

UNSTOPPABLE

1907 PEKING TO PARIS

World's first all terrain motor competition, precursor to the rally raid



Pioneer motorist, diplomat and explorer, Prince Scipione Borghese of the Italian royal family makes a triumphant entry into Paris at the wheel of his 35-45HP Itala after driving 16,000km from Peking to win the first ever organised motor rally.
Photo: Topical Press Agency/Getty Images



Edition 4 of a special series by
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UNSTOPPABLE

Where minds are ever restless, ever seeking a better way.
Where evolution is the imperative, and knowledge an endless quest.
Where every endeavour has but one goal:
That of making our customers unstoppable.



It was exactly 99 years back that the very first organised motor rally took place, and a magnificent event it was too. Many Indians might have heard about such epic marathons like the London-Sydney, the London-Mexico and the Paris-Beijing Master Raid. It is easier to relate to these events because they were held from the fag end of the 1960s to the present, in an era when automobile reliability had been established beyond doubt and the acceptance of automotive culture was paramount.

No such advantages though for the intrepid journo turned automotive pioneers cum adventurers who set out to prove the efficacy of the automobile in a gruelling run from Peking (as Beijing was known then), the capital city of the last world (China) to Paris, the glorious capital city of the nation that truly spearheaded the advent and acceptance of the automobile as a worthwhile means of personal mobility.

To have even contemplated a drive over such a long distance and over terrain where no roads existed was plain foolhardy.

However when the French newspaper *Le Marin* broached the idea of such a drive, it got an immediate enthusiastic response from 25 teams spread over a dozen countries. However when it came time to confirming the entry in a more tangible manner - by coughing up a 2000 franc entry fee - one saw just five serious competitors make the start.

The French were the pioneering motoring nation at that point in time and four of the five entries were by French drivers. Georges Cormier drove a twin-cylinder De Dion Bouton with Edgardo Longoni, reporter of the "Secolo" magazine. In an identical car was Collignon with a mechanic. Charles Godard had entered a four cylinder 15 HP Spyker (made in Holland) and he had Jean Taillis of *Le Matin* as co-driver. The fourth French entry was that of a Contal tricycle with Pons at the helm.

The fifth and final entry was from Italy in the form of the powerful 35-45HP Itala with Prince Scipione Borghese at the wheel and co-driven by Luigi Barzini, reporter for the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper in the UK and also the influential Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. There was also a third crew member, often forgotten but who played a vital role for this car and team - riding mechanic Ettore Guizzardi.

It was tough to convince the Chinese to let the motorists enter their country and to be flagged off from their capital city, especially given the fact

that logistics to set up fuel banks enroute had to be put in place before the event. Barzini was told "The reactionary Mandarins, who hold the power at Court, are afraid that the race is really an effort to see how long it would take to invade China by car." Sure the Chinese had a point there. Another topic which almost scuppered the event came about thanks to certain Chinese officials seeing the event as a means to discredit the local railway system while some others saw the motorists as spies led by Prince Borghese!

The five cars were shipped out to China from Europe and the event got underway in the early morning of June 10, 1907. Right from the start Prince Borghese in the powerful Itala set the pace, powering ahead of the four French cars. The first 800 miles were in the tough Kalgan mountain regions and the primitive brakes were more of a bother than the lack of power from the engines. Pons' tricycle dropped out of the running as soon the event hit the Mongol plains but from here onwards the Itala began to open out a lead over the three remaining French cars. Given the lack of roads and the



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One of the two De Dion Bouton rolls up for the start in Peking (above). Frenchman Charles Godard, the first to come up to the start in Peking, in his Dutch-built Spyker, is welcomed at the start by the colonial Europeans and bemused Chinese (far left).

inhospitable Russian terrain, the only 'roads' available to the rallyists were the tracks of the Trans Siberian Railway and the Itala plus the other three French cars rumbled on ahead. Cornering on rails was not very easy in this manner but the quartet survived.

Once across the Volga river and past Kazan it was the Itala's brute power that told. Prince Borghese thundered through Nijni-Novgorod,

"The reactionary Mandarins, who hold the power at Court, are afraid that the race is really an effort to see how long it would take to invade China by car" - Luigi Barzini, journalist & co-driver of the winning Itala

Moscow, Warsaw and on to a rapturous welcome into Paris on August 10, 1907 - exactly sixty days after taking the start in Peking. He had covered exactly 16,000 km and apart from a few broken wheels and dented tanks and underbody, the car came through intact. Unlike modern day rallies, there was no maximum permitted lateness (the concept came in later) because the other three cars all trooped into Paris in convoy some 21 days later!

Not much is known about the fate of the Spyker and the De Dion Boutons but the Itala has survived to this day and is housed in the magnificent Biscaretti museum in Turin to this day. It remains a poignant example of the type of car which got motor rallying off the ground some 99 years ago. And the Peking - Paris being the forerunner of the classic rallies of the 1950s, '60s, '70s & '80s (before they went all soft) before they all metamorphosed into rally raids. Even with major change, our sport remains, UNSTOPPABLE.