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Feature release

"Chopsticks... how frustrating are those things!"

Stuart Loudon just returned from his first trip to China to co-drive Alister McRae in the Chenzhou Rally, round one of the Chinese Rally Championship.

Here are his thoughts on the place, the pace and chopsticks.

Let's talk about the rally first: it was a tough one?

SL: *It was a tough one, but ultimately it was really rewarding. We had some problems on the first stage, but we came back on day two and set some great times. The event itself was incredible and the roads were fantastic with so much variation from quick stuff to the more technical sections.*

What was the surface like?

SL: *It was a concrete kind of surface, which wasn't like anything we really see at home. The road was built up in places as well, so you had a four or five-inch drop off at either side, Alister really had to keep the car in the middle of the road.*

There's a lot of talk about a World Rally Championship round out there, do you think it would be possible?

SL: *Definitely. OK, I've only seen a very small part of this amazing country, but there was huge enthusiasm for the rally and the sport where we were.*

What was the organisation like?

SL: *It was very, very good. There was the odd thing which was done differently – for example, you had to take the recce stickers off the recce car and give them to the organisers before they would give you the time cards for the rally. The security of the event was really good and there's no doubting the roads could be a great challenge to the world championship. Everything went well and it's absolutely conceivable to see a WRC round in China.*

This was your first event co-driving Alister, but your second rally co-driving a McRae...

SL: *That's right. I co-drove for Jimmy McRae when he drove his Ford Sierra RS Cosworth as course car on the McRae Stages a few years ago, but this was the first time I competed with a McRae – it was fantastic! Not only is Alister a great driver, but he's also a really disarming kind of guy who made me feel comfortable and made the whole thing so much easier than it might have been.*

I'll admit, I was pretty nervous about going to China for the first time and co-driving such a high-profile world championship driver as Alister – but it was great! We got on really well.

And what about China itself, what surprised you the most?

SL: *That's impossible to answer. Every day I thought: "That's it, that's the most amazing thing I've seen," but these moments just kept on coming. Culturally, it was so completely different to anything I have ever seen before. It was certainly a big step from Uddingston...*

Tell us about the dogs.

SL: *I'm a dog lover and I was sat with one of the mechanics looking at this really nice dog – it was some sort of husky-cross. The mechanic noticed me looking and said: "Nice dog, huh? We eat..."*

"We what?"

"We eat, these dogs are bred for meat."

He was very matter-of-fact about it and, I guess, it's just the same as us looking at a rabbit or a duck or something like that.

Didn't you have a moment with a duck?

SL: *I did. I was looking over talking to somebody at dinner one night and when I turned back there was a duck staring at me – somebody had given me the head to eat! I'd eaten everything else, but I had to draw the line at Donald's head! And anyway, where do you start trying to eat that with chopsticks?*

Ah, chopsticks. How did you get on?

SL: *How frustrating are those things! To start with I was getting on great, I thought I was really getting the hang of them... and I was with the big stuff like the dumplings and things. But then when you get down into the trickier food like rice and noodles, I came a bit unstuck. And it got worse the harder I tried and the more frustrated I became. The locals told me they would go and get me a fork and a spoon, but I steadfastly refused and persevered – I'm lucky I didn't starve!*

So you have some homework before the next round then?

SL: *Absolutely. There are some chopsticks somewhere in the house here, I'll be looking them out and cracking on – I'll be picking up individual grains of rice in no time!*

How did you get on with the local wildlife? See any snakes?

SL: *I have to be honest, I'm petrified of snakes and when we were sitting under these trees trying to shade for six hours when the car broke on the first day, I was really trying not to think what might or might not be in the undergrowth. Actually, there wasn't that much wildlife around.*

And what about the language barrier?

SL: *I'd learned a few phrases before I went and they seemed to get me through.*

You were actually learning two new languages, with Alister's pacenotes as well...

SL: Aye, that's right. Alister uses a descriptive system rather than numeric. Whereas some drivers will say a one right is flat out and a six right is a hairpin, or vice-versa, Alister's notes describe the corner, so he would want me to say flat right or hairpin right. That's no problem of course, but I had to find a way of abbreviating the words, so FL for flat or HP for hairpin – whereas I'd been used to writing 1 or 6, which is much more straightforward!

As for learning the read Chinese, hmm, I think I'm a wee way off that just yet. Trying to read the road signs and working out if they match what you have in the – all-Chinese – roadbook made some of the road sections entertaining.

Just before leaving, I asked the organisers for a copy of the championship regulations, so I would have it to hand for cross-referencing purposes. They told me it was no problem and hurried away to get me one. I put it in the bag and when I opened it on the plane home, I couldn't help but smile; you guessed it, all in Chinese!

Chenzhou Rally in brief.

The Chenzhou Rally is the opening rally in China's national rally championship (as a country, there is only one rally series). The event, which ran on Monday and Tuesday this week, was based in Chenzhou city in the Hunan province. The weather was sunny with temperatures around 35 degrees with around 80 per cent humidity. Stuart and driver Alister McRae competed with the BAIC Senova Rally Team in a BAIC Senova (essentially a Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X). The team retired with engine and suspension problems on day one, but the Scots returned to set top four times on all four stages on the second and final day.

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