

**I**T'S MIDNIGHT IN MAGWE, 300 miles north of Rangoon. In the fluorescent half-light of a small hotel canteen, surrounded by half-empty wine glasses so new they still have labels on them, the formidably forthright Alastair Caldwell is demolishing the design of a famously radical, six-wheeled racing car of the Seventies with the aid of a box of tissues, a beer bottle and a cruet set. Across the table, Xavier del Marmol, a genial, twinkly eyed cousin of the King of Belgium, is unconvinced. 'But, Alastair, it won a Grand Prix.'

'You're not \*\*\*\*\* listening! Don't be \*\*\*\*\* stupid! Look, the opposite of everything you're told in life is always true...'

Patiently waiting to clear the table, the hotel staff look on, bemused. Having barely two words of English between them, they must wonder at the passionate argument of these rich Europeans, for whom the hotel had to purchase so much new glassware.

Don't worry, it's just a few old blokes talking about cars, as might be expected on an old car rally. Mind you, this isn't just any old car rally. The H&H Classic Rallies Road to Mandalay is the very first competitive event to visit Burma, now known as Myanmar. Some 23 crews in cars dating from 1928 to 1971 are taking part in a three-week, 1,500-mile journey from Rangoon (Yangon) to Mandalay and back, competing in timed average-speed 'regularity' tests between days devoted to sightseeing. It's a relaxed schedule by rally standards, but H&H specialises in such mildly competitive adventures; the opportunity to explore a beautiful land of half-forgotten wonders, isolated for 50 years under a military government, is the main attraction.

The participants include quite a few rally novices; one couple even bought their car (a 1969 Rolls-Royce Corniche) on eBay. Others are veterans of long-distance endurance rallies and take the competition quite seriously, albeit with good humour. The retirement of the early

leaders, German couple Gerd and Birgit Buehler, who broke the engine of their vintage 1938 BMW 327/2 on the sandy tracks around the spectacular Bagan temple zone, has unleashed a close contest between a Portuguese-crewed Volvo 142S, an Australian BMW 2800CS, a British Lagonda M45 and a Caymanian Aston Martin DB6 that irritates Alastair Caldwell. 'Those racy Aston Martin boys have broken a second set of shock absorbers. They cost £2,500 and they're too long, just like the first set.'

Among those who can afford to ship a classic rally car (or a set of Aston Martin shock absorbers) halfway around the world, Caldwell is a familiar face. Fast and uncompromising, he's usually found at the front, as befits a former manager of the McLaren Formula 1 racing team. It was he who oversaw James Hunt's 1976 World Championship (his role rather underplayed by Stephen Mangan in last year's Hollywood movie *Rush*), and to encounter him at 70 is to wonder at the force of nature he must have been at 24, when he turned up at McLaren's Colnbrook factory, fresh from New Zealand, and persuaded them to give him a job as a cleaner.

If you want to discover the source of his energy, ask his rally navigator. Not simply because the stress-tested bond between driver and co-driver is necessarily a close one, but because on the intensely hot and dusty Road to Mandalay, dodging everything from stray dogs and young goatherds to wayward bikes and overloaded trucks and tractors, Alastair has chosen to be accompanied by his 96-year-old mother, Dorothy.

This isn't the first event they've done together. Two years ago, Dorothy navigated Alastair to fifth place on the Trans America Challenge, an 8,500-mile rally from New York to Alaska, as he happily recalls while overseeing a car-washing session in the hotel car park. 'I've got a photo of Mum changing a wheel on the road to Inuvik,' he says proudly, pulling out an iPad. 'I didn't really fancy the >



**WACKY RACERS** Dorothy and Alastair Caldwell with the Roller at Bagan (above). The Road to Mandalay is testing – long, dusty, shared with trucks, bikes and pedestrians; even the winners (top left) broke down within a mile of the finish

