

**Above:** Ian James explains to Sky TV why two apparently sane men would want to drive a 24-year-old car to Acapulco...

**Right:** leaving the start at Heathrow, French and James are blissfully unaware of the dramas that await them

**Below:** still going strong on the route to Lisbon, and in time to catch the plane to South America

**S**itting in the departure lounge of Mexico City airport at 5am, two days after finishing the London-Mexico Rally, the memories of the start seemed so far away. With all that had happened, it felt like much more than a month ago.

Organised by Nick Brittan's Trans World Events company, the rally was a re-run of the World Cup Rally of 25 years ago and, like so many things, taking part in it seemed like a good idea at the time. So, with Dick French, a colleague of mine from the Metropolitan Police, we entered this epic event, and preparations started nearly 18 months in advance in late 1993.

The choice of car was our first priority and after hours trawling through old copies of *Autosport*

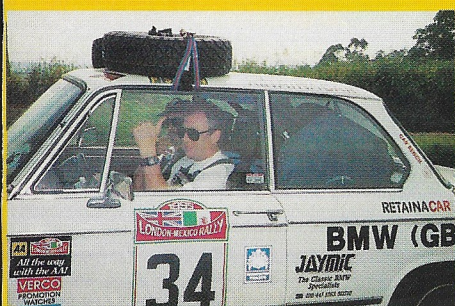


**Ian James and Dick French of the Metropolitan Police entered a BMW 2002 for this year's gruelling London-Mexico rally. They finished, too, but only after recovering from some impossible situations. Ian tells the story**

and much deliberation, the BMW 2002 came out as the best basis for our rally car.

Three were entered for the original event. They all finished, one as high as 12th, and we felt its combination of performance and durability was exactly what we needed.

A sound example was easy to find but information on preparing



# Police



it was not. BMW AG in Germany could provide only limited data on its Group 2 and Group 5 rally cars, but we gleaned a lot more useful detail from the RAC's homologation papers for the car. Armed with this, and with assistance from 2002 specialists Jaymic and ETA, we were able to work out what needed doing.

The shell was strengthened

and fitted with struts from Leda, larger front brakes, and discs at the rear. Lester Owen tackled the problem of building an engine that would give us enough power to be competitive while still running on petrol as poor as 82 octane. The result put out 128bhp at the wheels and was still flexible on the road.

The final-drive ratio was a

tricky choice, and Jaymic's first offering of a 4.1:1 unit was too low for the prospect of 12,000 miles at 70mph. We eventually opted for a 3.6:1 which proved more suitable and gave us 20mpg on the road sections.

Tyres came from Yokohama and we carried six spares on the car. Many competitors were freighting supplies to Lisbon and



**Above:** 2002 is battle-scarred following a dramatic encounter with a crash barrier on a mountain pass in the Pyrenees, but running again after a night's work



**Left:** a warm welcome for Ian from spectators in Bolivia



South America but the cost, for us, was prohibitive. We carried all our spares and clothing for the whole four weeks in the car which, with the 100-litre fuel tank, put considerable strain on the little BMW's rear suspension.

Held at the Ramada Hotel near Heathrow last April, the start was wet. So too was the first stage, at Wilton House near Salisbury. Here, we lost a pipe off the oil filter, shedding all the oil. Hoping we had spotted it in enough time to avoid engine damage we replaced the lubricant and still made it in time for the civic reception in Portsmouth.

**Above:** early days. Ian with the newly acquired 2002 before its extensive preparation and holding an original rally plate from the 1970 World Cup event

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**Right:** 2002 looks the worse for wear after a collision with a crash-barrier in the Pyrenees. It did save car from 50-foot drop, though. Eight hours in a Spanish body-shop and a Renault 5 radiator saw the team on its way again



**Right:** British stages were the least damaging, but James and French still managed to lose all their oil when a pipe came off the oil cooler in the Wilton House section



**Right:** Bolivian roads were by far the worst and they took their toll on the BMW's suspension (see text). This was about as good as they got; dampers needed constant attention



## LONDON-MEXICO: HOW IT ALL BEGAN

THE LONDON-MEXICO RALLY WAS RUN to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the *Daily Mirror* World Cup Rally. Organised to tie in with the football World Cup, the original event was flagged away from Wembley Stadium and arrived in Mexico ready for the World Cup final. Football hero Jimmy Greaves even took part, joining rally driver Tony Fall in a works Ford Escort.

Twenty-five years later the London-Mexico Rally followed much of the same route on its 10,000-mile journey through Europe and South America. Starting on 22nd, this time from London's Ramada Hotel near Heathrow, it took 30 days to reach Acapulco in South America. Along the way the competitors had to contend with many miles of unmade roads through deserts, rain-forests and over mountain ranges as high as 14,500 feet.

Planning and surveying the route took two years, and event-organiser Nick Brittan had to contend with impassable roads in the Andes, a civil war in Mexico, cattle disease in Panama, street crime in Rio de Janeiro and the small matter of a war between neighbouring Peru and Ecuador.

One of the biggest problems to overcome was how to transport 59 rally cars and other event support vehicles from Lisbon in Portugal to Sao Paulo in Brazil. The solution was to employ two giant Russian Antonov cargo planes adapted to carry up to 52 cars each. They completed the journey in 12 hours.

Of the 59 crews that started, 45 made it to Acapulco, and history repeated itself as overall victory went to the winners of the 1970 event, Hannu Mikkola and Gunnar Palm, once again driving a Mark 1 Ford Escort. ■

Crossing France, we completed the road sections without penalty before arriving in Spain to tackle the treacherous Pyrenees. Here, Special Stage Three was a 20km climb up a rain- and fog-shrouded mountain.

It was Dick's turn to drive and he coped well with the poor visibility and water streaming across the road until we passed the end of the stage warning board. Our relief turned to nightmare when, as he touched the brakes, the wheels locked on the wet surface and we headed straight for the crash-barriers.

A sickening crash and the sound of tearing metal left us with a front wing all but destroyed and the radiator impaled on the engine. Dick was devastated. We were only 50 yards from the end of the stage, and we had to wait for the AA support crew to winch us back from the 50-foot drop beyond the barrier.

While the rally headed 400 miles south to Salamanca, Dick had the car on a local bodyshop's jig. Eight hours later, and with the help of a Renault 5 radiator, we set off after the others.

Arriving in Salamanca in the early hours we were ready to make the restart again at 7am. A trip to a local BMW dealer produced a second-hand radiator before we headed for Portugal and a World Rally Championship stage 4000 feet up in the mountains. Not surprisingly, we treated the narrow gravel tracks with respect, always aware of the 2000ft drop if we got it wrong. Finally arriving in Lisbon, our cars were loaded into a pair of massive Antonov freight aircraft and flown to Sao Paulo in Brazil.

The eighth day was a 1200km haul starting at 6am and finishing at 9pm, which saw the rally climb into the Andes and Bolivia. From Jujuy in Argentina to Potosi in Bolivia caused the most problems due to the lack of oxygen as the route climbed to 12,000ft. It affected the performance of the cars, and many competitors started to suffer from altitude sickness, ranging from headaches to nausea.

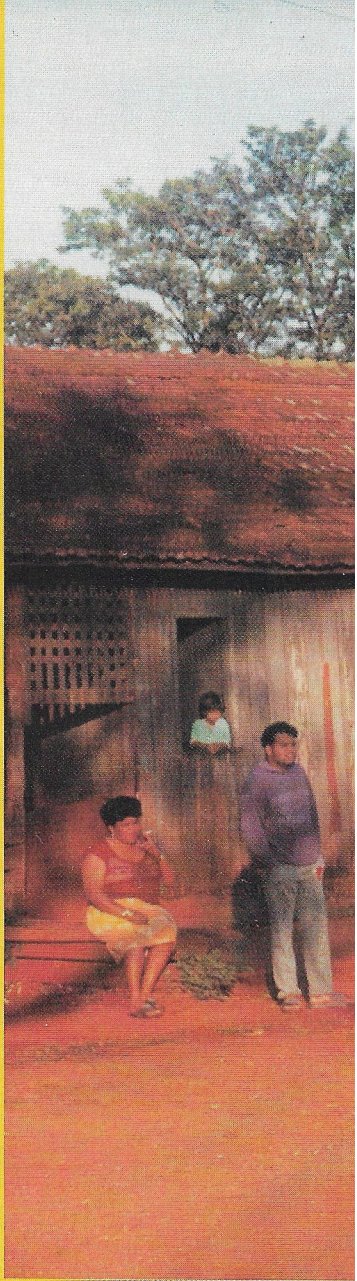
To make things worse, Bolivia also has the worst petrol at 82 octane, but our BMW continued to run well. Our biggest problem was shock absorbers which had taken a real pounding. The roads in Bolivia and later Peru were appalling. With the rear dampers now useless, the back of the car was getting a battering and eventually the fuel tank split.

A Jerry can performed the task until we reached La Paz where the very helpful local BMW dealer had

the tank welded while Dick spent most of the day working on the car. Unfortunately he was unable to do anything about the dampers and we travelled the 3000km from Puno to Quito in Ecuador with virtually no damping at all, just springs.

On the road from Puno to Arequipa the situation got worse, and the dampers needed welding three times in 24 hours. Both the shafts and the bottom joints kept collapsing and we quickly learned the Spanish for welder. As their roads are so bad, the South Americans are well-versed in repairing suspension parts and there is usually a man who can weld in each village.

On the road to Arequipa our third breakage left us with an overnight drive over the Andes to a height of 16,000ft and across a desert to reach the restart by 7am if we wanted to stay in the rally. The crossing was daunting





taking 12 hours of careful driving feeling our way through the darkness. Going off the route could have meant a long drop or getting lost in the highest desert in the world. The loneliness and complete silence as we crossed the desert was overpowering and, had we had a problem, it would have taken a full-scale aerial search to find us. Needless to say, our arrival in Arequipa at 6am was met with much relief from the organisers and ourselves.

On our way again at 6.40am, we headed straight for a garage to try and repair our ailing dampers before leaving at midday for Lima, 12 hours and 1200km away. About 80km down the Pan-American highway the BMW went onto three cylinders. Three hours of exhaustive trouble-shooting finally traced the problem to a grub screw on one of the carburettor venturis and, at 5pm, we were on our way again with

another 10 hours driving ahead of us. We finally arrived in Lima at 4am, just in time for the 7am start of a three-stage loop that was to be completed twice.

After the first loop we were pleased with our times and the car was holding up well but, halfway through the next stage, a rose joint on a damper sheared and we had to wait for the AA to bail us out again, welding it up to get us on our way.

It was with some relief that we left Peru, having failed to get some dampers from a Ford agent. Entering Ecuador we faxed the BMW dealer in Quito, appealing for help. We had E21 swinging arms fitted and we hoped to use E21 springs and dampers. But when we arrived at 6pm, the workshops were locked and the managing director was less than helpful.

Disappointed, we returned to the hotel where we met a 2002

enthusiast who was obviously well connected in Quito. He organised the use of a local garage and apparently all the shock-absorber specialists in town. Meanwhile Dick went off to try and find a suitable strut unit to replace the broken one on our car. He came back with a Sachs unit that, with some modification, we were able to use. By 2am the car was fully damped again and by 7am we were on our way.

From San Jose we crossed to Nicaragua and headed for Managua and the last gravel stage of the event. The pace of the rally was easing up now, with more time allowed between stages and many drivers trying to conserve their cars.

We entered Acapulco 30 long, hard days after leaving Heathrow, to be greeted by closed streets lined with people awaiting the event's arrival. The

finish was at the Fiesta Americana Hotel overlooking the bay and, for the first time in 30 days, we had time to use a swimming-pool. That night there was a black-tie reception, when we were at last able to wear the DJs Moss Bros had kindly loaned us back in London. Needless to say, they needed a press but you would never have known they had travelled halfway round the world in the back of a rally car. Winners of the 1970 event, Hannu Mikkola and Gunnar Palm, repeated their success in their Ford-backed Escort. But the surprise of the event for us was our award, Spirit of the Event, for crossing the Andes at night, and on Dick's birthday!

The car is now back home in one piece and has spent the summer being shown while we decide, following a rebuild, what event to use it on next... ■

**Above:** unable to afford expensive shipping costs, the crew had to carry all the spares in the car, including six spare tyres

**Photographs:** Martin Holmes, Matthew Sprake, Neil Perkins and Ian James