



Bratislava or Bust... They Made It!

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'Everything Keeps Going Right' was a Toyota advertising slogan of a few years ago, and thankfully it held true for a group of friends who drove a 16 year old RAV4 to Bratislava (and back again!) in aid of the Dementia UK charity. Kim Henson reports...



Still looking good and running perfectly after 3,900 miles of travelling through 14 countries - the 16 year old Toyota RAV4 in which Niall Brown (shown here with the vehicle) and his friends drove to Bratislava in Slovakia (and all the way back again), raising money for Dementia UK.



Recently on Wheels-Alive I wrote about a group of first year medical students who were about to set off in an ageing Toyota RAV4 on the exciting 'Bratislava or Bust 2014' challenge, in aid of Dementia UK. This national charity endeavours to improve the quality of life for everyone affected by dementia, notably including the provision of mental health nurses specialising in dementia care, and known as 'Admiral Nurses'.

The 'Bratislava or Bust 2014' challenge involved teams taking part each buying a sub-£500 vehicle and driving it to Bratislava in Slovakia. To raise money for the charity, there's a registration fee of £95, and each individual participant has to raise a minimum amount of £250 in sponsorship. The money thus raised goes directly to the charity, with the cost of each vehicle and the travelling being met by the individual teams entering the event.

The 2013 event raised £12,000 for Dementia UK, and this year hopes were even higher, with approximately 30 vehicles and their enthusiastic occupants booked to take part.

The Toyota team mentioned included Niall Brown (who originally comes from Dorset), Conor McCann and Connor McKee (all three are just about to start their second year of studying at Edinburgh) plus Ollie Bourton, who is at Loughborough University. Another friend, Ryan Loughhead, was intending to travel with them, but alas a serious injury left him temporarily unable to drive. However, he wasn't forgotten, and the team's vehicle, a 1998 Toyota RAV4 costing just £495, was decorated in 'camouflage' style to have deliberate connotations with 'Saving Private Ryan'...

The event started from St. Omer in France on 31st July, and participating teams were due to take seven days en route to Bratislava.

KAMPERS AND KARS

Niall was delighted when Poole-based Andy Saunders (famous for his custom car creations, and who today who runs the 'Kampers and Kars at Pottery Service Station' motorhome and garage business, originally started by his late father), pledged his support. Andy was so impressed by the lads' efforts to help Dementia UK, that he kindly agreed to provide the



minimum £250 sponsorship required by Niall in order to take part in the event. In addition, Andy had the Toyota specially signwritten. He said that he had a special interest as his own late mum had suffered from dementia in her final years.

HOW TO DONATE

If you would like to make a contribution to this very worthwhile cause, you can still donate via Dementia UK's website (www.dementiauk.org), where there is much more information about dementia and how the charity operates.

Additionally or alternatively, if you'd like to support Niall and his friends in their charitable mission in aid of Dementia UK, please go to: Niall's own page for giving (<http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/NiallBrown> - Niall Brown: Bratislava or Bust), and make your donation (which can be increased by the Gift Aid scheme if you are a UK taxpayer).



The Toyota team - including the vehicle itself and 'Private Ryan'



(Photo courtesy Niall Brown).

SUCCESS!

Niall and his pals are now back in the UK, together with their well-travelled Toyota (in which they drove a total of 3,900 miles), and I met up with him again to see how they got on.

Niall explained that not only did they succeed in reaching Bratislava, travelling 2,400 miles through 14 countries on the way, but they also won the event!

“It was brilliant”, he explained, “The Toyota was absolutely trouble-free, running perfectly throughout, and we had a fantastic time. Importantly too, a total of over £25,000 (for all participating teams) had been pledged by the time that the event started, and it is expected that this figure will rise”. This means that the 2014 event has already raised more than twice as much as the 2013 adventure.

Daily challenges were set for the teams taking part, and points awarded according to how they tackled them. At the end of the event in Bratislava, the winning team with the highest number of points for the whole event, won £500 (thus effectively covering the outlay by the winning team on their vehicle). In addition, winning teams on each individual day of the event were awarded £80, with £40 going to the runners-up.

Niall and his friends thought that it would be fun to take part in these challenges, but didn't believe they were in with a chance of winning.

Examples of the challenges that had to be met included going sailing and milking a cow (in Switzerland). Our team members in the Toyota did well with the 'sailing' challenge (involving an inflatable bed with a flag for a sail), but by their own admission failed the 'cow milking' challenge. Niall explained that it was difficult trying to explain to Swiss farmers that they needed to milk a cow...

He says that it was a 'lovely surprise' when his team was awarded First Prize overall for the



event, bringing them £500, plus another £120 for being winners and runners-up respectively, on individual days.

Highlights of the team's 'adventure' included camping by Lake Constanz, on the borders of Switzerland, Germany and Italy, and going swimming in the Lake first thing in the morning. It was here that they also succeeded in the 'sailing' challenge.

They also visited a number of places along their route, including a variety of interesting cities, the Wartime V2 rocket base in northern France, and Dunkirk beach.

Low points on the trip? None really, except in Prague when a person or persons unknown broke a quarter window on the RAV4. Fortunately nothing was stolen from the vehicle.



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Stelvio Pass at its splendid, zig-zaggy finest... (Photo courtesy Niall Brown).



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Wonderful scenery in the Stelvio Pass area.
(Photo courtesy Niall Brown).



Lakes and snow-capped mountains
'everywhere'. (Photo courtesy Niall Brown).



High altitude and tough driving conditions were shrugged off by the team's RAV4. Note the 'Maureen' graphic visible in this shot on the rear quarter panel - in memory of sponsor Andy Saunders' late mum.



'Ello, ello, ello, what's all this then; you're driving where?'

RELIABLE?

Not all the cars entered made it to Bratislava, although Niall says that he believes that more than half of the vehicles which started from St. Omer reached the event's destination. Sadly one was in so much mechanical trouble that it had to be scrapped within a day or so of setting out...



By contrast the intrepid team's Toyota RAV 4 was a real star. Niall agrees that its performance and reliability were 'incredible'. He says that it drove beautifully, and performed exceptionally well on the tight, twisting, steep mountain passes, with the Stelvio standing out as a truly amazing road. He also recalls how, when negotiating steep, long climbs, the RAV4 just kept going and running as it should, sometimes powering past vehicles suffering from overheating and other ailments.

Interestingly, at the outset Niall had looked at four or five other potential purchases in terms of a vehicle in which to undertake the trip (originally he had an old BMW in mind), before settling on the Toyota. The dealer from whom he bought the RAV4 assured him that it would run fine to Bratislava and back again – and it did just that!

WORTH DOING?

Niall says that he would thoroughly recommend anyone undertaking a similar adventure, for the enjoyment of taking part and, in the case of Dementia UK, helping what he considers to be a great cause. He enjoyed the driving, the scenery, the company (exploring Europe with people who have similar interests) and the fun of taking part – as well as raising a substantial amount of cash for the charity.

His advice would be for each team to take as many people as reasonably possible in the vehicle – he feels that in this way the trip is made more fun, as well as helping reduce costs, and having more people aboard to share the driving over long distances – because tiredness can take its toll.

Is there anything he would do differently 'next time'? Niall answered by saying that on this trip his team had originally planned to camp most nights. However, because the campsites are typically some way from the centres of the towns/cities at which they were halting overnight, they lost much time in driving to and from the camp sites. So if he did do such a trip again, he would prefer to book more overnight accommodation in advance. He added that in some places – notably Prague – it had been virtually impossible to find anywhere to stay 'on spec', so again, advance booking would have helped.



Awaiting the ferry back to England; the Toyota was travel-stained and had suffered a vandalised quarter window, but was still running perfectly and had helped to raise much money for the Dementia UK charity. (Photo courtesy Niall Brown).