

Ulan-Ude, September 30th, 2007.

The Mogelrally

On July 23rd 2007 four friends left Forchheim, Southern Germany – heading for Vladivostok, Russia. As means of transportation they acquired two Nissan Micra built in 1985. Price: Less than 400 Euro. In total. Since their chances of success seemed very small a deal was born: For every kilometer the crap cars do, the *Volksbank*, a local bank, donates 10 Cent to charity, in this case the *Lebenshilfe Forchheim*. Lebenshilfe assists mentally disabled people in their daily life and operates several workshops for them. The Volksbank is more than happy to get involved in charity support and, on top of that, their slogan “We clear the way” is probably the best way of support you can give to the four daredevils.

Peter, Matthias, Martin and Andreas know each other from school or university. Two of them are scientific assistants at the Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg, one does the same at the Technical University of Ilmenau and one is a freelance programmer. They gathered for this adventure, excited to learn how long they can keep their boneshakers in one piece or at least somehow operating.

On their way they visit 13 countries in Europe and Asia. Many obstacles and challenges lie on their way. The cars break down several times – be it because of their age or because bad roads and dirt tracks simply take their toll. Official or even political imponderabilities have their direct or indirect effect on the four. But altogether the positive impressions outweigh them by far.

More than anything else the people and the encounters on their way will become lasting memories. Almost everywhere locals are happy to help spontaneously to complete the difficult mission. No matter whether the exhaust is gone, a spring breaks, a place for the night is needed or simply the road cannot be found: Most of the locals help even before they can be asked to do so. Sometimes it does not even take a minute after a breakdown before somebody stops by, crawls underneath the car and fixes the problem before the adventurers had a chance to inspect it.

Their thanks are presents from Germany – such as German beer.

Shaking Heads and Thumbs Up

In general the four are considered absolutely crazy. Even Russian transit drivers who know the Transcontinental Road like the backs of their hands (and all drive westwards from Vladivostok) can only shake their heads. Quite frequently they are asked about their start and goal through the window of the driving cars. After taking a closer look at the vehicles the wish for good luck is enforced. Often all the locals want is to help. For example, when the four Germans want to give the money for the spare springs to their Samaritan in Krasnoyarsk, he had already vanished without further comment. It was only via his mechanics that the thanks and gifts could be delivered.

Central Asia – Pearl of The Route

Spontaneous invitations, e.g. for a “taxi ride” and beer in Azerbaijan, some tea in Turkmenistan, for dinner and an overnight stay in Georgia and Uzbekistan create unforgettable impressions. Especially those places and countries that seemed to be the most dangerous and worrying, for which it was already a challenge to get maps, surprised the daredevils again and again.

In Turkmenistan they were invited for a BBQ by the British company “Burren Ltd.”. The next day their hosts insisted on an inspection in the company-owned garage. Every liquid in the car was replaced and both cars were equipped with a custom-made steel sump-guard to protect the engine parts from the roads to come. As if that had not been enough attention, the adventurers had an appearance on Turkmen TV. They also visited cultural highlights along the Silk Road like Bukhara and Samarkand. Kirgizstan again fascinated the four with its spectacular landscapes.

A stone's throw from Vladivostok the Micras bite the dust

Not far from their final destination both Micras gave up one shortly after the other. Russian roads, in the first place Vladimir Putin's much praised Transcontinental Road, exceed everything the four rough riders had seen on their journey so far – in a negative sense. Not even a thousand kilometres before Vladivostok the second and last Micra ceases operation. There is no time for complicated repairs because the adventurers need to be back in Germany at the beginning of September. On the back of a truck both cars reach Vladivostok nevertheless, having done 16,770 km on their own wheels.

Will one Micra make it back to Germany?

Martin spent some extra days in Vladivostok. Thanks to the help of Russian mechanics he could merge two Micras into one that was fully working again. Ralf, a former fellow student of Martin met with him in mid-September. Now the two are on their way back home with the best of two Micras. This time they chose the northern route, including the whole Transcontinental Road to Moscow and then onwards through Europe.

Taking into consideration that they already had three major breakdowns in their first week, it stays more a hope than a plan that they can make it. The offroad tracks killed a spring and a front suspension. The clutch went rather for reasons of age and luckily the two brought the spare clutch of the other Micra from Vladivostok. The first 3,000 km were done at that point but the days became colder and colder. The car becomes more moody with starting every morning and on top of that the replacement clutch is predicted to stay for not longer than 7,000 km. That's Moscow.

Anyway, for their way back the Volksbank also committed itself to a donation for the Lebenshilfe. So their route leads the two past the North Cape in Norway. Exposing it to the freezing climate in Siberia and Norway is not exactly the best way to persuade the veteran vehicle to drive on. For the extremely cold days there is a pack of charcoal in the trunk. "If nothing else helps that is the ultimate way to preheat the engine and make it start" says Martin. So keep your fingers crossed and hope for the best!