



*Edge of the Plateau de Tadamaït*

## OUR POST-WAR MOTORING SCENE NIGEL STOKES AND HIS MG MIDGET - TRAILBLAZERS THROUGH AFRICA

By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*

Would you drive a small sports car across the Sahara? Most motor enthusiasts would cringe at the thought, but not CHC member Nigel Stokes and his mate Robert Tredger as young men. The idea started in August 1970 over a beer in a London pub.

How about trying out career prospects in Johannesburg and having the adventure of a lifetime driving there in Nigel's MG Midget?

To the best of their knowledge a small, light, two-wheel-drive sports car had never attempted the trans-Africa journey before.

wheels and heavy-duty tyres fitted. All the brake-pipes, fuel lines, cables and wiring were rerouted through the car's central tunnel and protected by an armour-plated steel under-tray and sump guard. An MGB 12-gallon petrol tank was installed to double fuel capacity, and in addition to this a 10-gallon petrol tank was mounted on the car's fibre glass hard top. The hard top was reinforced with metal strips to carry a massive load, the additional petrol tank, four wheels and tyres, three jerry cans containing 14 gallons of petrol and a spare spring, a total of some 200 kilos. Amazingly, the arrangement proved to be very effective.

Detailed attention was given to preparing the engine, a special unit which had once held the lap record for production cars at

Brands Hatch. The finely balanced machine had been bored out to 1 330 cc and was detuned to improve durability. 1.5-inch MGB SU carbs were fitted, together with a Cooper S head to lower the compression. Fortunately a heavy-duty Borg and Beck racing clutch had already been installed, together with Lockheed front disc brakes. Spot lights and high wattage head lights were fitted.

Paperwork proved to be a challenge, and the British Foreign Office representative was distinctly undiplomatic when asked for the best route across the Sahara. Even British Leyland, when asked for advice, said they'd never make it. But ignoring all the well-meaning but negative advice they sailed from England on November 11th.

After experiencing 1 500 miles

of fog and snow, black ice and freezing rain, they crossed from Spain to Ceuta in North Africa. Under the impression that they needed to register the car for the desert crossing in Algiers, they drove all the way along the coast to reach the city. After finding that no-one there was interested, they headed south.

At El Golea they were finally able to register for the desert crossing, although the official told them bluntly that they would never make it. The 2000-mile unpaved route across the Sahara started with a vengeance on the Plateau du Tadamaït. The massive Berliet trucks which crossed the desert throughout the winter had pounded the track into corrugations nine inches apart and six inches high. Forced to negotiate these at 10 mph



*First night in the desert*

The Midget had been prepared for racing so they changed the specification to one suited to a trans-Africa crossing. The suspension was raised and reinforced and larger



*Robert on the road to Tamanrasset*

they had to stop every ten miles to clear the air filters of fine sand. It took them two days at In Salah to repair the damage to the MG.

At Tamanrasset they were given life-saving information. Contrary to the advice they'd received, no

petrol was to be had at In Guezzam at the border between Algeria and Niger and the nearest supply was at Agadez, 390 miles further on. They managed to acquire two jerry cans and by emptying a water container and an oil can, were able to extend their fuel capacity by 15 gallons. Fellow travellers in a combi offered to carry extra fuel for them but failed to arrive at their destination that evening. Nigel set fire to an old truck tyre and fortunately their friends, who were hopelessly lost, saw the smoke and flames and were able to rejoin them. They heard later that five Frenchmen had died earlier in the season in the same area. When Nigel and Robert eventually arrived at Agadez they had less than a pint of petrol left in the tanks.

In Niger they continued to battle through soft sand, it penetrated the low-mounted engine through the carbs



*Fellow tourists near Tamanrasset*

and caused abnormal wear in the bores and pistons. This section was extremely difficult as the desert was changing to savannah and they were forced to make their own tracks through the scrub and bush. By the time they reached Zinder the engine was overheating and blowing out oil at an alarming rate. It eventually seized and they had to be towed the last few miles into Kano, Nigeria, after covering 6 000 miles in six weeks. They were fortunate to be offered a free lift in an air freighter flying to England, so they left the MG in a lockup and within six hours had landed back home just in time for Christmas.

With the festivities over, they bought a new low compression engine and a second-hand Morris 1000 van. New leaves were added to the van's springs, heavy-duty wheels and tyres mounted and an oil-bath air filter and oil cooler fitted. The back of the van was packed with food, spares, equipment, petrol and water tanks and the new MG engine. The load was way over the van's designed capacity but with the experience of the first trip, and despite a back axle break, five weeks later they were back in Kano where they stopped

for a month to rebuild both vehicles.

They enjoyed generous hospitality in Cameroon but the 1030 miles of the Congo were a nightmare. An entirely different type of driving was required as they had to stay on the rough tracks through the dense vegetation. A massive log fell off a truck just in front of the MG, ripping its front suspension mounting points. The damage required substantial welding to enable the car to continue.

Problems with visas meant they only had seven days to cross the country but they managed to reach Uganda by driving 12 to 16 hours a day. They spent two months in East Africa relaxing with friends and overhauling the vehicles. Fortunately much of the rest of the route was tarred, the exception being the infamous 'hell run' from Dar-es-Salaam to Lusaka, with its bad potholes and corrugations caused by huge trucks and trailers. On this section the van's front shock absorber bolts sheared, a steering arm broke and a half-shaft snapped, this meant hitch-hiking over 1 000 miles to find parts. Eventually on October 7 1971, nearly eleven months after first



*Nigel digging a way across a riverbed near Agadez*



*The MG engine sand-caked from the Niger tracks*



*The Morris van carrying the new MG motor sets out across the Sahara*



*Rebuild of the MG in Kano*



*The cars on a ferry in the Congo*

leaving England and 15 268 miles on - Nigel and Robert drove into Johannesburg, highly elated after an incredible shared experience.

They both found jobs without difficulty. Robert moved to the Middle East and New Zealand, but Nigel stayed on in Johannesburg, building up a vibrant motor business and participating in rallies and motor sport. Some years ago Nigel and his wife Joan retired to a town house at The Majestic in Kalk Bay in the Cape. Nigel joined the Crankhandle Club and participates actively with his impressive collection of classic Jaguars and

MGs. Pride of place in the collection is his 1965 MG Midget, now immaculately restored after its trail-blazing journey through Africa more than 50 years ago.

Nigel has a great sense of humour. Delighted with the story 'The Motor Magnates of Kalk Bay' (Chronicle March 2023), with tongue in cheek he asks whether he's eligible to apply as the latest candidate for the position!

*Acknowledgements to Nigel Stokes and 'Have MG, Will Travel', Technicar, July and August 1972 by Robert Tredger*



*Welding up the MG front suspension in Nairobi. The engine had to be taken out*



*Nigel and Robert with friends, the Morris van and the MG in East Africa*



*Nigel and Joan Stokes recently completed their MG Midget's journey through Africa by driving from Johannesburg to Cape Agulhas, the southernmost point in Africa* 🚗

### **The Genius of Steven Wright:**

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| 1 I'd kill for a Nobel Peace Prize.                          | 5 82.7% of all statistics are made up on the spot.                   | 8 If you want the rainbow, you got to put up with the rain.                 |
| 2 Borrow money from pessimists -- they don't expect it back. | 6 A conscience is what hurts when all your other parts feel so good. | 9 All those who believe in psycho kinesics, raise my hand.                  |
| 3 Half the people you know are below average.                | 7 A clear conscience is usually the sign of a bad memory.            | 10 The early bird may get the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese. 🚗 |
| 4 99% of lawyers give the rest a bad name.                   |  |   |