

PASSION PLAY

PHILANTHROPY ON THE ROAD

Hong Kong expats Vincent Duhamel and Jean Mouret challenge themselves in a car rally from Beijing to Paris to raise funds for the Asian University for Women.

STORY APPLE MANDY



ABOVE
Vincent Duhamel (left) and Jean Mouret (right) on the road.

OPPOSITE
Vincent Duhamel (left) and Jean Mouret (right) celebrate crossing the finish line after over a month on the road.

Road adventures can be memorable and sometimes fulfilling, especially when there's a philanthropic goal tied to it. And that's certainly the takeaway for Canadian-born Vincent Duhamel and French-born Jean Mouret, a duo who embarked on the thrilling, adventure-filled 6th Peking to Paris Motor Challenge 2016.

The triennial event, organised by the Endurance Rally Association, is known as one of the world's hardest rallies. It begins in China, leaving from the Great Wall outside Beijing, and passes through different parts of Mongolia then into Russia. The rally continues across Europe, into Belarus, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Italy, and Switzerland, until it reaches Place Vendôme in Paris. The race lasts 36 days, from June 12 to July 17.

The decision to join the rally was an easy one. In 2013, Duhamel and Mouret had already agreed to participate. But instead of just going for the

experience, they intended to use this adventure as a tool for raising money. A year ago when deciding which charity to raise money for, Duhamel, who was already a supporter of the Asian University for Women (AUW), introduced the university located in Chittagong, Bangladesh, to Mouret who loved the idea.

"We use the car rally and the people's interest on this to increase their awareness of AUW," says Duhamel, who's the head of Asia for Lombard Odier, a Swiss private bank. "Tuition costs about US\$15,000 a year [per student]; our goal is to raise as much money as we can and get as many women into the university as possible."

Participation at this rally entails a lot of preparation. First, drivers need to buy a car that falls under one of the categories – either Classic, for models built before 1975, or Vintageants, for models built before 1941. They have to be fixed or modified to ensure it meets the demands of some of the world's toughest terrains. When Duhamel and Mouret registered, the Vintageants category was still opened; Mouret found a 1941 Chevrolet Business Coup in South Dakota while visiting North America and the car, named as Boomba, carries the race number 51.

"Chevrolet has a very good reputation and ability to drive long distances," says Mouret, who's the founder and chairman of Landa Ltd, a group of companies that manufactures outdoor furniture, bags and luggage. Duhamel adds: "We want to find a good, solid car that we can modify to do such a journey and a normal car won't be able to do that." When asked about the price of Boomba, Duhamel discloses, "the car itself was the cheapest".

MAKING EVERY MILE COUNT

Duhamel and Mouret described their whole journey as "epic", finishing 13,675 kilometres. Placing 23rd, they managed to finish the entire journey despite the challenges. "You're expected to accomplish the race everyday, but that doesn't include breaking down and other uncontrollable variables like traffic jams," Duhamel says. "Part of the rally is to respect a very specific amount of time to make it to your destination."

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On a typical day, Duhamel and Mouret would start driving at 8:21am. They had a targeted distance they must fulfil each day. In Mongolia, they drove between 10 and 12 hours each day covering 300 to 400 kilometres for eight days. In Russia, they spent 14 days on the road, driving 600 to 700 kilometres per day. Duhamel described this experience as “a killer and just unbelievably boring”. With 115 cars leaving one after the other at one-minute intervals, everyone is expected to arrive by 6:55pm at a designated campsite or a chosen hotel for dinner.

During the race, the two took turns driving, alternating every two to three hours, so as not to get bored or tired. “You do get really tired; your attention span is not what it should be and it can be dangerous,” Duhamel explains.

The duo encountered several challenges. They found it difficult to reach the required distance within the set amount of time given each day. Driving on tracks in Mongolia and driving on roads with potholes in Russia delayed them. Moreover, Duhamel said trucks and eight wheelers were avoiding those same potholes, making the drive quite dangerous.

Mechanical issues were also a concern. The two recounted getting into a collision and one of the cylinders from their car came loose. The six-cylinder engine made a lot of noise, which was not only unpleasant but also gave off vibrations that caused further problems to the engine. Every nut and bolt started to become loose, and the engine mounts and suspension broke. In fact, they barely made to Paris because the transmission almost fell out.

“We were like ‘please, please help us make this through the finish line’. We were counting every kilometre we have to push the car through,” Duhamel said. “If there was an airport next door, I would have taken the flight back home. Clearly on our last day, our discipline went by the window because we were so fed up with it.”

There was also the psychological factor. At times they both felt tired, exhausted and as if they are not progressing fast enough to their destination. “My lowest point was when we drove out of Mongolia and got into Russia, and Jean had it the best way to remind me not to give up,” said Duhamel. “The fact that every kilometre we make is an extra dollar we are raising, it just put things into perspective so I thought ‘I better shut up because I am being a prima donna.’”



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- Vincent Duhamel

As the rally came to an end, Duhamel said he felt “relieved” while Mouret felt “glad it was done.” Asked whether they would do the rally again, Duhamel says, “It’s clearly a great experience though I am not sure whether I’d like to do [a race] as long as this one. It’s a great way to explore the world. But if we need to raise more money for AUW, well I guess I could sacrifice doing it again.”

Having raised over US\$150,000 (over HKD\$1.1M) from the rally, the team is thankful for the experience. “Never give up,” said Mouret. “We had a choice to give up or to stop but we never did. Whatever issue we encountered, I think it was a reminder that we should always be humble and accept whatever it was given to us.”

Duhamel added, “And then just move on. Deal with adversity, roll over and just keep moving forward. This rally is a great experience, because you get hit everyday whether your car’s not working, problems on the road, or some adversity that will affect you.” ☺

ABOVE
The 1941 Chevrolet Business Coupe, or simply Boomba, at its starting point by the Great Wall, Beijing. The car carries the race number 51.