



Turkey and Greece in a Minor.
The eventful tale of a student's travails across Europe in 1961
By John Dixon.



John Dixon with his 1932 Minor Homebuilt Special

In the summer of 1961 I decided to go to the Middle East for a six-week holiday. I obtained a green card car insurance to cover the countries I expected to visit and a customs carnet from the RAC. Then on Monday 21 August I drove from Bingham down to my Uncle Len's in Dartford. The next 4 days I drove up to London to sort out my visas. I got a transit visa for Bulgaria and a one week tourist visa for the UAR, which then covered both Syria and Egypt. I set off for Turkey. My friend Chris Rogers was also going to Turkey in *The Vicar* (a 1932 Austin 7 box saloon) and left a day or two after I did, but we made no arrangements to meet since neither of us knew just what we would be doing and also because Chris was going for 6 to 9 months, depending on how his money lasted and would stop for days at a time, whereas I had to be back to continue my Ph.D. I caught a ferry in the afternoon from Dover to Boulogne and camped at Le Cateau.

Next day I drove through Luxembourg and Karlsruhe and along the autobahn to Stuttgart, 380 miles with little in the way of stops. Next, another long day of 333 miles on the autobahn to Munich and Salzburg and then over the famous Radstadter-Tauern and Katchsberg passes (long since by-passed for most by an autobahn) to Villach where I camped.

I went south over the Würzen Pass (1 in 4 for a stretch of 200 yards) into Yugoslavia. I naturally chose to go south over the Würzen and north over the Loibl as these were the steepest routes! I passed through Ljubljana and along the motorway from Zagreb to Belgrade. I camped mid way after 253 miles. I got to Belgrade early in the afternoon. There was a Peace Conference attended by all the leaders of the most suspect countries of the time. Archbishop Makarios swept past me whilst I was surrounded by Yugoslavs fascinated by my car and its

massive 4-cylinder engine! At Nis petrol had to be obtained from 50-gallon drums at a railway siding. The last 50 miles of road from Nis to the Bulgarian border was very bad and primitive. I camped before the border. The next day I drove across Bulgaria. Near Plovdiv I was stopped by a policeman, who just wanted to look at my car! I arrived in Sofia at the same time as the competitors in the Liege-Sofia-Liege rally. There were several British cars including a Mini. I watched them for a while then visited the cathedral. This enormous fine building was built between 1882 and 1914 in memory of the Russian soldiers who had liberated Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire in 1881. I camped before the Turkish border. In the morning I arrived at Erdine, parked outside a mosque and climbed to the top of one of the minarets. From here there were splendid views of the town, its mosques and for many miles. I explored the grand interiors of the mosques. The crown wheel and pinion broke up so I fitted my spare and made sure that I had enough oil in this time

I averaged nearly 300 miles a day and reached the campsite at Istanbul within a week. I had a mixed grill at a tourist restaurant about 80 miles before Istanbul, but regretted this as I was laid low for several days with the trots. One of the front springs of the car was broken so I replaced it with the only spare I had and stupidly threw the broken one away. At this point I decided that I would go no further than just across the Bosphorus on the ferry to Asia and to have an easier and more leisurely journey home via Greece. I did not know it at the time, but the 300 ton ship HMS Waterwitch, which my grandfather had been master of in the Aegean and Bosphorus at the end of the 1914-18 war, was still being used as a ferry on the Bosphorus. I did see her sister ship Kalender passing an old ship I was photographing. Waterwitch was converted after retirement in 1986 into a luxury motor yacht, Halas, used by royalty and featured in the American Express magazine, *Discovery*, which I came across while awaiting my take-away at The Eastern Queen in Catford. Sadly it seems Kalender was broken up like most of the old steam ships that had plied these seas for 70 years or more. One of the steam engines from Kalender is in a museum at Istanbul. I don't know the fate of the two steam engines removed from Halas.

I visited Ramile castle. *N.B. My father retired and had to close his pharmacy in his 80th year in 1988. I was helping to move my parents' stuff to their "new" house when I found a box containing hundreds of unused world-wide post cards and photos of my grandfather's ships in & before WWI. Two of the photos were of the Waterwitch outside Ramile castle. About 2000 I found out that Halas had featured on a Turkish stamp. It was valued with 3 others in a set at 50p. Stanley Gibbons always said that their catalogues were a price list for them selling you a stamp and not what they would pay for one. So I went to Stanley Gibbons on The Strand expecting to get the set for 50p, but I had to pay £2!!*

I drove up to Pier Loti's café where you get a splendid view of the Golden Horn. Outside the local kids were interested in my car so I let them sit in her. Unfortunately they managed to ruin the hood, but it never rained till after I got home. I visited the Blue Mosque and St Sophia, the bazaar and the fish market.

Having spent a week in Istanbul, I drove round the coast to Athens, where I saw the usual sights. I drove over the bridge over the ancient Corinth Canal and along the coast road to Patras, visiting many of the beautifully decorated Greek village churches. I took the ferry across to the mainland of Greece and set out up the west side of the country. I soon came to a sign, which said in Greek "Road under construction for 50 Km". When I got to the end of these 30 miles of very rough stony road there was another sign saying "Road under construction for 80 Km". This was repeated every 30 to 50 miles all the way to the border with Yugoslavia. The Minor's silencer was smashed to bits by the boulders and eventually I had to dump the whole silencer and tail pipe. The car was not too noisy if I drove gently.

At that time it was impossible to enter Albania at all so I had to drive all the way round. The roads were even worse, but merited no signs! One day to Skopje (largely destroyed a few months later by an earthquake) I drove for 13 hours and did only 91 miles, virtually all in first or second gear. Both my front springs broke. On one side every leaf behind the axle broke and on the other side every leaf except the main leaf broke on both sides of the axle. This meant that the chassis was supported on the front axle only by the old rubber bump-stops. Every big bump or hole meant that the axle fell away from the chassis, only to be crashed up against it a fraction of a second later. I therefore had to negotiate the bumps and holes to minimise this. It was not until I reached the coast again at Kotor that I found a blacksmith who could repair the springs. I removed them and he cut up some suitable old leaf springs and rebuilt mine. The job took him all morning and cost me £10. Fortunately I was able

to pay this with special vouchers that we were able to get in UK in those days as getting cash from a bank took about a week and credit cards had not arrived and I was running short.

I visited Dubrovnik with its beautiful harbour, sadly recently ruined, was envious of the super rugs and carpets for sale, only lack of funds and the impracticability of carrying a carpet in the Minor stopped me buying one. I drove along the coast road admiring the scene and the beautiful islands. Suddenly at Zadar I came to the first tarmac road since just after Patras. As I approached the Alps the car started to misfire badly, eventually stopping altogether in the middle of nowhere. Obviously the condenser had failed but no worry I had a spare in a distributor. However sods law applied - there was no condenser inside it! Whilst pondering what to do a chap on a moped stopped. He was an electronics fanatic and was sure that he would have something that would do. I rode on his luggage rack for a few miles to his workshop. He dug out a few approx 1 μ F condensers and we returned to the car. One of them worked so I was on my way duly grateful. As I approached the notorious 1 in 3 Loibl Pass into Austria, the new condenser started to pack up. I managed to buy a Bosch condenser from a garage and because it was so fat I had to fit it outside the distributor. Now I had a good spark so got to the top with ease - well just! The pass was closed for 30 years shortly after, as a tunnel was built. It was opened specially for the re-inaction of the 1913 Alpine Rally by the RR-EC for their Silver Ghosts in 1993.

Three more days and I was back in England. I was driving to visit my friend Bizuk, whom I had met in Italy in 1957 and who was now working in London with his wife Miranda 16 hours a day to pay off a debt that a friend of his welched on, and for which he had acted as guarantor. Unless the debt was paid off within a few years Bizuk's aged parents would have their home taken by the bank and be thrown into the street. A few miles from his work and house near Heathrow I was stopped by the police, who complained that the car was noisy. I explained that the silencer had dropped off in Greece, but they took offence and proceeded to find fault with the car. One yanked the steering wheel from side to side and even though there was less than an inch of free play at the steering wheel he managed to turn it 90° before the good tyres moved on the road. I pointed out that he was bending all the steering rods, but was ignored. In due course I was to get my summonses.

On 21 December I had to go to London in HV3621 to answer my summonses for inefficient silencer and defective steering. After a few miles on the day before, the coldest of the winter, the engine boiled and blew out a core plug. The radiator was frozen. Fortunately I was outside the workshops of the Canadian Air Base so I soon got the core plug back, thawed the radiator and cooled the engine. I sat through all the other cases, all found or pleaded guilty, except the last whose AA solicitor bored the magistrates to death, but managed to get his client off for doing 60mph in a 40 mph area, because the 40mph repeater signs on the street lights were missing or obscured. This despite the clerk pointing out that the driver should have assumed the speed limit was 30 mph! I had to return after lunch. I fought hard but as I didn't have a silencer, it could not be inefficient and in any case I was not charged (as I could have been) with making excessive noise. So I had to pay £3 for the silencer and £5 for the steering, as much as I paid for the car two years before.