What do you do when it rains?

Accidental encounters on and off the roads of China

Presentation Synopsis
The Mad Idea

Peter Schindler loves driving holidays. After living in China for fifteen years and having taken stabs at learning the language for twenty, he thinks it’s time to see more than Shanghai, Beijing and the Great Wall. So why not go on a driving journey? How about 20,000km or so? Say from Shanghai, China’s hippest city where the Yangtze flows into the East China Sea, to its source in the Tibetan highlands where the only thing he’ll find is a Yak? And of course it must be an open-top car. What a dream: wind in his face; the scent of fresh dumplings at every stop; chats with people at every corner; in May, June and July, when the birds are alive, myriad flowers bloom, and the sun shines brightly.

Realty check: July temperatures that soar to 45 degrees Celsius and drop to -15 even in summer; floods, landslides, snow, and deserts; mountain passes that soar to 5,300m in elevation; the world’s most accident-prone roads; car theft and petty crime running high; questionable maps; petrol stations that are few and far between.

If he was sensible, what would he want in a car for this sort of drive? High ground clearance, four-wheel drive, large wheels, big bumpers, a sizeable petrol tank, voluminous storage, various features of comfort and convenience – air-conditioning, power brakes, power windows, power steering, key-less entry. In other words, an ‘M998 Series High Mobility Multi-Purpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV, pronounced Humvee*)’.

Instead, his chosen set of wheels is the offspring of the legendary 1950s Lotus 7, a British sports car called ‘Caterham Super Seven R300’. In all likelihood you’ve never heard of it. Never mind. Suffice it to say that it’s a car as ill-suited for driving in China as a Humvee is for parking in central London. Caterhams have none of the desirable features for this journey, except ‘key-less entry’ because they don’t have doors.

Why on earth did he ever choose a Super Seven? For one reason only: it makes people smile. He likes it when people smile. A friend put it best: “I’ve never owned a dog, nor had a child, but a Seven can outcute either.”

He had this mad idea on January 14, 2005. On May 3 last year the journey began with three laps on the Shanghai F1 track. On August 12 he arrived back in Beijing. Somehow. What do you when it rains? is about what happened along the way.
The talk tells the story of Peter’s adventure. It is rich in spectacular photos and dotted with observations about modern China’s countless contradictions:

- **horribly polluted** in places, and yet still possessing some of the most **beautiful landscapes** on earth; fond of showing off its new **riches**, yet still **miserably poor**, as **wasteful** (if not more so) than the rich world, and yet **frugal** beyond description; still suffering from the recent amputation of many of its cultural roots, and yet evidently still extremely wealthy in traditions; **ignorant** of the world, and yet determined to become **cosmopolitan; uniform in creed**, yet surprisingly **multi-cultural**; dreadfully arrogant and **haughty** in many ways, yet beautifully **humble** in others; the **friction of corruption** burning up much of people’s herculean efforts, yet still **surprisingly well-functioning**: full of apathy, yet also of indomitable spirit; self-absorbed, yet striving hard to regain its dominant place in the world. Yes, China’s people are **full of strife** and working hard – working so hard, in fact, that they make people in the rich world fret about China’s rise – but in this whirlpool of **hyperactivity** I also found the world’s kindest souls.
21,000km in 100 days

1. Beijing to Shanghai, the mouth of the Yangtze
2. Along the Yangtze (more or less) to its source in Qinghai Province’s Tibetan Plateau
3. From there to Lhasa
4. From Lhasa, to the source of the Yellow River, also in Qinghai’s Tibetan Plateau
5. Along the Yellow River to its mouth in Shandong
6. Return to Beijing
At the end of the journey...

Miss Daisy on a pedestal...
in preparation for being auctioned off at a Gala Charity Dinner hosted by Yao Ming, China’s NBA basket ball star...
About Peter

Pity the customs official who needs to deal with Peter when he crosses a border by car. His documents can be rather confusing, if not downright suspicious: his car has an Austrian license plate; he holds a Swiss passport, but it shows that his residence is in Hong Kong; as for his driving license, take your pick: two from China, one from the U.S., and several others; and his miniature laminated marriage certificate says that his Malaysian-Chinese wife is Australian.

When he was a lot younger, he raced automobiles in Europe – Formula 2, Formula 3, Formula Super-V and Renault Elf – for four years, on occasion even successfully.

He then entered the ‘dark years’ of his life during which he studied I.T. at M.I.T. and business at INSEAD. Painfully, he heaved himself up to become an associate partner in Accenture’s China practice. Then it was time to move on.

His passion for driving has never left him, however. In 2005, it resulted in a book the BBC Radio called a love letter to the pleasures of being on an open road: On the Road – Driving Adventures, Pleasures and Discoveries (See www.ontheroadeditions.com for.)

Having driven over the years a million-plus kilometres on roads in Europe, the U.S. and Asia, and loving every moment of it, he nowadays quenches his thirst for driving by taking to the roads of China. The upshot is www.ontheroadinchina.com, a company through which he offers driving holidays in China and wants to show the world just how beautiful China can be.
Dreams come true when you manage to convince enough people to help you...and so...

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