



AN UNFORGETTABLE ROAD TRIP



Driving from Alaska to Mexico seems a challenging enough adventure to most people, even with a labyrinth of well-paved byways and highways to help ease the drive.

And in most cases, determined motorists can make the journey in a couple days, without pressing too hard.

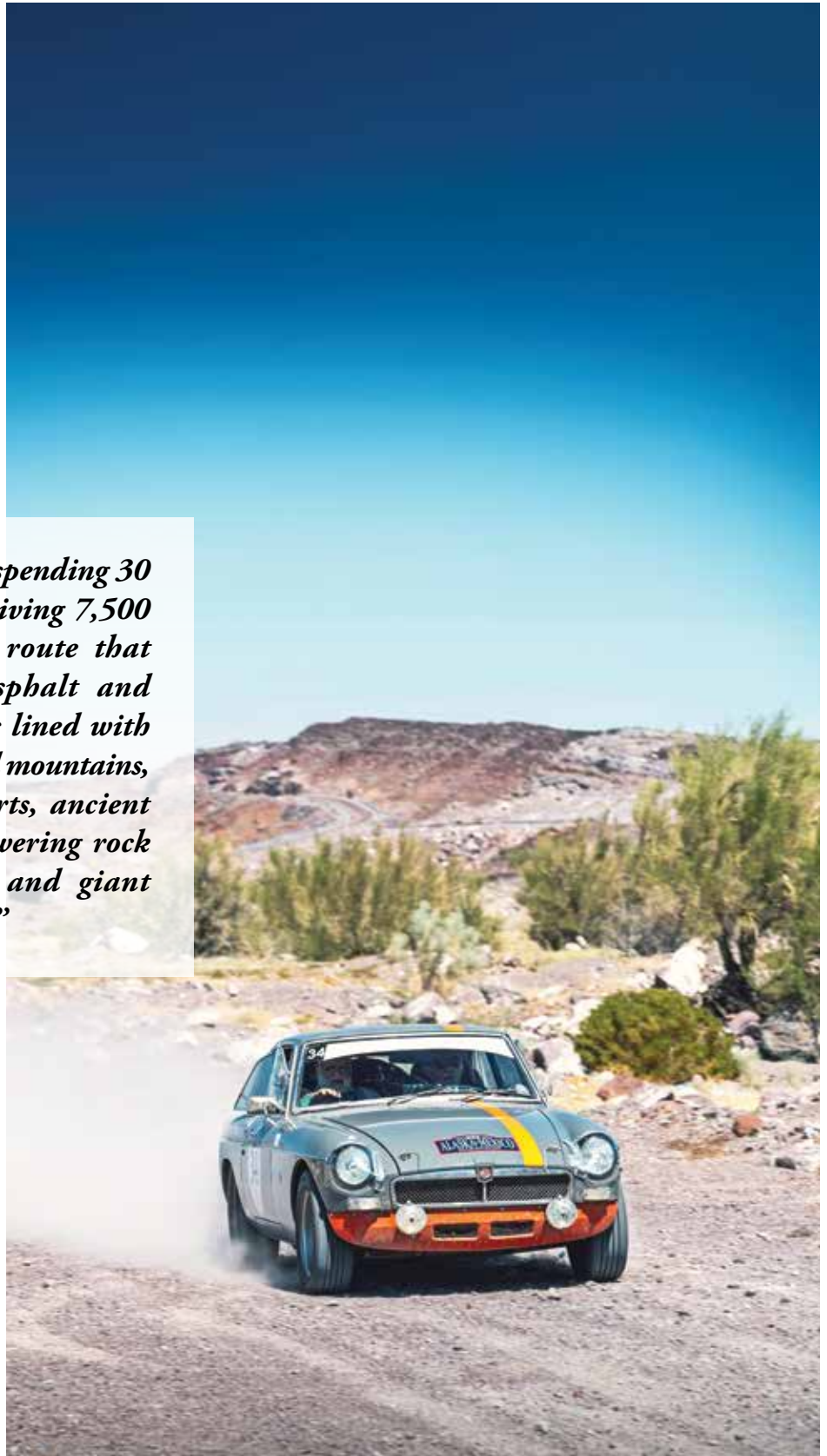
But imagine spending 30 days and driving 7,500 miles on a route that included asphalt and gravel roads lined with snow-capped mountains, rugged deserts, ancient canyons, towering rock formations and giant sand dunes.

Welcome to the Alaska to Mexico Marathon, organized by the Rally the Globe Vintage and Classic Car Club in Leeds, UK.

Forty-eight teams and that many cars started the rally in Anchorage, Alaska in August 2023 and ended in the Baja Peninsula, Mexico. Only 33 crossed the finish line.

Among those was a 1968 MGB GT driven by John Henderson and Jeff West of Australia, and prepared by Kevin

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Kemper of Sierra Classic Sports car in Meadow Vista, CA.

“Together, the friends have competed in several events, including the Classic Outback Trials in central Australia, the Sydney to London rally and a couple rallies across the US.”

The GT was the only MG to compete in the torturous course, which crossed no fewer than 38 lines of latitude.

Henderson and West have been rallying together for more than a decade “He lives in a town near where we have our

farm and we talked of rallying together. About 15 years ago, I bought a classic gravel rally car and we started -- me driving and Jeff navigating.”

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Henderson and West were planning to compete in another rally last year. When it was canceled, they learned about the Alaska to Mexico event and jumped at the opportunity. "It looked like fun," Henderson said.

He came to know Kevin Kemper through his shop in California, which among other things prepares British classics for endurance rallying.

"I emailed him to see if he knew of any classic rally cars for sale. He said no, but he had an MGB GT race car that he wanted to turn into a rally car and we came to an agreement."

"Among other things, the MGB GT suspension was raised, a larger fuel tank was installed, a limited-slip differential was added and the cockpit was fitted with race seats, safety harnesses and rally instruments -- lots of rally instruments."



Henderson, West and Kemper worked up a plan to develop the car for the torture ahead. Among other things, the MGB GT suspension was raised, a larger fuel tank was installed, a limited-slip differential was added and the cockpit was fitted with race seats, safety harnesses and rally instruments -- lots of rally instruments.

“The organizers also wanted the car fitted with a half roll cage and for us to carry two spare tires,” Jeff West added. “We also needed to have tools and spares. That did not leave much room for anything else once our luggage was loaded.”

“From a navigator’s point of view, I needed two stop watches and a very accurate odometer. We used a Terratrip which reads to an accuracy of .01 of a kilometre.”

Early on, the Australian rallyists had considered campaigning a Mercedes Benz 450SLC. But that plan fell through. However, the MGB GT proved itself.

“It had far better fuel economy, was easier to work on and was more nimble in little forest tracks,” Henderson said. “But it was more challenging to fit our luggage. The Merc would have been faster with better acceleration, and it would have aircon.”

The most challenging part of the event was maintaining your concentration, he said. “The most satisfying part of the event was finishing when a lot of people said an MG couldn’t make it.”

Jeff West remembers the last few days of the rally “when the outside



“...the camaraderie among teams was amazing, he said. “Sharing tools and parts with people who were only two seconds ahead of you, knowing your help would keep them going.” Kemper said.

air temperature was touching 110 Fahrenheit. You really had to work on keeping hydrated.”

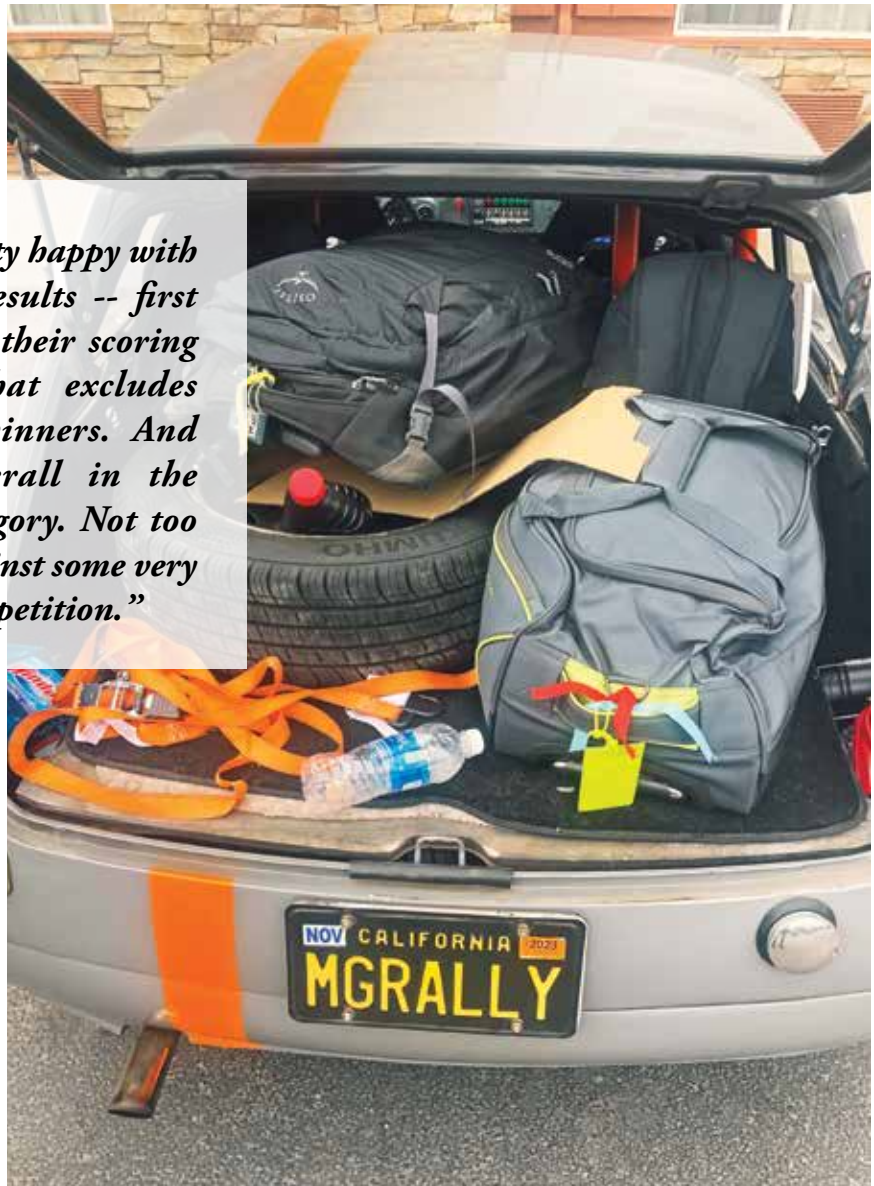
Kemper, who traveled separately to support the MGB GT, remembers the memorable fun times as the MG tried to keep up with three fast-moving 1927 Bentley 4-1/2 Liter cars.

“These Bentleys sell for millions of dollars, yet here they were beating themselves up on pretty bad roads and racing in the company of an MGB.”

“We’re pretty happy with the final results -- first in class by their scoring system. That excludes outright winners. And eighth overall in the classic category. Not too shabby against some very serious competition.”

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WORDS: LARRY SANATA
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RALLYING



HE PREFERS TO DRIVE HIS CARS FOR ADVENTURE



Talk about an incredible career change. Kevin Kemper worked as a real estate attorney in California for almost 30 years when he decided it was time for a change.

“The world needed another British car shop more than another lawyer,” said Kemper, who now owns and operates Sierra Classic Sportscar in Meadow Vista, CA.

It’s this shop that was commissioned to create the MGB GT that competed last year in the torturous Alaska to Mexico Marathon at the hands of two Australians.

“We are passionate about road rallying in vintage British automobiles, and are one of the few shops that focus on building British classics for endurance rally,” he said.

The shop also maintains British cars for customers throughout northern California and Nevada.

“My wife and I have had an interest in vintage rallying for many years. We prefer to drive our cars on adventures rather than polishing them for shows,” Kemper said.

Before opening the shop, the couple used to rally Mercedes Benz cars, including a 1958 190 Pontoon and a 1978 280SLC. Also included in the mix was a 1963 Volvo 122S.”

They eventually acquired a 1968 MGB GT for local rallies. “It became our primary rally runner because at that time

British cars became our mainstay and the MG is a great car.”

It’s that car that was further developed for serious long distance rallying and campaigned by John Henderson and Jeff West of Australia.

“We were able to build the car to their specifications before the event, and to provide support as needed.”

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Locating a car in North America also avoided the trouble and expense of transporting a car from Australia to here and back.

“We were very excited about this opportunity, as John and Jeff are a very experienced rally team and had

participated in many global rallies.” Here’s a detailed breakdown of what was done to the MGB GT by Kevin Kemper and his crew:

- Engine was built for maximum reliability rather than maximum performance. That included engine bored to 0.60 oversized pistons, lightened flywheel and stock camshaft, crankshaft and rods.
- Gearbox is a standard 4-synchro MGB unit with overdrive.
- Standard SU HS4 carburetors used along with Lucas 25D distributor, converted to full centrifugal advance and a Pertronix ignition unit.
- Engine cooled with a Mishimoto aluminum radiator and Revotec pusher fan kit. The electric fan is independently controlled by a thermal switch as well as a manual switch on the dash.
- An MGB tube-style rear axle is fitted with a Quaife-style limited slip differential. The axle is the shorter unit, specified for a wire wheel car, which enables 15” Triumph TR6 steel wheels to be fitted without rear fender interference.
- The interior of the car is fitted with Sparco EVO L seats, slightly modified to fit within the outer sills and parking brake lever on the passenger side. A rear roll bar is fitted to provide chassis rigidity and mounting points for the Sparco 6-point harnesses that were fitted.
- The dashboard is the original “pillow dash” armature, with the padding and cover removed, holes filled and powder-coated. A center switch panel is fitted to control ignition, dual fuel pumps, fan control and driving lights.
- The original wiring harness was

replaced and includes modern relays and fuses on all circuits. The main panel is located under the dash on the right side. The alternator is a Denso-style 60-amp unit.

- The front suspension is stock, with the addition of heavy-duty coil springs and polyurethane bushings. The rear suspension was originally fitted with seven-leaf GT stock springs and an additional helper spring for load-bearing. These springs were later re-curved along the rally route and an additional leaf added for strength. Adjustable lever shocks are fitted to the rear.
- Rally equipment is a Terratrip 202 GeoTrip GPS Rally Computer,

with electronic timers, and a GPS speedometer with a heads up display for the driver.

- A 16-gallon fuel tank was installed along with aluminum rock shields to protect the underside of the engine and the fuel tank. A new exhaust includes a stainless header routed over the rear axle for clearance.
- The car is painted MG Gramplan Grey, which is the MGB GT’s original color. The stripe and valance are Kubota Tractor Orange. ○

WORDS: LARRY SANATA
PHOTOS: GERALD BROWN
KEVIN KEMPER



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