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For Your Bookshelf – Retrospective Book Review: “Coleman’s Drive”

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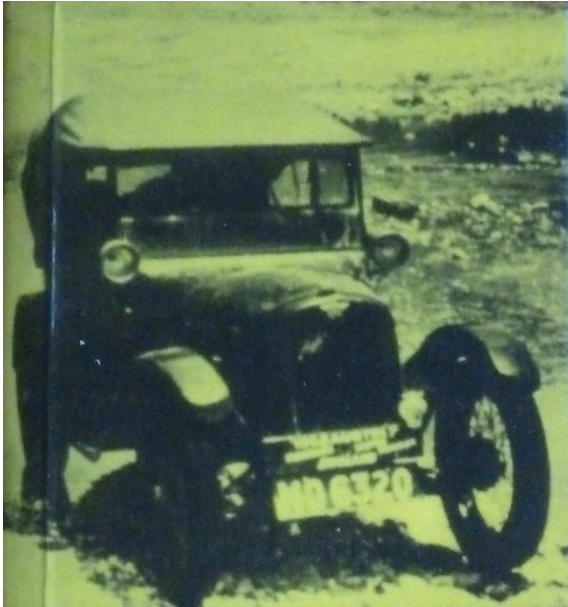
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From
Buenos Aires
to New York
in a vintage
Baby Austin

Coleman's Drive John Coleman





All about a drive in a 1925 Austin Seven from Buenos Aires to New York...

...Reviewed by Kim Henson.

Author: [John Coleman](#)

Originally published in the 1960s; the version reviewed re-published in 1996 by: [New European Publications Ltd.](#)

260 pages (paperback)

UK Price: [Varies \(no longer in print but used copies are available from a variety of sources. Current typical prices \(March 2024\) within the UK range from around £10 upwards \(plus delivery\) for paperback copies, and from £20 upwards for hardback versions.](#)

ISBN: [1-872410-06-5 paperback](#)

An impossible dream?

It was some 65 years ago when, in 1959, John Coleman set out alone in his 1925 Austin Seven Chummy on the hugely challenging journey from Buenos Aires to New York.

Even these days to undertake such a trip in a tiny, low powered car (which was 34 years old at the time), and single-handed, would be considered an improbably difficult adventure.

In the 21st Century too, there are impressive tarmac highways (or at least roads!) to aid progress. By contrast, to attempt this journey at a time when quite simply for hundreds of miles there were no roads at all along the route, which also crossed the Andes, traversed wild deserts, passed through dense rainforests and necessitated fording deep, wide rivers, was thought to be dangerous, and at the very least likely to fail, if not impossible.

However, John Coleman was determined to succeed, and his engaging account of how he



did it, and especially how he overcame many major obstacles along the way, had this reader's imagination working in overdrive - in my mind I was visualising the heroic efforts of this man and his diminutive old Austin, as they travelled northwards from Argentina and through the countries lining the west coast of south America, eventually reaching and crossing the United States to get to New York.

Quite apart from the physical difficulties encountered en route, due to the always-challenging harsh terrain in the south American countries, the political situations current there in the late 1950s also came into play, often providing further obstacles that required diplomacy and determination to overcome them. Illness and 'bandits' were further hazards experienced, and dealt with successfully, along the way.

In fact, as he explains in his book, John Coleman's inspiration for this incredible journey came from an earlier volume that he read when in his teens. Entitled 'Tschiffely's Ride' (and originally called 'Southern Cross to Pole Star'), this book told the true story of how Tschiffely, on horseback, covered the whole of the route from Buenos Aires to New York using the same two Argentine Creole horses - another amazing feat!

John Coleman had full confidence in his car, one of the earliest Austin Sevens - a model that was to provide dependable motoring for so many people from the 1920s to the 1960s and beyond. He was already an enthusiast of Austin Sevens, having been impressed by their capacity for hard work and sheer reliability.

Challenges overcome...

I am keen not to spoil the excitement and interest for would-be readers of 'Coleman's Drive', but a few examples from the story may help to give an idea of how fascinating this journey was, and how difficult.

Early in the trip, the formidable Andes mountains had to be crossed from east to west, from Argentina to Chile, and the climb to the highest point involved mile after mile of steep, rough-surfaced 'roadway', with hairpin bends galore and necessitating use of the car's first



gear (of three).

In fact, often on this long and arduous journey, it was necessary to reverse up the steepest mountain gradients (as reverse gear had a lower ratio than first), and this involved some hair-raising moments as tracks with huge sheer drops were negotiated!

On reaching the highest point of the road across the Andes, John Coleman explained, "I was happy. I was now literally on top of the world, and my Austin was certainly the first Baby Austin to stand on top of the Andes".

In addition to steep gradients, the Austin and its driver had to cope with severely corrugated road and track surfaces, which often also gave rise to clouds of thick dust - making it difficult for the Austin's engine and for John Coleman to breathe.

Another challenge was keeping the engine cool, especially on the steep climbs, and attentions to the radiator and the car's magneto ignition system were required as the trip progressed.

The jungles of Ecuador threw up their own challenges, as did some undesirable locals encountered in several countries.

Some of the toughest moments were experienced when attempting to cross wide, deep rivers, for there were no bridges in many areas, and there were times when it seemed that the car might be a write-off; amazingly it survived.

Yet John Coleman graphically describes in detail the high points of the trip as well as the lows, and his eternal optimism throughout the journey is reflected in his account.

VERDICT

Brilliant. 'Coleman's Drive' is an epic account of a ridiculously tough and truly amazing journey, which took from October 1959 to June 1960, and was completed successfully in a



Vintage Austin Seven. This in itself says so much for the dependability that Herbert Austin and his team built into their 'baby' cars.

I wholeheartedly recommend this well-written, easy-to-read book for anyone interested in motoring adventures, and especially one of such grand proportions, undertaken in a car so small.

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[Retrospective Book Review - Around France in an 8 H.P. Car](#)

['Seven Years With Samantha' - Around the world in a Vintage Austin Seven: seven-years-with-samantha-around-the-world-in-a-vintage-austin-seven/](#)