



## A Challenging Drive

*Participants in the Peking Challenge face a long drive from Amsterdam to Beijing via Russia to raise money for charity.*

By John Wendle  
STAFF WRITER

**T**he Vodka Trail, BMWs stuffed with thugs, mud, selfless charity, bridgeless rivers and the trackless steppe.

It sounds like the start of a generic action movie about today's Russia. But these are the obstacles and rewards facing drivers in the Peking Challenge—a drive from Amsterdam to Beijing that will, for the second year in a row, commemorate the epic 1907 Peking to Paris Rally.

But this is no fight to the death. "This is not a race. It's the opposite of the Paris to Dakar Rally," said Koen Bergers, a Belgian participating in this year's challenge. "In that race, all that matters is speed and the place you take. There is no contact with local culture."

In this race, however, "the slogan is 'We all arrive together, or we don't arrive,'" said Bergers, who is making the trip for the first time.

The challenge, beginning July 12, will follow the original route in reverse, this time leaving from Amsterdam. There are a few other differences too—the race has been re-branded a challenge, and the prize, in the form of donations, will go to charity.

After five days of driving, teams from Holland, Belgium and Japan will arrive in Moscow on July 16. The teams will take a rest day in Moscow on July 17, and their machines may be on display in the city. The location will be announced at [www.pekingchallenge.com](http://www.pekingchallenge.com) closer to race day.

The challenge will finish 29 days later in Beijing, just a day before the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Olympics.

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Like the original race, there are few rules, other than meeting at prearranged points on time, spending as little as possible on the machines and interacting with locals as much as possible.

"We saw the home movies from last year. We are prepared for the worst. Some people say 'oh God, you don't know if you'll arrive,' but that's why we want to do it. This is an adventure, so we will see what happens," Bergers said.

To prepare for the race, Bergers said he and his teammate, Chung Keung Siu, have been talking to world-renowned rally racers. They've been preparing physically as well.

"We've been doing some running and some walking," Bergers said. "The only thing we have to do is drive. My co-pilot has also bought a computer with thousands of languages in it," he added.

Of course, this would only be useful if an old man in a village outside of Perm would know the road to take to Beijing.

"After Moscow, you don't have any roads any more, and you have to drive all the way to Beijing," said Pieter van Mullekom, a Dutch participant in last year's inaugural race.

"Everything after Moscow was the hardest part of the trip," he said. "The roads in Russia are glued together with mud and tar."

The eight to 10 days spent on the roads between Cheboksary and Yekaterinburg were especially difficult last year.

The teams christened this part of the trip the Vodka Trail.

"The Vodka Trail is the part where it is very muddy and the people they met in the villages were all drinking vodka and so are all the teams," said Marcia van der Hoest, the head of the press office for Global Challenges, the organization hosting the race.

"We came into some pretty difficult situations where you're on a dirt road and it ends, and all you have are some empty farm fields, and you're driving through bushes for hundreds of kilometers," said van Mullekom.

Somewhere around Omsk, three cars out of the four-car group van Mullekom was traveling with got stuck in a lake of mud. Without a winch on the front of his car, van Mullekom had to go back to the nearest village—about a 100 kilometers away—to borrow a tractor to pull the others out.

But it was events like these that brought the teams into close contact with the people of Russia.

"The challengers would come into a village where they invite you for food and vodka. It doesn't matter if the people don't have much, you are always welcome. That was very beautiful," van Mullekom said.

But racers also saw the massive problems facing people in rural Russia.

"You see a house with a fallen roof, but you still see a grandmother sitting behind the window. How does she live there?" said van Mullekom, the owner of a company and specialist in nuclear optics whose expertise came in useful after the Chernobyl accident.

"Everything that used to be Russia is falling apart. Everyone is moving to the cities. The farmers are not taking care of their land. For a Western European, that was difficult to see."

At one point, van Mullekom said, "we offered a grandfather money for



Last year's challengers took a short break to admire the landscape before continuing their offroading on the way to China.

the meal his family prepared for us, and he said the only thing he wanted was a picture of himself with his granddaughter."

But not everyone was friendly. Van Mullekom and his wife were almost carjacked at one point by a BMW full of men with shaved heads.

"My wife thought I was crazy at first, but we ended up having a terrific time."

The 2007 challenge included 15 teams and raised around 80,000 euros

for charities such as Plan International, the Dutch Cancer Society, the Challenge For Charity Foundation, Dance for Life and Right to Play, said van der Hoest.

"This is just the beginning. We will raise more," she said.

Besides the Peking Challenge, Global Challenges also hosts the Amsterdam to Dakar Challenge, which has raised over 2 million euros through four races.

In the future, the company is plan-

ning to host a Siberia Challenge and a Red Sea Challenge to raise money for these charities.

When asked what problems he expected to face, Bergers, the first time racer, echoed van Mullekom's observations from last year.

"Russia is a very, very big country, so I would say we'll go through villages where not a lot of foreigners come and they will be very surprised," Bergers said.

"But I'm an optimist."



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