

FORK ON SEASIDE and friends to drive over 10,000 miles in the greatest motoring adventure on the planet'

by Rebecca Mendoza | 25 March 2022 | Community News



An example of the type of terrains that teams drive through during the Mongol Rally. Photograph: The Adventurists Mongol Rally website

“We’re at a point in our lives where we can go off and do something completely ridiculous and illogical,” says Alec Stokes about their upcoming participation in the Mongol Rally—an event organisers describe as “motoring stupidity on a global scale.”

This July, three friends are planning to set off from the UK on a 10,000 mile driving adventure. For roughly two months, they will travel through big and small countries, on motorways, dirt roads and in regions with no roads. The goal: make it to Mongolia. The car that will get them there: a 900cc Fiat Cinquecento.

James Leyland, Alec Stokes and Miles Chermiside-Sergison are taking part in the Mongol Rally, an event coordinated by the thrill-seeking organisation [The Adventurists](#).

“It’s not like a rally rally, like a race or timed or anything like that,” says James who learned about the event in early 2020. “There’s nothing like that. It’s mainly for raising money for charity, and the adventure spirit, or whatever you want to call it.”

The Adventurists describe the Mongol Rally as “the greatest motoring adventure on the planet” and use the slogan, “motoring stupidity on a global scale.” Though the event has official start and end dates and locations, there is no set route. It’s up to each team to decide how they will get there.

The organisation has run long distance travel events for nearly 20 years, some of them in cars while others using motorcycles, scooters, rickshaws, boats and even horses. The Mongol Rally remains one of their longest running and most popular events.

Keen on the idea from the very beginning, James knew he had to get his friend Alec involved.

“At the time, I thought he was crazy,” says Alec. He admits that it took a few months for James to convince him to participate.

After talking about it for a while, they eventually took the plunge and paid the team entry fee. “Once you’ve paid, you’re not going back on it,” James says.

“So, since then, it’s just been kind of like right, we’re doing this. We’re locked in,” continues Alec. “We paid our money. So, let’s figure out how we’re going to do it.”

Alec and James eventually enlisted Miles as the third and final teammate. The three friends, who will all be 23 years old when they set off on their adventure, met in 2010 while attending high school in Chester and have remained close over the years.

According to Miles, him joining the team later on wasn’t due to any malice from James or Alec. He feels that his friends genuinely didn’t think he was interested. “This is really quite a wild card thing for me, to throw me into the deep end and really out of my comfort zone.”

Miles recalls listening to James and Alec talk about the rally and wanting to join. “It will be an experience of a lifetime and something which I would have regretted if I didn’t pester Alec and James and say, ‘Look, I really want to do this. I can do this...’ It took a while to convince them, but I got there eventually.”



James Leyland sitting in the back seat of the teams 1996 Fiat Cinquecento. Photograph: Cheshire Melt – Mongol Rally Team Facebook page

The importance of team dynamics

The trio, who chose the name “Team Cheshire Melt” in homage to their home county, have naturally taken on different roles within the team.

“I’m probably more team mechanic slash general practical person,” says Alec, who is a maintenance technician at Vauxhall Motors, having joined them at 16 on an apprenticeship.

Miles is in charge of most non-vehicular duties where he can put his degrees (a Master’s in Environmental Assessment and Management from the University of Liverpool and a Bachelor’s in Politics with International Relations from the University of York) to good use.

“I’d say probably [Miles]’ job role in the team is, you know, keeping an eye on the world situation and the politics and the various countries we’re going to.” Alec explains. “He is great at finding out about random really, really specific details of how to get visas in these tiny little countries we’re going to visit.”

“I think I’m more like project management, keeping sure that everyone’s on the same line.” James says who is in his final year of an integrated Master’s in Electronic Engineering with Communication Systems at the University of York. “I help Alec with like, the hands on stuff. But that’s mainly Alec’s area. And the same with the admin stuff. I’m helping to point out and find things for Miles, but Miles is king of the admin.”

Being in a car together for a few months means they will also need to rely on their different personality strengths. According to Alec, “James has boundless optimism” while Miles is more “cool-headed, realistic and bring-it-back-to-reality” type. “And I’m probably the one that will just insert a little joke and either annoy or make the situation better.”



The team will drive roughly 10,000 miles in a 1996 Fiat Cinquecento. Photograph: James Leyland

Driving in a car made for a city

The rules of the Mongol Rally state that each team’s car’s engine must be 1.0ltr (1000cc) or less-though they may make exceptions for a particularly unusual vehicle. To the organisers, the dinkier and more unsuitable the vehicle, the better.

After having already sourced a car, and finding out later that it really wasn’t up for the 10,000 mile trek, they eventually found a 1996 0.9ltr (900cc) Fiat Cinquecento on eBay.

“I contacted the guy. Aand the guy loved his car,” says James. “He didn’t really want to let it go unless it was for a decent reason. So I told him about the rally. We got it for a very, very, very small price for what it was worth.”

For James, the car is exactly what he was looking for. “It’s a city car for like pottering around in, as opposed to driving around the world.” The likelihood of having some car trouble somewhere inconvenient is inevitable, but they are prepared. “You know, if you break down, it’s all right, you’ve got all spare parts, and you’ve got support there,” James says of his teammates.

With the costs of the rally mounting, they have secured some corporate sponsorships. Even with the car purchased, the team still has to pay for modifications, insurance, visas, spare kit and also budget for fuel, food and other and all other associated costs.

Adventuring while doing some good

One of the big draws for the team was the charitable aspect of the rally.

Since 2013, The Adventurists have raised over £8 million for charity through their events. Each team that participates in the Mongol Rally commits to raising £500 for Cool Earth—a charity committed to protecting rainforests. Any money raised beyond this can be donated to different charities that are important to the team.

“It’s doing it for a good cause as well and not just doing it for the sake of doing it,” says James. “I was quite drawn to the fact that it was raising money at the same time as doing something adventurous.”

For part of the pandemic, James lived with a housemate who worked for Marie Curie. He learned about the impacts that the pandemic was having on fundraising efforts. “I got to have a look firsthand look at the impacts of having underfunded charities like that.”

The team decided that they would also raise money for Marie Curie and Help for Heroes. They are aiming to raise a minimum of £1,500 with the funds split equally between the three charities.



The logo for Team Cheshire Melts. Photograph: Cheshire Melt – Mongol Rally Team Facebook Page

Challenges of travelling in 2022

Though the team is upbeat and optimistic about their trip, they are aware of the many challenges they can face along the way.

One of the more notable aspects of the Mongol Rally is that there is no planned route, just a start and a finish. Their website tells potential teams, “We want you to go your own way, make it up as you go along, improvise and get lost.” The rally officially starts in Prague and ends in Ulan Ude in Russia.

It can be argued that their biggest challenge is navigating a route through or around various political climate and Covid restrictions.

“It’s so unknown what the future is going to be like when we do [the rally],” says Miles. “We are doing the Mongol rally but unfortunately, at the moment that’s closed to foreigners.”

At the time of our interview in January Miles highlighted concerns regarding travelling through countries like Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Iran. “I wouldn’t drive through them now, but we obviously want to go to these places in a few months...We just don’t know at the moment which route is going to be viable. But we are keeping our fingers crossed.”

In addition to consistently monitoring the political climate, Miles and the team also have to think about what visas, if any, are required to enter and travel through each country. “It’s more bureaucracy and more money that we have to consider.”

Despite the automotive, political, cultural and many other challenges, the team remains upbeat. The key is to “just take it in stride,” explains James. “I think the whole point of the adventure is to be flexible and accommodating of whatever you come across, and try and make the best of what you have.”

“We’ve just got to be really flexible and keep an open mind,” Alec continues. “We cannot have tunnel vision.”

He’s being careful not to create too many expectations of the rally that may not be fulfilled. “What we do can change so much between now and setting off, and even after setting off to be honest.” In the few weeks between our interview and this article, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has escalated—further highlighting Alec’s point.

With a seemingly innumerable amount of challenges they will encounter and tough decisions they will have to make, Alec knows that the team will just have to find a way. “It’s just adapt and overcome. And that’s what we’re really sort of mentally preparing ourselves for.”

But why are they actually doing this?

Understandably, considering the obvious logistical challenges as well as the current political climate, reactions to their participation in the rally have been mixed.

“They think we’re mad,” James chimes in first.

The team say they have received a range of questions: How can I help? What are you doing? Where are you going? Alec says he’s also had people say, “you’re an idiot” and walk off.

The most frequent question they receive is “why?”

“Why not?” says Alec. “It basically comes down to we’re at a point in our lives where we can go off and do something completely ridiculous and illogical. The chance of us visiting most of these cultures and countries is very slim otherwise, you know? Are we gonna go and book a flight to Kazakhstan? Probably not. So yeah, it’s pushing ourselves, it’s challenging ourselves and it’s a life experience.”

There will be good times

Despite knowing about the various issues they will likely encounter, James, Alec and Miles remain optimistic about their 10,000 mile journey.

“I’m looking forward to the first day when you first get in the car ready to go,” says James. “Everything’s about to happen, you just don’t know what it is yet.”

For Alec, it’s more about the cultural experiences he’ll have. “I’ve been to countries in my life but I’ve really been off the beaten trail, certainly not to this extent. So, I’m looking forward to seeing if I can handle it. It is plenty of things to be stressful.”

Miles is also looking forward to experiencing the many countries and cultures he’s spent years studying, but there is one thing he’s more excited about.

“The thing that I’m most looking forward to is probably the end so I can say, ‘I have done this,’ and to do something which is completely the opposite of what I usually am.

“To say that I’ve travelled with my two, or two of my closest friends, raising money for these good causes across all this way. I think, for me, it would be the end game to say I’ve done it.”

You can help James, Alec and Miles raise money for Cool Earth, Marie Curie and Help for Heroes on their [online fundraising page](#). You can also keep up to date with Team Cheshire Melt on their [Facebook page](#) and [website](#). Internet allowing, they plan to post updates during their travels.

Note: Due to the war in Ukraine, The Adventurists have made some changes to the rally. The team is currently assessing their involvement in this year’s event. James Leyland informed the Jorvik Radio news team that “This is for a fair few reasons, including what is in the news currently, but we 100% intend to drive in the rally either 2022 or 2023.”