

16 JAN 2003
Couple-Drive
DRIVING FOR MALAYSIA

By: Wan Ahmad Hulaimi

LONDON, Jan 16 (Bernama) -- In September last year in Malaysia, Arshad Feroz Khan, 59, an ex-army major, did something that he'd been dying to do all his working life - he just faded away, taking his wife and childhood sweetheart Salina Abdullah too with him.

Now, four months later and after some 21,000 km of driving his 4-wheel drive, they are here, about to start on the next leg of their journey by air to Montreal in Canada where they will be reunited with their Toyota, and then back at the wheel again to Vancouver.

It was Arshad actually who felt this itch to travel overland around the world when he was in the Malaysian army. Then, in civvy street working for a major plantation company in East Malaysia and Indonesia it became an obsession; if only he could persuade his petite wife to follow him too.

He had known his wife since schooldays in Perak when she, three years his junior, was known as Liew Von Kim, a tin miner's daughter.

On hearing the travel plan Salina did what every cautious, thinking wife would do in the face of a wild suggestion from a husband who was touching sixty. She gave him a vehement 'No'.

But Arshad, although retired from the army, still retained some of the resourcefulness that he'd learnt in the forces. He broke into his piggy bank and ordered the high-tech 4-Wheel drive from Japan at a cost of nearly RM100,000.

Then he gained the blessing of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, and also the support of corporate sponsors.

One major question still faced him: was it going to be one solitary drive around the world for him, or was his wife coming along as co-driver and navigator?

She had already said no to him once, but now, with the Toyota delivered, he had one last desperate idea. He drove the car home and proudly showed her its registration number, "PUTRAJAYA 2002".

With a mischievous grin, Arshad explained that on seeing this his wife thought that he'd chosen a number to commemorate her birthday on 20th of February, so she immediately agreed to follow him on the tour.

Now, halfway around the world, and with his wife now willing, and the sponsorship of the Malaysian International Shipping Corporation (MISC), the Malaysian Automobile Association (AAM), Silverstone tyre and Caltex, they were now ready to travel on the Caltex Overland World Challenge, the official name of their grand tour.

Politics as much as time played a role in determining the course of their journey. They were advised to keep out of certain countries which are politically unstable, and for reasons of safety Arshad chose to avoid a few others.

"Travelling with my wife means that I have to think of our safety always. With her I cannot be reckless and wouldn't do take any route that I would've taken had I travelled alone," Arshad said.

They flew from Malaysia to India to be reunited with the 4WD that had been shipped ahead by MISC; from there they drove to Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Greece, Italy, Spain, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium and France before hitching a ride on the cross-channel train to Britain.

In Vevey (Switzerland) they were reunited with their daughter and much-missed four-year old grandson who had all flown in specially to join them for Hari Raya.

"I do the driving mainly, and my wife does the navigating. I have discovered a lot about her in this journey, and one of them is that she is a first-class navigator," Arshad said.

He also said that the name Malaysia had opened many doors for them, most memorably in Spain where the stiff examining police melted when they explained to him that they were Malaysians on a World Tour.

"Ah Malaysia, you're very welcome!" the policeman said in a change of tone.

Being Muslims also posed occasional problems. In Switzerland a policeman pondered unduly about his name, which carries the Muslim 'bin' (son of).

"I hadn't trimmed my beard during the journey and it was looking very unkempt," Arshad said.

Seeing that the officer was looking at him very anxiously, Arshad said something which melted the ice, "Look, I'm not Bin Laden!"

Both he and the policeman laughed, and it was plain sailing from then on.

After travelling through Canada their next stop is Japan, then China and Korea before travelling home in March after seeing most of the world and breaking through the sixtieth year of his life en route.

And his wife's birthday, of course, on Feb 20 when they expect to be in China.

"It will also be our 37th wedding anniversary in China. I also have another appointment there. I was told that there's a Muslim restaurant in Dailan which makes the best camel's trotter dish in the whole country. We shall be going there," he said.

The couple left for Montreal Wednesday to be reunited with their car.

-- BERNAMA

WAH AU AU