some more miles out of the way, but just as we left the highway for the mountain pass to Hetauda.....bang, grind, clunk! Trying to find a straight piece of road to find out what the noise was or some sort of way to look under the car was interesting. We ended up driving up a mound directly after a bridge on a corner which was the safest location we could find. It proved to be very safe as no sooner had we stopped there were a bunch of locals around us to help us, guiding traffic, putting chocks under the wheels and offering smiles and help how ever they could. The Volvo is low even when it is up on a mound and finding the problem was still difficult, especially as it was intermittent. As there was no dealership in Nepal, it was decided to limp our way out of Nepal as steadily as we could.

The mountain pass to Hetauda was spectacular passing through 2500m, but long and winding. It turns out that the 100km direct from Kathmandu to Hetauda takes about 5 hours, and it is much quicker going the 250km, but without the scenery. There is even a lookout (and resort) where in a season other than the monsoon you get views of Mt Everest. Needless to say we couldn't see it as we drove the peak of the pass through the cloud.

2009-06-19 Convenient consulate

Arrival in Kathmandu was primarily for an extension to our visas which had ran out due to the hold ups in Turkey. We were offered the Hotel car and driver to take us to the consulates which was particularly helpful considering the street signs aren't!

The Bangladeshi consulate also gave our application every consideration, it was faxed before our arrival by Consular Services Worldwide in Switzerland, a phone call confirmed it had arrived at the consulate and the 3rd secretary told us to call him if we got any grief from the staff. The staff were efficient anyway, but we decided to talk to our man to thank him, and found we were sitting in front of the 1st Secretary of the consulate. He was most interested in our journey and welcomed us to his country before we had even been granted out visa. He also arranged for the visa to be put in the passport immediately rather than waiting until the afternoon like everyone else.

We got a similar warm welcome from the Burmese embassy, however, once again we were told that it was going to be impossible to enter by land. We could get a tourist visa and try our luck, but as we had already applied for an overland visa we would need to wait a day or so before the secretary would approve it.

Back to the hotel, Manang, were we met the owner. He bought us lunch and offered some advice for our travels, gave us a name of his partner in Dhaka who could help us with what ever we needed when we arrived. He also told us of the coffee we were drinking... real espresso! And it was good! Yeti Coffee is a fledgling brand of Nepali coffee, grown in the highlands of Nepal and roasted and distributed by our hotel owner. If it hits the stores in your country, try it! It comes with good recommendations.

2009-06-18 Lucky Blessings

The evening before we left Pokhara the manager of our hotel returned to the hotel after his shift and late at night to present each of us with plain white Buddhist prayer flags for luck and safe travels. Needless to say we were touched by the gesture, and everything else the manager and staff did for us during our stay.

From Pokhara to Kathmandu the road took us to a valley with quite a large river. Dotted along the river were many suspension bridges of different lengths and designs. Being a bridge fanatic, I stopped to walk over the 1st one I could and was impressed to find the length was

probably more than 100m, being in a small village the people didn't have much English but were more than happy to point me in the direction when I asked for the bridge, and some didn't even need me to ask. All sent me on my way down a small well worn path with a smile. The traffic while I was there was enough to make taking photographs difficult due to the swinging of the bridge, but it was nice to see and get smiles from all the local people. When I made my way back to the car, I found there was a more major way, which took me past a whole new type of architecture, hidden well away from the highway which I hadn't seen previously. The buildings were all wooden constructions with a wall of doors on the bottom level, which could be opened up to create a frontage for a shop, while the 2nd floor jutted out and served as a verandah. In such a small village I was astounded at how well looked after these buildings were.

As we neared Kathmandu we found we were looked after by our prayer flags well, as the truck traffic increased remarkably as the road wound its way over a mountain, and fearing the worst, we discovered that there really isn't that much traffic in the capital, which is very handy considering the width of the streets, and although we didn't do our usual trick of getting lost and driving through the market, we found ourselves on the smallest of streets trying to find our way to the consulate. The people of Kathmandu are certainly helpful, but we were not able to follow the directions and instead decided to try for the hotel pre-arranged with discount by our Pokhara hotel manager. Finally we were guided through the tourist district by a overly enthusiastic Nepali man at full sprint. Do you have any idea how hard it is to follow a running escort in a car through the streets of Kathmandu?

2009-06-17 A cut above

Another 4:30 start took us to the World Peace Pagoda, another look out and a shrine as well. The view of the mountains was no better than in the town as the clouds had built up again by the time we arrived. Back down the hill our taxi that waited for the hour and a half for us to walk up and back took us to an underground shrine which is built in a cave formed by a water fall. A 40 metre high cavern was created over time where the water from the lake flowed down the water fall and disappeared in an underground river. Oh to have the time to explore past the area lit naturally by a narrow opening where the water fell. The above ground river was equally spectacular to see where the water had carved circular holes through the rock over the years before falling down to the river below.

Then it was back to business. Haircuts all round, interesting to note that you can get a decent hair cut for 3 bucks and it is better than I can find in the 15 shops around home!

Only in the morning was I talking about my late cousin, Brian, who inspired me to travel and how he had one of his jackets embroidered in Nepal as a souvenir and no sooner had we arrived back at the village, when lo and behold we stumbled across an embroidery shop.

What should have been a quick trip next door to the trekking outfitters, I returned to the shop with a new fleece to get my own souvenir and tribute to my late cousin ordered.

It was hard to leave the trekking shop as all the latest gear was on sale or for rent for prices that would make any gear freak go wild. Just 1/5th the price! It was hard to resist the latest top of the range wind stopper jacket for less than \$60.

2009-06-16 Early bird gets the view

After being woken up at 4:00 by the alarm we were off to find the road to the top of a fort hill, only to find that the road has a 6 foot trench dug across it. Next the detour required some spotting from outside the car to negotiate the crossing due to the low, low Volvo.

On the 500m climb in the car up the hill, we got glimpses of Fish Tail Mountain of the Annapurna ranges, supposed to be best at sunrise. Huge spectacular pinnacles peered out of the clouds at us as we rounded bends up the steep slope. Arriving at the village, we had what the "book", Lonely planet, called a short walk, 200m vertical climb, I must be getting old! By the time we arrived at the top, the sun was already 2 fingers above the peaks and the peaks disappeared in the instant we arrived into the clouds. After very relaxing wait on the

top of the hill for about an hour, some of the peaks started to re-emerge. You could easily miss them poking out of the top of the cloud as it was deceiving just how impressively high the ranges are, even from our vantage point you had to look up to see the 8000m plus peaks over the top of the cloud, from an aussie perspective, land just isn't supposed to be up there! It is true that it is awe inspiring to look at them and it is very easy to see where the urge to conquer them comes from.

2009-06-15 Into the fray

Arriving in Pokhara was like getting awoken by an alarm clock at 4:00am, the relative quiet we had experienced in the country side on the west of Nepal was abruptly ended. A true tourist town, it was shocking over and over to see some westerners. The first thing you notice as you drive into Pokhara is westerners on the road, white skin dotted the highway as they made their way out to the outer sights in shorts on hired motorbikes. Looking for somewhere to stay, after taking the 3rd direction out of the centre of town we found the lake, 2nd biggest in Nepal. In Lake Side every 3rd shop was a trekking supplier or internet café. Pokhara is the starting / ending point for a lot of treks and tours, and a timely chance to get a relatively western hotel to relax a bit after several days of concerted driving. But first we needed to be refreshingly cooled by our first experience of the monsoon. Just as we were about to leave the café overlooking the lake, where we had relaxed for about an hour, sipping a chocolate lassie (I know it doesn't sound appetising, but it wasn't bad), and the worst milk chai on earth, the sky gave us a show we hadn't seen for a while. Rain not unlike a downpour in PNG was thrown at us as well as hail! Yes the white hard rain stuff. Only the 4th day of the whole trip where it rained and we had just crossed several thousand kilometres of desert, it was a welcome change. Rice paddies started to fill and rivers formed in the streets and locals and tourists alike, if they were caught out were wading through them. On to the daily business of finding somewhere to stay, starting with a look at a hotel which could only be reached by a pontoon powered by a Nepali man pulling on a rope we eventually found a serene location recommended by the bookshop owner where we bought a 2nd hand copy of lonely planet guide book. From then on we were treated with much interest and care by the staff of the Lake View Hotel. The next few days were going to be spent on the ground work for arranging visas, yet again, due to our itinerary being behind schedule and some visas running out.

Our expensive luxury room cost us the exorbitant sum of 19 AUD, and was well worth the expense!

2009-06-14 1st City in Nepal

Our 3rd day in Nepal took us to Butwal, our first big town after entering Nepal and after the quiet of travelling the country side to the west, it was again time to get back into the hustle and bustle of noise and chaos. We found a hotel after being turned back at the road exiting the town due to a landslide, and negotiated some car insurance after driving to a town big enough to support a few agencies, we settled in to a 3 star hotel, where the price was an exorbitant 19 AUD. A walk around the lively main street and market until well after dark was pleasant and the atmosphere was alive even if humidity was oppressive. Bigfoot (Lukas) was heading for the mountains and had been looking for some new things in all the cheap countries, and finally had to settle for a pair that were too small by 4 sizes! Apparently the Yetis don't shop in the same Bazaar as we do.

The hotel appeared clean, apart from the smell from the bathroom so we decided to chance the hotel restaurant as it was so late the relief of showers after the humidity, but dinner turned into an interesting affair with a local throwing up in the restaurant twice and not one of the staff batting an eye and even walking through the mess rather than cleaning it up. Other than that our night was uneventful, having gotten used to the bed's mattresses being more like masonite than foam.

Our next destination the town known for the staging point of treks to the Annapurna ranges.

2009-06-12 High on Nepal

Crossing the border to Nepal was the quickest crossing of all. After working out how to get the gate open and negotiating 2 single lane bridges we were in a river flat and the road had turned to round stones, which were time consuming to traverse with the low and delicate Volvo. One Quick visit to immigration and an equally quick visit to customs, both us and the car were cleared to leave India. No man's land seemed to go on forever, and life in no man's land seemed to be normal village life, with kids playing in the channel, washing being done, of course the mandatory cows and buffalo plodding along their own course and shops and stalls lined the road. Double checking the passports and Carnet, we corrected a few mistakes and eventually got a stamp in both passports and we were on our way in Nepal.

Nepal brought a pleasant change. The road is a very good highway, with the odd bump and dip, but easy to get some speed up when compared to the average 35 km/h we managed in India. The traffic thinned out from the vehicular chaos of India to a plethora of pedestrians and bicycles, with the odd buffalo drawn cart in the villages. The country side had turned green as we drove through the national park in India, and continued to be a pleasant sight throughout the day. What was more easy on the eye was the complete lack of rubbish we were used to strewn across India. Nepalese people turned out to be shy, but were still interested in the overlanders, and as in other places, we only had to stop for a few minutes and there was a gathering around the car, and it didn't take long before the shyness was overcome and faces peered into the windows of the car, marvelling at the steering on the wrong side and the disappearance of one of the pedals. Despite the dust in the towns, it was refreshing to see the many bright and vivid colours of the clothes of the women, and a marvel how they managed to keep so clean in the dusty environment, the lack of women completely covered was even more obvious, and the odd girl in jeans and a t-shirt was surprising.

We had made good time crossing the border and getting a quite a few kilometres under our belt, so after 8 hours of travelling we were ready to find some accommodation. After settling on a Guest house, it was time for a walk through the streets. Stopping to buy something at a little shop, the old gentleman owner couldn't understand what we were after, but his grandkid, all of about 5 years, rescued us by translating. Lightning cracked over head and the temperature seemed to soar as the humidity rose. We had walked only about 1 km along a street when a dust storm began in the unsealed street. People all seemed to have the same contorted look on their face as life momentarily speed up. Shops closed, people were riding rickshaws and motorbikes with scarves wrapped completely around their heads, while the children continued to play in the street undeterred.

Our evening was spent in a small shop cum restaurant, next to our hotel, where we stopped to shelter from the storm. During cold drinks, then Chai, eggs and noodles for starters and some delicious dinner, we met the owner of the shop, her mother, sister and all of their children. The shop was an open fronted kitchen, which doubled as the lounge room, where the family gathered to watch television, or talked to us as the odd customer came and went. The storm eased, not enough rain fell to completely wet the ground, but enough to cool the air to a comfortable temperature. Entertainment started initially with the girls, Aastha, and Prabisha, then with their cousin when he returned from Uni, photos were shared, our travels and theirs, and many laughs were had trying to find out much about each other's lives..

2009-06-10 Snapshot in Pakistan in 1 hour

Drive to the border from Lahore and you will see so many aspects of Pakistan in one short trip. Leaving the relative serenity of the Defense district, where the greatest disturbance is the backup generators, and people testing Pakistani musical horns that they have fitted to Volvo's after midnight, the scene quickly changes to the organized chaos of the Lahore streets. The heading out of town towards the border, where the miles and miles of road construction have turned the way into a scene out of the wild west towns.

The morning brought dust, noise and colour. Carts were being drawn by donkeys, mules, horses and water buffalo. One donkeys was even hitched to a cart with one wheel missing. Trucks in the typical painted Pakistani style, busses, overcrowded with folk on the roof, and a conductor hanging out of the door, vendors pushing hand carts, bicycles, rickshaws and pedestrians all vied for space on the narrow streets. Horns blared continuously, some deafening even from within the cabin of the car. People were going about their normal business, setting up shop or going to work, and if there weren't just 6 up on the seat and 2 of them side saddle, then there was some other load suspended precariously or fixed permanently, such as a 20 foot ladder or 2 full size cans of milk that would touch the ground in a turn.

Everyone took it all in their stride, still the people had smiles, were polite when they weren't leaning on the horn and would go out of their way to help, and life went on as usual.

2009-06-09 Half way!

15 000km are up, and Australia is about 30 000 km from Switzerland if you take a few turns and a boat. Lahore turned out to be the venue for the half way party and we were even able to take in a drink!

Lahories have a saying, if you haven't been to Lahore you haven't lived, and in honour of our reaching half way we were given a new sticker for the car as a present. We are sporting our half way marker on the roof above the windscreen.

2009-06-09 Portraits in the Punjab

One of our hosts should be a renowned artist not only in Pakistan, but across the globe. Maliha Aga, apart from being an artist in her own right also lectures at the University in Lahore, and also tutors from home, decided she would like the challenge of a new model, someone to challenge the usual colour of her palette. We both sat for her and the result was a colourful depiction of her subjects, capturing us very well in her own distinct style. We were so impressed with the result, that she offered to give us the works as presents, and we will wait patiently for them as first they will be part of an exhibition of her work in Lahore in October. Check out the photos of the portraits on the web site soon.

2009-06-08 Bordering on comical

Inter-country rivalry is nothing new, but can you imagine an international slinging match staged every day at the border. Arranged so perfectly that there are grand stands, enough to seat at least 5000 people, with VIP seating and professional tauters, who are there to encourage the spectators to jeer at the neighbours, not that it is needed. All the while the soldiers are performing, like peacocks with their fancy head fans, in a dance of sorts, competing to show their might and disdain, both to the crowd and the rival soldiers of the other country. Wildly exaggerated marching styles with leg kicks so high they would impress any dancer or gymnast, and foot stomping that would make a chiropractors cashier ring, all brought together to create a ceremony just to see the closing of the day at the border crossing. Welcome to the Pakistan – India border at Wagah where the closing of the border and flag lowering ceremony at sundown is a spectacle probably found nowhere else in the world and definitely not to be missed. It would seem as if half of the inhabitants off Lahore turn out for the evening's entertainment, with people arriving, car after car, rickshaw after rickshaw, bike after bike, some with as many as 6 people on board and at least 2 being women riding side saddle. Men and women are segregated in the stands; the men's stand a raucous sea of white and green, and the women's section alive with bright and varied colours. Drums beating, loud hailers blaring, soldier's lungs bursting with the force of commands issued at full tilt, and the sound of the stomping of their feet all compete with the crowd yelling, and the Indian replication in response. Patriotism is thick on the ground and in the air. The crowd is managed surprisingly well, although all have passed immigration and customs without any more formality than a metal detector, whose incessant beeping is largely

ignored by the officials standing by, and all leave safely and satisfied that the Indians have been put in their place for another day. Pakistan Zindabad! Long live Pakistan

2009-06-07 Spoilt in Lahore

Our host Ali met us, again after simple instructions, at the edge of the city and we followed the driver back to the house. Where an evening was spent with a small party of friends who all welcomed us warmly and we were able to finally get some casual insights into the country and the people. Much of the talk centered for a while around the bombing last week in Lahore, which extensively damaged the office of our host, the people of Pakistan on the whole dismayed by the arrival of terrorism in their city.

From the very start onwards we were spoilt rotten especially with food. Pakistan has a great range of food which as long as no one has been too heavy with the coriander you can actually taste and it tastes good! Desserts are also a favourite with lots of choice as well. We were taken to a restaurant called "Cooco's Den" overlooking the largest mosque in the world, which is a must for anyone interested in atmosphere, rooftop dining, artefacts and the owner's art, an interesting collection of paintings depicting mostly the life around the old city and of note the prostitutes.

Our other host, Maliha Aga, is also an artist and lecturer in the arts at the University of the Punjab, could give us insight into the arts culture around the city, and we were able to admire some pieces of her work around the family home.

The temperature in Lahore is a welcome relief from the arid regions of Baluchistan and the lower Punjab, where the heat has subsided from the mid 50s to much more reasonable 40s, with pleasant nights getting down to 30 degrees. I am glad we are missing the monsoon in Pakistan!

Sightseeing took us to the Mosque and Fort, both monuments steeped in history.

Culture was doled out in the form of an invite to a live performance at the launch of mobile internet broadband in Lahore, Abida Parveen, a spiritual singer in Pakistani style, seated on stage and belting out haunting tunes in with a vocal range fit for opera, though vastly different style. She was accompanied by a harmonium and percussion.

2009-06-03 On tour with The Police

The morning started with a visit from the police chief, which was a welcome change from the Policeman who wanted payment for delivering us to Sukkur. While talking to the Chief, we enquired as to the speed limit in Pakistan as there was no way we had been able to reach it thus far, but we had heard that the roads were going to get decidedly better. He told us that there was no limit, which was countered by the owner of the hotel. The Chief stood corrected. A bonus to being escorted everywhere by police is you don't have to stop at the toll stations and pay the road tax.

8 Hours of travelling got us the 454 km to Multan. The last 4 police were disgusted that we had to pay 2 rupees more than normal for our drinks when we met them, and were going to go and sort out the shop owner until we told them what the tourist charges were for foreigners in Iran, that got them laughing. I found it hard to decipher the most talkative coppers accent and this gave us an insight into his sense of humour when he asked me if I could understand English. From then on we got on very well, following the police car through the crowded dusty streets was like an arcade game, dodging bicycles, rickshaws, donkeys and carts, cars, people and pot holes that would fit at least half the car in. On arrival in Multan he offered to take us for a tour of the city after our dinner. We accepted gratefully and ordered some Tikka and rice, which the receptionist told us would take a while as it was made from scratch. After an hour I went to check on the progress, being worried that we would be late for our tour, and noticed the take-away bags behind the counter. The Chicken was no good!

Shortly after we were on our way through the city sirens blaring and making little impact over the din of the general traffic, getting tour notes on all the important landmarks as we

drove to the first monument, a Mausoleum of Sheikh Rukn-i-alam. This required removal of shoes out of respect, but it was interesting to note that removal of guns was not required and we entered the tomb. Each time we left the vehicle we were required to wait until the police were out of the back of the Ute and had checked the area, which was another ironic procedure considering we were travelling in the back of an open Ute and anyone could have picked us off if they desired. But you cant knock the police for their efforts to get us around the town as safely as possible and still see the sights of the city they were so proud of.

A few more stops took us to several monuments including a park in honour of some English government officials, in which the locals were enjoying the evening on the grass, and other mausoleums, one of which we drove into and the other we were escorted through metal detectors which went off because of our cameras and phones, but after a check by the chief of intelligence we went to join the celebration of the anniversary of the Saltan Ali Akear. Once again not paying any fees, as anyone who tried to come near us to see the white fellas, or indeed to collect entry fees was quickly dispensed with and ushered away.

An interesting first was to see for the first time women in the streets, walking, and on the back of motorcycles, with both the full covering and only eyes showing, as well as full flowing hair in the wind. Still no contact with them to get their side of life, but then again most of the men we have spoken to so far have been just hoteliers and policemen, so not a great cross section of society yet!

Back to the hotel before the sun went down, with the din of the traffic still ringing in our ears as well as the call to prayer, we listened carefully to the instructions not to leave the hotel boundary at all until the morning pick up by the police. Not so dissimilar to a jail we were guests at just a few days ago.

2009-06-02 News on the hour every 3 days

Finally seeing the news in our days of rest, washing and catching up on sleep, we learned that the Iran border to Pakistan at Zehadan was closed shortly after we passed. The suicide bombing of the Mosque in Zehadan next to our hotel caused the close. Luck is with us as I needed to get out of Iran due to my visa expiring the day after we left. And if that is not enough of a reminder why we need a police escort today, a prominent politician was shot dead in Quetta where we are residing. Funnily enough, twice we have been told of motorcycle laws relating to crime. Initially we were told the reason bikes over 250cc were illegal was because it was too easy to commit a crime and get away, we were also interested to hear just hours earlier, the crime reporter who bought us a drink, tell us that 2 up on a bike was illegal because of security threats, only to find the politician was shot from a motorcycle carrying a pillion passenger. I wondered at the time how this law impacted all those whose family transport was the trusty motorcycle which has been known to carry 4 or 5 people.

After turning down another invitation to Afghanistan, passport free of course, we were off, two police cars accompanied us out of Quetta, no doubt the evenings activities adding numbers to the constabulary's presence. Pakistan's police appear to have an amazing logistics network, with so many other things not always running to plan or on time the first 300 km was done almost with out stopping. Each police checkpoint having a car ready for our arrival and handover was done on the run like a baton in a running race, though there wasn't much running, the pace was extremely slow and once we were out of Baluchistan we were back on to true Pakistani time, waiting for up to an hour for the next escort.

Temperature in Jacob Abad reached 52 degrees and the waiting time passed slowly.

12 hours got us to Sukkur, a measly 406 km. The police stayed with us as we searched for a hotel, frustrated by the full key board behind the counter of each hotel and being told that there were no rooms, we finally found a hotel only to be asked for money by the policeman. Some discussion saw the hotel owner and several others involved and soon the policeman went on his way disappointed.

2009-06-01 Dangerous liaisons

It was a difficult decision today to turn down an invite to Afghanistan for the day , but i have to admit it was tempting. As we are so close to the border, for just the small cost of 200 Rupee per person we could get to the border and another 20 would see us across the border for a visit to the desert and Kabul, no need for a passport. In the end we had to settle for the relative safety of Pakistan and be invited to have a drink with a couple of reporters we met in the street. These were not typical Pakistani people, one was 3rd generation Afghani, who loved to hate Pakistan, the other was an Indian expatriate, both disgruntled with the country they lived in. In general the people of Pakistan are friendly, and love their country so it was surprising that we should meet some people so negative. Everyone else wants to talk to us and take us for a drink.

2009-05-31 Quiet in Quetta

Arrival in Quetta brought a range of different sights sounds and smells. The streets are busy with literally thousands of auto rickshaws, donkey and carts or the up market version sporting a horse up front, which added a new dimension to driving along with the return of driving on the left side of the road. Sights included a commotion caused by a donkey and cart caught between the pad locked boom gates of a train line lowered manually well in advance of the arrival of the train, and amongst a myriad of bicycles sneaking through the gates a man with at least 30kg of offal strapped loosely, guts dangling off the carrier of his bike. Driving a left hand drive car is now a 2 man operation especially on the highway where overtaking requires some teamwork (no – wait – yes) Quetta's streets are busy with life, while the arrival of open sewers gives an ever present smell to the air, street vendors cooking can still permeate the senses even though they are partially shut down trying to breathe the dusty air. In Quetta the wind blows and blows and brings the desert sand along with it which the rickshaws stir up endlessly.

A change in customs was noticeable, the relaxed approach of the Iranians was replaced by the pushy style of the Pakistani street people, headed by the bus touts, the beggars of which we had seen very few until now, and the size and volume of the horns on even the smallest of vehicles. It is not uncommon to think a semi trailer is bearing down on you quickly by the sound of the horn, only to find after scurrying out of the way that it is simply a guy on a 100cc motorbike.

Women are notable by their complete absence from the streets, with the exception of beggars whose presence might conjure pity if they didn't treat their babies like puppets, throwing them on the ground in front of you. The real empathy can only be afforded to the children. Some hotels claimed to be full when westerners try to check in, but we managed to find a very comfortable hotel, The Hotel Bloomstar, with a garden enclosed within the complex which coupled with the location of the hotel off the main road kept most of the dust and street noise to a barely noticeable level. Finally a timely sleep in was had which was not interrupted by the regular power outages. The manager director Tausif Ahmed Bazzai, kept us entertained and well looked after, instructing his staff to take good care of us and our needs. In the evening we were treated to the simple joy of flying his most prized kites from the roof of the hotel.

Mostly the local people are friendly, if they aren't trying to ply their trade. Everyone wants to try their English, and it is normal to have a shadow of kids following where ever you go on foot. I pulled out the camera for a photograph in the street and before I could put it away we were taken to a café for a cold drink.

2009-05-29 Invitation

While confined to our hotel in Zehadan we met an interesting fella who studied in Kuala Lumpur and was visiting his girlfriend en route to his home town, he gave us an insight into his feelings about the bombing and the people behind the struggle, his struggle with freedom in Iran, and how that affected his relationship with his girlfriend, who he had to pretend was his wife in order to stay in the hotel. We got an invitation to drink something with him in his

room and a candid meeting with his girlfriend who was shy but relaxed and out of hajib. Our last night in Iran was definitely memorable.

The day started out as any other, apart from the bombing and the stoning and the police escort. Our drive to the border was uneventful, 3 handovers of escort, the last needing to sit in our car, so we had to make room on the back seat by rearranging luggage and the Policeman sat squeezed in, with automatic weapon, happy to be in the air-conditioning. He helped us find our way around the Iranian border side and left us at immigration. While clearing customs on the Pakistani side we were treated to chai and a glass of cold water, which is always a difficult situation, but we were assured after we refused that we would only be given mineral water, then we were told we needed another escort and had to wait some time until the police car arrived. This meant that we were the guests of the customs officials and after they washed our car, they treated us to a cooked lunch.

We finally got underway after 4 hours of the usual process, waiting and lunching.

A long drive got us through 7 escorts all who sat in our car. The last of which delivered us to the police station at Dalbandin, and then promptly disappeared, leaving us with the local constabulary who knew nothing of our arrival. Initially we were ushered into an office, in which we sat and were questioned by many officers who wanted to know what sort of trouble we were in. Finally after some sort of inspector arrived who was there to check on the conditions of the prisoners and could speak good English, we were able to relate our story and the fact that we were just after accommodation. Much discussion ensued, none of it in English, and at the end it was decided that we would stay in the jail as guests of the police. The car was allowed to be brought into the confines of the station, and parked next to an ambulance full of bullet holes. Already 11pm Lukas was taken to town to choose dinner from a local restaurant and brought back to the police station. Dinner was very tasty, then were shown the prisoners Shacked hand and foot to the beds, assumedly to assure us that we were safer in the jail than outside. On to our beds, well where we would sleep, on the roof, a bare patch of concrete, under the stars with all the police officers scattered around the fort like roof. Morning came early with the sun rise, breakfast was soon to follow, by way of an armed escort and me at the bazaar, surely no site as funny when buying naan and bananas?

2009-05-28 Tread lightly

From Bam to Zehadan should be a leisurely 3 hour drive, the roads are good and there isn't too much traffic, though the heat assaults your nostrils as soon as you get out of the car. Fuel seemed like it was going to be a problem, as after filling the tank and paying the customary 4 times the price for litres above the ration we tried to fill our jerry can for the long drive through Pakistan. After consultation with the manager of the fuel station we were allowed just 4 litres more than what we had got in the tank of the car. Half of that was used to wash out the jerry can, but the attendant gave us 6 more litres! Iranians can't help but be nice. Now the leisurely drive past 2 up on a motorbike, both hiding from the searing heat by wrapping a single towel with no eye holes around both their heads, got us as far as Nosratabad where the usual police check was a little more rigorous. There was no way we were going to be allowed to pass without a police escort, so we waited after the formalities of cross checking passports. The guard brought us Pawpaw, which was delicious, then a very short tour of the buildings nearly got me in trouble, the main building was the police, who would not let me go in to use the toilet despite being directed there, they directed me around the back of the building, but no luck there either, so I tried one of the smaller buildings closer to the road, only to find a lone woman inside, turning away I was yelled at by an angry man waving his arms at me, who was quickly calmed down by some bystanders who showed me the WC. No more exploration here for me!

After about 1/2 hour the young guard who stopped us came over again, interested by the car, he wanted to sit in it and the next 1/2 hour was spent trying to talk to him. He was extremely interested in mobile phones and quickly worked out the functions of both our phones then showed us some videos on his phone, which was of the aftermath of a cleanup of terrorists at

the border to Pakistan, bodies everywhere and bullet holes in everything! Ok so now finally he could settle in and eat some of the dried seeds we had in the car.

Soon we were off again with our armed escort, a Land cruiser ute, with seats in the back and 2 police wearing scarves completely covering their head, and they took off like a bullet! Looking after the Volvo we fell behind but were keeping pace from a distance, 30km/h over the speed limit, and caught by a radar gun! Our escort waited by the side of the road while we smiled and laughed with the radar police. A few moments later we were off again, this time in front, but the escort couldn't be bothered driving at the speed limit so they passed us again. We thought the 99km to Zehadin was going to be fast, but at the next hand over our escort barely cracked 70 and stopped at a local earth works site for some tea, while great chunks of ice were loaded into the back of the police car. These were delivered to another police outstation and we were delivered to the next check point and handed over to the next escort. Once in the town we were handed over again, and we explained that we needed a 1* hotel and fuel. The police stopped and helped us buy black market fuel from a boy at a road side stop, then delivered us to the hotel. We were told if we needed to go out we had to ask for the escort, we declined as it was getting late and there was a restaurant in the hotel. Not a bad choice as no sooner had we settled in and put the car behind the gate a huge explosion rocked the town. Just 2 streets away a suicide bomber had martyred himself out the front of a Mosque, very bad form according to the locals. About 100 ambulances screamed past our hotel as well as the police. We were assured we were safe where we were, we could see an army post with armed lookout from the hotel entrance.

A little later in the night after dinner, settling again into our very spacious room with hot water from both taps, we heard the sound of a demonstration of sorts in our street, things being broken, yelling, shots and sirens for about ½ an hour. But you know what? Everyone was still very very nice to us, typical Iranian style.

2009-05-27 Police intervention

With the final days of my visa approaching we had to leave Shiraz and make a dash for the border. Driving through the night we arrived at Kerman at 0500 found a hotel and settled in for a couple of hours kip. The roads still remain very good and driving at night presented no problem, very few trucks and no cars were on the road making the drive easy and pleasant. After a short internet stop we were again on the road to Bam, Stopping only to look at some hill top ruins and a bite to eat we came to Bam in the early evening. Once again the Iranian hospitality was exceptional as when we asked a local for some directions to a hotel, they got in their car and got us to follow them a few kilometres to the hotel. By the time we arrived at the hotel it was just on dark and having checked the price of the 4* we decided to find more reasonable lodgings. The man on the desk would not let us leave until we had a police escort, this is quite normal after hours as far as we could ascertain. Within what seemed like seconds a police car arrived with 3 very happy policemen on board and off we went following a police car with a wheel looking like it was about to fall off, no brake lights, one tail light and dents that would make a tin can on the highway look straight. Flashing lights blaring down the highway, the Volvo closely in tow, with other normal cars passing all around we must have looked a site. We stopped momentarily only to change escort cars, this time for a more modern one, then again a few kilometres later another change, to a ute with a gun toting kid in uniform sat in the tray, beaming like a Cheshire cat at the tourists. Handshakes all round and calls of "Kangaroo" at the Australian, it was going to be hard to make another change to hotel after all the flashing lights and drama, so we settled in to our next expensive 4* hotel thinking that we would make use of the supplied wireless internet only to find out it was broken, ok so on to a few text messages back home..... no service!

2009-05-25 Getting Dizi in Shiraz

The ruin of Persepolis is a huge site, wide open space and best seen in the cool of the morning or afternoon, this left us the time to catch up on some rest in the cool of the hotel. The

afternoon was spent once again under the expert guidance of Ali wandering through Persepolis, an historic site with more being done to preserve it than most other near eastern attractions. Huge stone walls, columns, statues and stone carvings were all explained to us by Ali. A museum was also on the site and it was refreshing to see some artifacts actually retained on site, even though most were removed to other countries due to the early excavations of teams of other nations. The views from the tomb on the top of the hill were spectacular.

Some discussion was had on what to have for dinner, and after consulting the trusty “Lonely Planet” we were convinced to try some more local fare. Dizi, is quite a ceremonious affair which involves breaking bread into a bowl, pouring off the watery broth over the bread from the stew of lamb, beans, potato and tomato stew, then mashing the remaining ingredients with the pestle supplied and also eating on bread , all washed down with a watery yoghurt drink laced with mint.

The rest of the evening was spent with our new friends drinking espresso coffee in a café well hidden from the street and impossible to find if you didn’t know it was there. Conversation quickly returned to swapping stories of the interesting customs, habits and personal lives with in our different cultures, for us, giving yet another insight into the real Iranian culture, including slightly politically incorrect regional jokes.

2009-05-24 Insiders Shiraz

The morning was spent ambling through the bazaars, taking in the smells of spices and the colourful carpet stalls and material shops as well as the wood and leather stalls, The usual throngs of people surrounded us but the most refreshing thing of note was the lack of hard sell vendors. It was so refreshing to have no one hassling us and to be free to look and shop with out pressure. Our new friends met us after work and we began our tour of the city. We took in a museum with waxes, a mosque with western influence and a cow well and a theological college which we were able to explore fully through the knowledge of our friend. The history was given to us by Ali who held a guides license and this was contrasted by the comical commentary of Hali and the cultural conversation of Sara. We were introduced to some of the Bazaar vendors personally and were invited for a bbq at one of their homes later in the day.

The night was spent at the home of one of the vendors, we were treated to the bbq and entertained by Ali on the Daf, (Iranian drum) and a type of flute, while we took in the smoke of the water pipe sitting on carpets on a huge balcony overlooking a very large garden. An extremely entertaining , informative and friendly day,

2009-05-23 Guided by the bright

Yesterday, In our endeavour to find a laundry we stumbled across a local restaurant, after being given a drink which we weren’t allowed to pay for, the owner tried to convince us to stay for lunch, we had eaten, so we made a plan to revisit. Today we had biriani, a tasty meal of lamb and sheep lung patties with bread soaked in some sort of stock, a delicacy specific to Esfahan.

Our contact gave us the message that he would be waiting at the gate in the square when we arrived in Shiraz. One would have thought this was going to be an impossible task to find, but the City gate of Shiraz is lit up at night along with other stone wall decorations along the highway and it is such a welcoming attraction to the city, as well as a shooting star burning brightly for what seemed like an eternity across half of the orange evening sky. Of all the people sitting picnic style on carpets chatting or smoking water pipes on the grass by the gate only one of them was waving, everyone was looking of course, as the expedition car rolled into town. Our new friends were keen to see us sorted, and after some introductions and getting to know each other we were shown some hotels, we checked in and went for dinner of heart, liver and kidney kebabs, very delicious.

2009-05-22 **The other side of life**

Driving in to Esfahan, you could easily see how it was the 2nd biggest city in Iran just by the number of cars and the fight to drive through to the centre of town. Once we were in the city centre the noise of the traffic was distractingly loud and mostly caused by the thousands of motorbikes. The next day, a Friday, it was as if the city transformed to a sleepy country town with almost no traffic and it was then that you could relax and enjoy the sights. 6 Girls on holiday from Rasht were keen to chat to the foreigners and we were equally keen to hear of the lives of the other half in Iran as being careful of local custom we had not spoken to any women on the street. It was interesting to hear the restrictions placed on the girls and their frustrated tolerance of the rules and laws. Wandering around the sites of Esfahan with the girls there was no doubt all eyes were on us. Men were clearly jealous of the freedom of foreigners as we had already found out they were equally disconnected from the other sex and frustrated with the system. In a country of so many nice people, such rich culture and heritage, and diverse and fantastic landscape, it was almost shocking to hear how many people were openly disappointed with the government and although all loved their country so many were keen to find a way out.

2009-05-21 **Cementing our experiences**

A cement factory was the first place on our agenda owned by Espandar, our hosts. A rather impressive establishment in what seemed to be the middle of nowhere, we took a tour of the mining shale and lime through to the ovens and packaging and were then treated to a guided tour of one of the mountain villages close by. The village we visited was perched high on the top of what seemed like just rock. The biggest natural feature being the waterfall emanating from the very top of the escarpment and pouring out over a waterfall then flowing throughout the village in channels. The area was used by the local community as a pick nick and gathering area and the waterfall as a much visited tourist attraction. Iranian tourists climbed up and through the waterfall with their suits, hejab (veils), and children as if it were a bazaar, one elderly woman even fell and had to be carted off unceremoniously on an iron stretcher. Every where you turned there were stalls and shops selling the village's wares, which was flavoured and scented water for all medicinal uses as well as perfume. From the very top of the mountain you could see the streak of greenery scratching a mark for a short distance out into the desert. There was also an ancient fire worshipping temple standing on the top of the mountain.

2009-05-20 **Sand and Salt**

Arriving in Kashan we were greeted by our hosts at the Guest house and a plan was drawn up for what to see around Kashan. We settled on a trip to the desert. 2 hours of driving the Volvo slowly along dirt roads through barren country tinged with green from the recent rains took us through great rocky outcrops and sandy planes, where the local flora and fauna were more apparent than anywhere we had seen in Iran. Birds, huge winged grasshoppers and eagles and lizards were busy sourcing their food and the military were also settled in with trucks, choppers, guns and preparing an unmanned drone for flight. We stopped at Maranjab, Caravan Sera, a welcoming shape in the desert which you could imagine travellers were excited to see. Four walls kept out the desert winds and provided shelter and water for many years. We were able to bring our caravan (the Volvo) into the sanctuary and sit barefoot and cross legged on carpets in one of the cool rooms we enjoyed chai with the local keepers as well as wandered around the many rooms, stables, and on the roof for views of the salt lake and sand dunes. We took one of the locals with us as we headed for the sand dunes and climbed the 60m sand blow for more views of the area. The sand on the southern side of the dunes burning our feet as it got through our sandals. On the way back to Kashan we took a detour to the salt lake where the miners had formed a road into the middle, and we followed the road for a few kilometres until all we could see around us was the white of the salt and the shimmering of the sun. Back to Kashan.

2005-05-18 On to Tehran

The road network is fantastic, where there were no highways, huge roads are being built, where there is a major highway it is 3 lanes both ways with not too much traffic, but when you get in to Tehran although there are 4 lanes painted on the road, there are 8 rows off traffic, and still it works! With just a few instructions we were able to drive directly to our host company's address in peak hour traffic, where we were greeted with a very warm welcome. The people at Espandar Cement Investment Co. were extremely helpful in gaining a visa for me to enter Iran, facilitating the whole visa application with expediency. Then when we arrived to thank them in person we were treated to hospitality fit for a king together with the Chairman, CEO and the team. Once again leaving Tehran was easily negotiable with a hand drawn map and we were on our way to Kashan to the guest house of the company. On our way we watched the landscape change from green fields stretching out to snow capped mountains, to arid country, salt lakes flanked by huge rocky outcrops, and still the 6 lane highway stretched out before us.

2009-05-17 The Caspian Sea

Can you imagine a beach where no one wants to go? Where the women are not allowed to swim? Where a resort consists of a few stalls and accommodation is non-existent? Where the sand is a mixture of sand and rubbish all along the coast with no boulevard or boardwalk? Where cows graze and rice paddies are within 20m of the water? Where once there mangroves now stumps line the water like ship spikes from the war.

2009-05-16 How to ride a motor cycle

Today we saw a passenger on a bike, dressed in a suit with his hair all slicked back, wearing a clear plastic bag completely over his head, I aren't sure if this was to keep his hair from being messed up or to keep the bugs out of his teeth, or as a temporary helmet or air bag. Did you know you can also send sms messages while riding a motorbike? Quite a challenge I would have thought, but 3 out of 4 motorcyclists seen today had the skill! Of course all not wearing helmets, and the mandatory passenger was on the back.

2009-05-16 Baorder Patrol - Iran

On a bank holiday it is worth planning ahead, to enter Iran you need to expect to take all the money you need into the country as there is no facilities available for getting money once in the country.

We took 2 trips to the border, the first to check out how it worked, when we were greeted by a very forceful local who wanted to help us including changing money. Eventually we found a boy in town who took us to the only (?) exchange offering Rial. Now try to work out an exchange rate for a currency that is only spoken about less one of the zeros shown on the note! And then try to work out how much you are allowed to take into the county when it equals only about 50AUD.

Anyway, after being walked through immigration, car documents and customs, we were on our way, that is in the queue for the border gate. Finally, after getting through the gate, we were then introduced to Iranian friendliness, where we were taken to the front of every queue because we were tourists.

Customs consisted of officials wanting to see what was in side the roof tent, which after they were amazed at how it opened did not want to see any more of our luggage.

6 hours later we were on our way.

2009-05-15 1st impressions of Iran 15-05-09

After buying our car insurance at the border we were underway again. Stopped only 50m away at another guard station. Parked several meters behind a local car with a bus right behind us, the local for no obvious reason decided to reverse at full speed. Lucky there was a

person between our car and his, as this reduced the damage to our car to only a broken grill! Before we had finished checking the damage the offender had disappeared. We thought we were on to him when we saw a white Ford prefect, but it turns out 5 in every 6 cars are the same!

Iran then greeted us with a wind storm, which only added to the dramatic effect of the precipitous mountains looming on either side of the valley we were driving. It was amazing to travel always between mountains on such flat plains, and all the while at about 1500m ASL.

The overcrowded highway we were promised was no where to be seen and the roads were much better in Iran than the last 200km of Turkey. Soon it was night and the intermittent approach of drivers with lights on high been and then with out lights was disconcerting, more so when they were on the wrong side of the road.

Our expectations of Iranian people was high, we have been told too many times that they are the most friendly people in the world, and we had just left Turkey. It was going to be a reputation hard to beat. When we were stopped by a local In Tabritz, our first night stop, to find out if we were in need, we thought we were on to the real hospitality. He offered to show us by following, how to get to a hotel which proved to be our of our pocket. Then he showed us a cheaper alternative, very neat and clean, then he wanted twice the cost of the hotel for showing us our way. We are still open to the real Iranian hospitality, but have a dubious start!

2009-05-15 On the road again

Well what a turn of events! Turkey really has a system that would surely rival any other customs. 14 Days of waiting for a part to clear customs, In the end it didn't matter my Iran visa took just as long, but all is good and we are sitting on the border to Iran finally catching up with some photos and words.

So what do you do with 15 days in Turkey, do what the Turkish do. We went to an historical site of ancient burial mounds, Gordion, which was well off the beaten track, then on to a quaint Turkish holiday town, Beypazar.

Beypazar was lovely, with its different style of architecture and the feel of the place was totally different to the other touristic sites because there seemed to be no foreigners who had discovered the place when we were there. Of course there was the customary cups of tea with the vendors and conversations of different languages on each side.

The delay gave us the chance of staying in Istanbul and catching up with friends and some of the sights we had previously missed in Istanbul. Once again the Turkish hospitality was extended to us in full with accommodation offered to us by our favourite Turkish people.

Lots of time was spent on the Bosphorus with a bit of fun. We chartered a boat for a tour of the Bosphorus, but we didn't want to foot the bill, so Lukas tried to sell space on our charter to any passerby who would listen. Needless to say we ended up with 11, enough to get underway and a good tour was had by all.

Dinner on roof top terrace, musical nights with our hosts, out till the wee hours with the night life in Istanbul, Meeting more wonderful people, and our own visitors from abroad, riding through the forest on horseback, babysitting, spectating on a boat race, Walks through the backstreets of Istanbul, more food and more wine.....who could ask for more

2009-04-30 Stuck in Ankara

So here we are in Ankara, kind of stuck stationary.

After finding a way around the 15 day wait for parts, DHL from Sweden through Switzerland to Turkey, our Turbo is stuck in Customs, apparently it is hard to get things through Turkish customs and the duty and taxes are more than the part is worth. The last 2 days have been sorting out a way to get the part out of customs before the weekend and Volvo Switzerland, Pfenninger Garage, Ankara Volvo and Istanbul Volvo all collaborating to get us on our way.

The other sticking point is Shauns Iranian visa. A very helpful official at the embassy could do nothing to speed up the process, he even called our sponsor in Iran to explain what we needed to do. It turns out that Australians are on the watch list and need to be approved by the Department of Foreign affairs directly, a process that all Iranians tell us may take some time, the amount of which is undefined, after all it is Iran.....

What can you do in Ankara while waiting, get a hair cut! This a process I enjoy in any non-English speaking country, it is always a bit of fun and in this case it was no different. Several cups of chai later, a few smokes in the chair and some wild gestures and several peoples input I actually got a hair cut which rivalled any cut I have managed to get in Australia! News flash, there might be some light at the end of the exhaust, a breakthrough in communication has got us thinking that there might be a way through customs.....

2009-04-26 Don't miss Cappodocia if you go to Turkey

On the way to Cappodocia we were tempted to follow a sign which we knew nothing about. We ended up in a little village where there were more animals on the streets than people. The town was built half in the hill and half normal buildings and the holes in the cliffs looked inviting to explore. It was all a wonderment to us, and little did we know that it was going to be all over the district. After getting instructions from about 20 Turks in the main square (we stopped most of them from their inspection of hand tools at the back of a van)we were on our way to find that our sign pointed us to an underground city. We were the only tourists there and after an excited Turk got to practise his German with Lukas, he paid the entry fee for us to visit the cave city. Most amazing!

Well what a surprise we got when we got to Cappodocia! More holes in the hills than you could explore in 20 lifetimes. Underground cities, cathedrals cut out of rock, some still with frescoes, rock formations that you could marvel at for weeks and even thermal springs. You couldn't expect more in one place.

As usual you could walk anywhere, climb in, over, under anything and there were no barricades either, so falling 100m was a real risk when looking through a rock church cut high in the hill side with windows out to nowhere.

We stayed in a rock cave, Shoestring cave pension in Goreme. Which incidentally had heating and hot water! Spent our days exploring love valley, Rose valley and Pasabag. We were invited to chai, which turned into lunch by a local, who called us over when I was taking a photo of some of the scenery behind his house. Their dog was one of the Turkish sheep dogs which all the information tells you to look out for, and the collar on the dog with 10cm spikes explained why. These were so the dog had some protection if it got attacked by other dogs! The love valley no doubt got its name from the shape of the formations (see the photos) and were a wonder to see.

After such a good day in our previous Turkish bath, Hamam, we decided to have another one. The local guides told us not to go to the one we chose (hidden and off the beaten track) because they didn't get any commission, so we headed there and got lost as usual. Turkey isn't the place to follow signs, usually one sign will point you in the right direction, if you can work out which direction it is pointing, but then the next 3 or 4 turns are up to you to guess before there is another sign. Our Hamam was at the site of a thermal spring, so we swam in the thermal pool to start with, which is where we met some local boys and quickly started a bombing competition, and then a piggyback fight which we declined. The boys didn't do so bad at the bombs considering they could hardly swim, but they were extra keen to interact regardless of the language barrier. Then to the serious task of massage and washing. Back to our bat cave for the night

2009-04-24 A Turbo charged day at Volvo

On to Ankara after a night in the Firkin hotel - Kulu. The hotel lived up to its name (think slang)and it would seem that there is a theme in all of these cheap hotels. No hot water, and no heating. Yes it is still cold at night, very cold for us old luxury travellers, but we battle on.

Volvo in Ankara looked after us and the car well. There was a team of up 6 mechanics working on the car, and that was just for a check and minor service.

We were given loads of Turkish Chai, and breakfast, then lunch and more Chai as well as a tour of the facility.

The habit of smoking our Volvo had developed on the 2nd day of the trip started to get interesting here. We had been told by many Volvo dealers across Europe as we visited them that the turbo was on the way out, but getting a new one was going to be difficult it would take several days. As this was the last Volvo service stop and we had a few days up our sleeve, we decided to order one from Sweden, the only place that had one.....more to come on this debakle

With nothing to do but wait, and the weekend looming, we decided to head to Cappadocia and after filling the Volvo garage with smoke we stayed the night in Arksaray

2009-04-23 Why is it so hard to leave Olympus

The guide book says that you will either love the lifestyle at Olympus and stay longer than you expected or think that you are on school camp and leave early. Bayrams tree house pension have postcards for free that say come for a day stay for a week.....When we arrived we found it hard to believe the rambling set of back packer joints and the bohemian setting seemed from the outside not very inviting, but once we checked in we were instantly at home. The first night took us to Chimera, the eternal flames. A short walk up hill in the dark up a rocky path takes you to the flames which emanate from the rocky ground in patches. Lots of rocks and dirt surround each flame from where people have tried to douse them, but it is said that the gasses just reignite on contact with air so you can't put them out. Quite a spectacular display, even if the flames are only small. Like most of turkeys out of the way attractions you can walk all over the site, right up to an on top of the attraction. The rest of the night was spent drinking expensive and not so tasty local wine around an open fire.

The next day turned into a relaxing day on the beach first at a cafe on a deck filled with cushions then on the pebbles that are the beach. Lukas tried his hand at rock castles and we tested the water of the Mediterranean. Needless to say we had to check in again.

Planning the final check of the car before leaving Volvo supported countries started with trying to book in a service and some more photos were uploaded the next day. Time in Olympus gets out of hand so it was 1600 before we got back down to the beach to jump off the cliffs that were beconning the previous day. Then we went to Adrasan to meet our new Turkish friends for dinner on another cushioned deck, this time in the middle of a river. Of course time got away from us and we had to check in again, but at least we were enjoying our stay.

We finally got going towards Belek the next morning to meet our friends from Istanbul, where San (Shaun) was in a tennis tournament and we were to be the international cheer squad. Needless to say the staff at Olympus expected us back that night

2009-04-20 The best way to see the sights

On our way to Olympus we took the back roads and found our selves in the middle of some very quaint villages. It also took us through some very mountainous country. As usual for me when we passed a small waterfall coming out of the rock on to the road I had to stop. This is where we notice a brown sign denoting a tourist attraction. We thought we may as well have a look and found that the place was a ruin. It was the best place to visit. There were only 6 people on the entire site and we were able to ramble over, in, and under every part of the site. Not like a real tourist site, where most of the interesting stuff has been removed to museums. I was even able to ferrit through ancient pot shards piled up. Arykanda was the name of the site which was run by an extremely helpful guard who explained anything we needed to know and even could make lunch if you visited with some notice.

Then it was on to Olympus where we were not so amused by what we saw in the way of accommodation, but things were only going to get better.....

2009-04-18 **Paying respects to ANZACS**

Leaving Istanbul took us to the Gelibolu peninsula and Gallipoli.

We arrived late as usual and stayed in a Otel in Gelibolu. Dinner was locally caught fish, started with traditional mezes and Raki a potent brew which needs to be cut with water by at least half. The wine was also a local brew, not too bad, and dinner was finished with a luminous green menthe drink and a Turkish coffee brewed under open flames at our table. As usual all was done with out any communication in the same language.

The morning saw us invited for a Turkish chai by 2 old men in a tailor shop. Much laughter was had trying to tell stories in other languages, but the tea and company was good

This is where the Allied soldiers including the Aussie diggers landed at ANZAC Cove. After a bloody battle 250 000 soldiers died there had been little change since the 2nd day of this battle. Looking over the site of the battle it is easy to see why. You really have to give respect to the courage of all soldiers who fought here and their courage. We were not able to visit on ANZAC Day though it was probably more beneficial to tour the area without the expected 30 000 pilgrims.

Then we missed Troy as we are not known for getting started too early in the day, but we did manage to get a few shots of wooden horses about the country side.

2009-04-15 **A Bazaar day in Istanbul**

It was a slow start to the day but eventually we made it back in to Old Istanbul for some daylight exploring of the Grand Bazaar. Unlike the last time we attempted to visit it at night when there was nothing but litter in the street. The Bazaar is much like the Vic market with the same stuff on offer all around the market, though the selection is a lot wider. Lots of silver, carpets, clothes, trinkets and more silver and carpets. We did the customary things, got hassled by carpet sellers, managed to get them to spread at least a dozen carpets out for us to see even though we didn't want to buy and also got over charged for the things we bought. Have to get in to the swing of things the further east we go with this bargaining idea. After a long stint in the bazaar it was time for some relaxation. So off to the Turkish baths where for about 40 Euros (55 AUD) or 55 Turkish Lira, you can while away your time on a hot marble stone after being slapped, massaged, washed, doused in water and scrubbed by the half naked Turkish man of your choice. It is the funniest experience when you have no idea how the whole system works. Walking out into the foyer to get to the baths with only a short towel not knowing what to expect and not being told much either. Women bath in a separate area but are free to sit in the main area and watch the men coming in and out of the baths. We were then entertained for the time after dinner by a local Kurdish fella who gave his interpretation of the struggles of the SE of Turkey. Which by the way we are informed is no trouble! I think we will still stay clear of there - Tomorrow is a travel day to Gallipoli I hope you enjoyed yesterdays post; it took a long time and was done from the Nokia phone!!

2009-04-12 **Istanbul**

We arrived in turkey after a night in Varna on the black sea and a journey along the most minor road to the border that even the border guard was shocked to see us. After 5 border controls, just on the Bulgaria side, and buying a visa to turkey and going through all the custom checks we were wished well on our way by yet another nice border guard who couldn't believe our itinerary. By the way roads in Bulgaria are fantastic, even if they just lead to 100s of brand new sea side empty resorts. Our host Semih and his family are great. Today after a traditional breaky of eggs and Turkish sausage we went and explored the old town of Istanbul

2009-04-10 **I think we have it**



Sorry all who have been checking the blog, we had no clue how to post to the site, but might have stumbled on something here. - Today we are in Bucharest. We have spent the day relaxing at Hotel Michelangelo owned by our host Sorin a good friend of George who has looked after us for a couple of days. Thanks Guys. Our VOLVO was also looked after, parked in the path to the hotel over night an all day under video surveillance. We spent some time at `Dracula` Castle in Bran yesterday and discovered just where the BAD roads are in Romania. Up until we got off the highways we thought all roads in Romania were perfect contradictory to popular belief. We really need to thank all our wonderful hosts so far seeing as we have not been able to write about them until now, more to follow regarding these wonderful people.

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