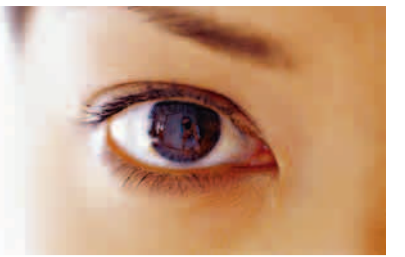


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Life

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Vroom with a view

Why would a former racing driver take the long and winding road across China? **Katie Lau** reports

Going on a driving tour around the mainland might strike some as an ill-advised idea given its poor record on traffic safety and unreliable roads, but not Peter Schindler. Last summer, he embarked on a 104-day road trip criss-crossing the country in a vintage convertible that he had named Miss Daisy.

Although he expected problems along the way, one aspect proved particularly gruelling. "It was the incredible heat that was killing me. It was so hot I almost fainted on several occasions," recalls Schindler, a Hong Kong-based entrepreneur. "I only put up the roof when there was heavy rain... I didn't expect to be bothered by the heat so much."

But then he chose the Caterham roadster, a remake of a 1950s Lotus race car, precisely for its eye-catching looks. The 48-year-old Austrian got the idea for his road trip after taking a similar vehicle out on a photo shoot. "I ended up driving it in Mong Kok, and everyone was looking at us. So I thought, 'What if I took a car like this into China?'"

A former race driver, Schindler had written a book about the joys of driving and planned to publish more. Travelling around China in an unusual vehicle might lead to droll encounters that could provide rich material for a second book about ordinary Chinese people, he decided.

Schindler was also partly inspired by a book written by a hitchhiker who travelled around Ireland with a fridge, which introduced readers to Irish people in a humorous way. "Driving around in China in such a quirky car is the equivalent of that," he says.

To give his adventure more meaning, Schindler, who obtained a mainland driving licence in 2005, turned it into a charity drive. He persuaded Nokia to sponsor his journey and the car, which was auctioned off after the trip at a gala dinner hosted by basketballer Yao Ming, raising 650,000 yuan (HK\$743,000) for the China Youth Development Foundation.

His 21,000km journey started in Shanghai and went along the banks of the Yangtze to its source in the Tibetan plateau before descending from Lhasa and following the Yellow River all the way to Shandong, ending in Beijing.

Painted a bright egg-yolk yellow, the Caterham quickly proved its worth as an ice-breaker. Wherever they went, Schindler and his car attracted within minutes crowds of curious onlookers, including schoolchildren and policemen, some of whom contributed signatures on the vehicle as mementos.

"Unlike a Ferrari, it doesn't give you an impression that it's about money, but about a strange

guy like me. They haven't seen anything like that," he says. Apart from the dramatic landscapes, Schindler, a fluent Putonghua speaker, was struck by the warmth of people he met along the way. "Hong Hong", a reader who lost her right leg in a car accident, left a message on his blog (also translated into Chinese) that made such a deep impression he drove to Taiyuan to visit her. Schindler says he was moved by how she and her husband, who was also injured in the crash, supported each other through adversity. "I still keep in touch and she's become a special friend," says Schindler.

Then there was an 18-year-old girl who tried to get a lift to school in the Sichuan-Tibetan highlands. "It's rare to see hitchhikers in China," he says. "I thought she would run away because me and my car might be as strange to her as a UFO landing, but we ended up having a nice conversation about her family and dreams."

Surprisingly, Schindler didn't encounter any of the problems he'd feared, such as theft or collision, on the road. "I took a huge bag with 50 different medicines, but didn't get sick once... not even a cold or an

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Peter Schindler

upset stomach," he says. "I expected to change tyres all the time, but didn't have a flat."

Miss Daisy's low ground clearance meant some roads were inaccessible, forcing him to take detours as long as 1,000km. But such barriers weren't the main reason Schindler wound up taking a more complicated and extended route than planned.

Some detours were made simply to check out scenic spots such as the Longsheng rice terraces of Guangxi, the Three Gorges Dam in Hubei, Huangshan in Anhui and Zhangjiajie in Hunan.

Perhaps his biggest headache was a malfunctioning sensor that plagued the car's ignition for much of the journey. "When the engine brake fails in a big way, it's hard to fix. And once every two weeks Miss Daisy just wouldn't start up," Schindler says.

Still, he pushed on and was crossing the border between Qinghai and Tibet, 4,700 metres up in the mountains, when he got a scare.

"I continued to drive because the weather was so good, but suddenly Miss Daisy wouldn't start up again," he recalls. "We finally had

to tow her with a support car and I was really depressed." However, the rope they used wasn't equal to the task and kept breaking; meanwhile, it was getting colder and darker. "We could have been in danger if it started snowing. It looked like there was no way out; that was the most frightening moment," Schindler says.

He decided to abort the trip and abandon the car but the driver of his support vehicle refused to give up, and tried to restart the car by injecting fuel into the engine. "We kept trying and trying... Just as he wanted to let go, she was running again. It was a miracle," he says.

"In hindsight, I don't think what he did made a difference, but I learned that you've got to keep trying, whatever it is, even when you don't know what to do."

Schindler loved driving even as a child and competed professionally in Formula 2 and 3 races for about four years. But he says there's a lot more to driving than an adrenaline rush. "Most people like the mechanics of cars, but for me it's about the freedom on the open road, a sense of adventure, an ability to discover new places quickly and friendships you can make. A car is almost your friend," he says. "I am happiest when I drive."

He quit racing when he was 22 to focus on his studies. "It was total abstinence. I didn't even watch the races on TV any more," he says.

Schindler went to the US, studied computer science at MIT and switched to a career in information technology, which brought him to Hong Kong in 1993.

Ten years later, he left IT to return to his passion; he wrote *On the Road*, a book celebrating the freedom of driving, and set up a driving tour business.

Schindler says driving on the mainland is not as dangerous as it seems. "China is very strange. In big cities like Guangzhou and

Shenzhen, you've got incredible traffic and pollution, but if you go between cities, in the remote regions of Sichuan, Yunnan and Qinghai there's no traffic. Surprisingly, the roads are superb - big and wide," he says.

Schindler reckons driving is the best way to explore the paradoxes and cultural diversity of the mainland. "The nice thing about driving is it lets you cover great distances and see a lot of places, whereas you are going to need more time when you hike," he says.

"I went from China's most modern and populated city to the most remote highlands. I saw how

some places are rich, while other places are poor; how some places are clean, how it's dirty in some places; how some parts are very cosmopolitan, while elsewhere people have little understanding of the outside world."

Although keen to develop his driving tour business, Schindler says he's conscious of the impact that vehicles burning fossil fuels have on the environment. Hence the idea for his next odyssey - "a trip to promote alternative-energy vehicles so that the tremendous growth in [mainland] car ownership will not overwhelm the world's resources", he says.



Schoolchildren greet Peter Schindler in Beijing (above); admirers sign his car in Zunyi, Guizhou province (far left), a herd of goats slow his progress outside Lhasa, Tibet (left). Photos: Ron Yue

People

Photos: AP/Reuters/AFP

LaBeouf arrested for drink driving

Shia LaBeouf has been arrested on suspicion of drink driving after an early morning traffic accident in which the *Indiana Jones* star injured his hand and knee, authorities said. LaBeouf was trying to make a left turn at a West Hollywood intersection around 3am when his pickup collided with another vehicle, rolling the truck over (right), Los Angeles County Sheriff's Sergeant Scott Wolf said.

"It was immediately apparent to officers responding on the scene that LaBeouf was intoxicated and he was subsequently placed under arrest," Wolf said.

Wolf said LaBeouf was booked then released for a misdemeanour DUI. The 22-year-old actor was



taken to Cedars-Sinai Medical Centre and treated for injuries to his left hand and a knee, as well as a minor head injury, Wolf said.

A female passenger in LaBeouf's truck was not seriously injured.

The cause of the crash remained under investigation, Wolf said. AP

Egyptian director Chahine dies

Film director Youssef Chahine, a leading light of Egyptian cinema for more than half a century, has died in Cairo at the age of 82 after six weeks in a coma, his office said.

Chahine (right), best known for his series of films linked to the Mediterranean city of Alexandria, had a brain haemorrhage in June and spent several weeks in a Paris hospital before returning to Cairo 12 days ago.

The director's last film, *Chaos*, came out earlier this year but his colleague Khaled Youssef had to finish the work because of Chahine's ill health.

Film critic Tarek el-Shenawi said in tribute that Chahine set the standard for Egyptian directors.



"When you see the names of those who worked with him... you can say that the giants of Egyptian cinema graduated from the Youssef Chahine academy," he said. Reuters

Hogan denies tax cheat claims

Paul Hogan has renewed his strident attack on the Australian Taxation Office's investigation into his tax affairs, telling it to "bugger off, you've had your share".

Hogan said he was prepared to fight "tooth and nail" over claims he had secreted tens of millions of dollars in movie royalties in offshore tax havens.

In an interview with the Nine Network's *60 Minutes* programme, the 69-year-old star of hit film *Crocodile Dundee* issued a stern rebuke to the ATO. "Bugger off, you've had your share... Get off my case. You're not getting another cent." Agencies

'Fastest sax player' Griffin dead at 80

Jazz saxophonist Johnny Griffin, who played with stars such as Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane, has died at his home in western France. He was 80.

Griffin (right) was found dead on Friday by his wife Miriam, just hours before he was due to give a concert, his agent told BBCi.

Once billed as "the world's fastest saxophonist", he had played regular concerts across Europe until his death.

Born in Chicago in 1928, Griffin attended the same school as Nat King Cole and Dinah Washington. After graduating, he toured with Lionel Hampton's big band before spending two years in the US Army. He also played with Art Blakey.

