
TALK SHOW

By Joanne Ryan



RIDING PLASTIC FOR CHARITY

Struck by the plight of Cambodia's homeless children while travelling through the country in 2006, 28-year-old Californian John Lovejoy decided to embark on an unusual road trip to raise money for and attract attention to the problem. Leading a caravan of three multi-coloured, 20-year-old Trabants (plastic Soviet-era cars) on a circuitous 25,000 km route through 20 countries, Lovejoy set out to raise USD 300,000 for charities that work directly with Cambodia's homeless children and now has plans to document the incredible journey in a TV series.

HOW DID YOU FIRST COME UP WITH THE IDEA FOR TRABANT TREK?

The idea for Trabant Trek was a mixture of my desire to return to Cambodia to make a difference and my indifference to my job at that time. I was sitting at my desk in Budapest day dreaming about Cambodia when a Trabant sputtered by. Thoughts of prior conversations with people about cross-continental journeys sprang to mind, and instead of working that afternoon I began sending out emails to the charities and people who I thought might be interested in accompanying me.

DESCRIBE A TYPICAL DAY ON THE ROAD.

There was no typical day on the road. There were days we would drive for five hours and stop for a few nights, days where we would drive 24 hours straight and then those days where everything went wrong and we broke down five times and it took us all day to go 30 kms.

YOUR ROUTE TOOK YOU THROUGH SOME VERY REMOTE PLACES – WERE FOOD AND WATER SUPPLIES AN ONGOING ISSUE?

For the most part procuring sundries was not an issue, but on Thanksgiving we were stranded in the middle of the Gobi desert, 50 kms from any village in what quickly became -32C temperature as night fell. Finally done fixing the car we made the decision to camp around a

fire fuelled by camel dung and shrubs. We had no water and only dry noodles to eat and a bottle of mustard for dipping. It was easily the most challenging day of Trabant Trek in terms of food and water.

HOW DID YOU PUT TOGETHER YOUR TRABANT TEAM?

The team came together through recruiting people I had travelled with or met in my travels in the past. Initially the idea was for 10 people to come with four 'trabis' and a support vehicle. When we got to eight, instead of searching for two more people, we decided to go with that. It wasn't as international as I would have liked, but with five countries represented we felt it would still draw international attention.

AS YOU THINK BACK ON THE TRIP, DOES ANY ONE MEMORY/ IMAGE REALLY STICK OUT?

The final arrival to Cambodia was overwhelming. I had a never-before-felt sense of true accomplishment on arriving and seeing the children we had travelled halfway around the world to help. Being atop Whitehorse Pass in the Pamir Mountains at 4,800m with three plastic cars and two of my best friends was sensational. No one ever imagined we would make it across the Pamir Highway, and there we were eating dried noodles and melting snow to drink.

HOW DID YOU COPE WITH THE CABIN FEVER OF ENDLESS DAYS TRAPPED IN A PLASTIC CAR?

The cabin fever was intense. Earphones for privacy were a necessity and we would sometimes set up one of our computers in the passenger's lap and watch a movie or series to stay awake during the long driving stretches. There were times when it was rare to see another vehicle for four or five hours.

WAS THERE ANY TIME ON THE TREK WHEN YOU THOUGHT YOU WOULDN'T MAKE IT?

The times in the trek I doubted our success had nothing to do with the cars or the team, but with the bureaucracy of the former Soviet republics. I had to fly solo to Dushanbe at one point to sort out visa renewals for the team, but a post-Soviet summit had all the embassies closed for two weeks. During this time I was convinced the trek would end somewhere in the Siberian winter.

WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO KEEP GOING?

Everything was set up in order to benefit street children, and it was the thought that we were out there for a greater purpose that kept me, and I would imagine most of the team, going.

HINDSIGHT IS 20-20. IF YOU COULD DO IT ALL AGAIN, WHAT WOULD BE DIFFERENT?

Organisation. Having never done anything like this before I think I would have waited longer and had more of the pieces in place before starting out. We also funded the entire thing ourselves, but if we had more time I think getting sponsorship for things like maps – of which we had none – a GPS system or a satellite data uplink to keep the website current would have been helpful.

HOW DID IT FEEL TO FINALLY FINISH THE TREK?

It felt unbelievable to be finished with the physical part of the trek in the beginning of January. There is still so much left to do though. There are times I want to get away from the editing and interviews and just get back on the road!

WHERE WILL THE MONEY RAISED GO TO?

All the money raised goes directly to Mith Samlanh in Phnom Penh and M'Lop Tapang in Sihanoukville. They partner a variety of programmes in Cambodia and have worked closely since the establishment of M'Lop Tapang in 2001.

To find out more about Trabant Trek, or make a donation, go to www.trabanttrek.org

