

OXFORD DON

An Oxford goes from Oxford to Oxford to celebrate 50 years of the Morris Oxford.

STORY **JOY CHAUDHURI**
PHOTOGRAPHY **JOANNE BOWLT**
& **TIM NICHOLSON**

Hello. My name is Florence. I was born in a place called Cowley when Winston Churchill was still the Prime Minister of Great Britain. It was also the year that Roger Bannister ran the first four-minute mile at Iffley Road track in Oxford. The year was 1954.

I am a part of the Morris family. And I was titled Oxford Series II. Between 1954-56 there were 80,000 of my kind born. Turning heads with our spiffy 'new look' as our 1.5-litre hearts beat proudly. *Autocar* wrote in 1954, "On both wet and dry roads, the Oxford appeared to be particularly stable. The engine was lively and flexible, so that the car could be accelerated from a speed of 15mph in top gear to its maximum, which is claimed to be something over 70..."

Sadly, today only about a hundred of us are left.

I still remember that fine September morning in 1954 when Mr Jelley of Gomshall Post Office parked his very fine posterior behind my rack-and-pinion steering. And so we remained for the next twenty years.

God bless Mr Jelley's soul. But he had to move on. And so did I. The Monk brothers, Steve and Richard, were jolly lads. And we spent many a sunny afternoon parked at the local pub. And then there was Eddie Lean. There was Eddie till he went



How could I leave Mumbai without this Kodak moment?



Me and my buddies at the start of the adventure in Oxford, UK.



Joanne and Tim at the white Cliffs Of Dover.



These youngsters nowadays have no patience. What does that Citroen think he's doing? In Paris.

off to Malaysia, wherever that might be.

This is where the madness begins. Eddie is off to Malaysia, and I am back at Richard Monk's garage in Surrey. Richard is pondering over what to do with me when these two nuts walk in.

Her name is Joanne Bowlt. Joanne is thirty-five. She is a public relations consultant. His name is Tim Nicholson. He is a chartered surveyor with Pillar Property Plc. He is thirty-six. They want to drive me to Oxford. Oxford? I know Oxford. The City of Dreaming Spires. Home of the University. Right?

■ India is my land. The land of my children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. ■

Right. And wrong. They want to drive me to Oxford. And then they want to drive me to Oxford. *In New Zealand!* A small rural town 55km from Christchurch.

What are they thinking? Two Oxford alumni, driving half-way across the world, from Oxford in UK to Oxford in New Zealand in a 50-year-old Oxford! I say, isn't that rather eccentric, chaps?

It's all for a good cause, they say. It's to raise funds for the British Red Cross. No sir, they have a very altruistic reason to go and pound my ageing chassis across four continents, through all sorts of no-roads. In the process if they have an adventure and stories to tell their grandchildren, that is just a side byproduct.

So do you think common sense prevailed? No sir. Tim and Joanne chuck up their nice jobs. They sell their cars. They let their apartments out. Put their stuff in storage. Chuck a few spares and spanners in my dickey. And off

we set from the city of Oxford in a battery of flashbulbs and sound bytes. It is May 5, 2004.

It takes us a week more before we look back over the white cliffs of Dover and have our last English meal – fish 'n' chips – and cross over to France. Here let me tell you that I, Florence, am the first guest of the Hilton Arc de Triomphe, Paris that opened the day we reach Paris, May 12. Joanne and Tim are the second and third guests of the hotel.

From here it's a blur of cities, people, smells, sights, experiences, as we drive through France to Spain to Morocco to Algeria to Tunisia, Libya, into Egypt. Joanne and Tim make many friends along the way. We stop to ask for directions, and people end up buying Joanne and Tim a meal. Of course, their prime focus is me, Florence. They knock on my thick metal body and admire my curves. Hey, don't knock me just because I am fifty. Didn't I drive nearly 800km across the flat Libyan desert in one day, without even a hiccup?

Let the truth be told. There were many times I was scared silly. Like in Cairo. Schumacher clones behind the wheels, wing mirrors folded in, whizzing just millimetres away from me. Yet Egypt was nice. The old Sphinx looked a bit gloomy. I can understand that. He is old. My advice

to him is to get out and see the world. Have an adventure. Get those old creaky bones moving. Just look at me!

Next destination, India. It's decided that I shall travel by ship to Mumbai. After more than three months on the road, I look forward to some rest and relaxation. Nothing like a cruise to lift an old lady's spirit. Unfortunately, Jo and Tim cannot travel with me on the ship. They have to fly. I have grown rather fond of these two. I shall miss them.

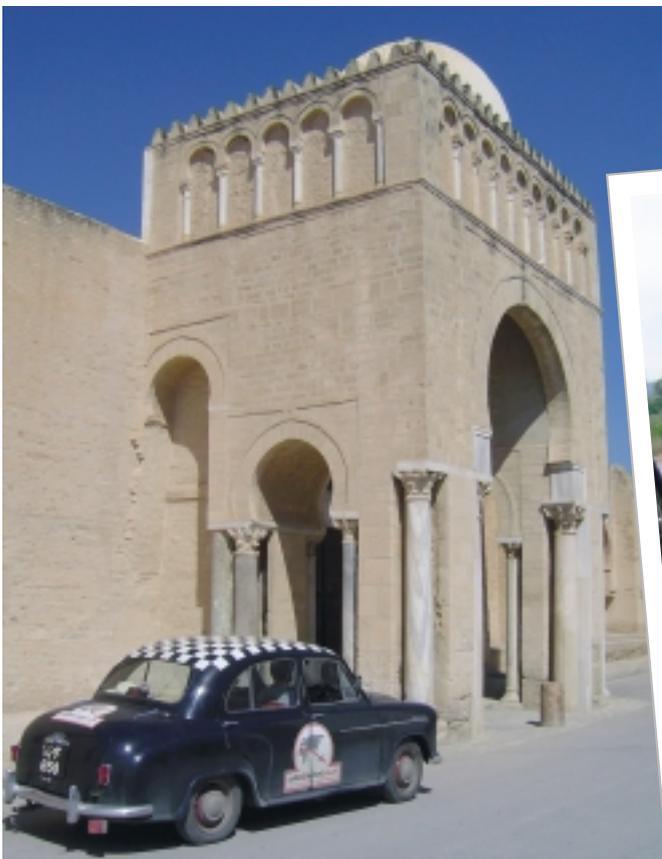
It is August 16 when I finally arrive in Mumbai and am reunited with my dear friends. I can't make out whether it's tears of joy streaming down their faces, or



Me outside the Spanish Red Cross building. On a goodwill mission.



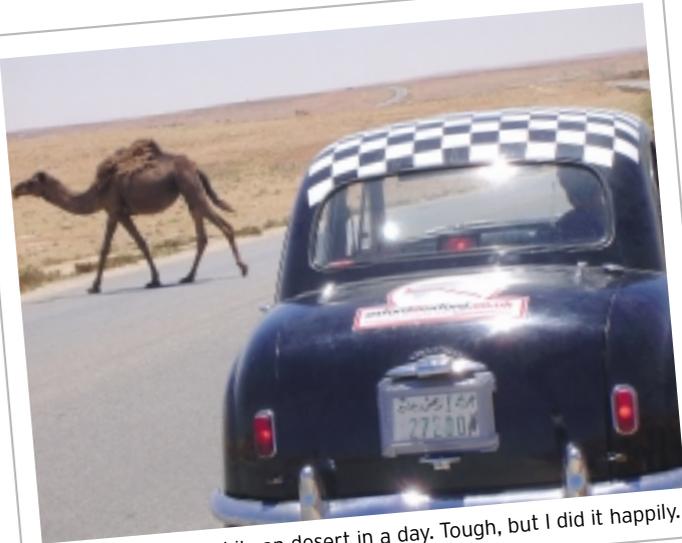
All ready to board the ferry to Morocco.



The Kairouan mosque in Tunisia is one of the oldest in the world.



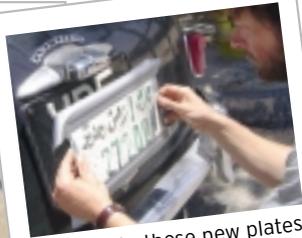
Wish I'd learned Arabic... road signs can be hard to read sometimes.



Did 800km across Libyan desert in a day. Tough, but I did it happily.



What a pity, pyramids can't travel.



UGH! I hate these new plates.



Tim fixing my sump guard.



I may be 50, but I still look fantastic. Thanks to Tim and Joanne.

is it just the monsoon rain. Maybe it's just tears of relief from overcoming all the bureaucratic red tape involved in freeing me.

Then it hits me. This is my land. The land of my children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They are all over. Mostly in white with a red light on top. There is no mistaking the family gene. Here they are called Ambassador. Nice name. They are ambassadors of British engineering. The downside is that people hardly notice me here. India was the home of my cousin, the Landmaster. We are nearly identical twins. So it's only my decals that save me from the ignominy of being passed off as yet another Landmaster!

So far we have travelled approximately 10,000 kilometres together. We have so far managed to raise over £3,000

for the Red Cross. And we are just half-way into our journey. By the time you read this, I shall be somewhere in the southern part of India on my way to Chennai. The original plan was to take a ship to Australia, but Jo and Tim are rather excited about the prospect of taking a slight detour and travelling to South-East Asia; Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia. Think I'll apply for a job at *National Geographic*. But Jo and Tim are determined to take me home with them.

We are scheduled to reach New Zealand and Oxford in February next year. We don't run on a fixed schedule. We can't. We never know what's around the corner. But you can catch our adventures on our website www.oxford2oxford.co.uk.

Ta ta. Bye Bye. This is Florence. ●



Everybody, meet my grandson, Avigo. Haven't seen him in 50 years.

RISHAD SAMI MEHTA