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Love on the open road

When Peter Schindler met his future wife, there was one compatibility test he knew would determine their future

I've always loved driving – put me behind a wheel, any wheel, and I will instantly feel free and in the mood for adventure. And my passion for driving has had an interesting side effect: I always knew exactly what kind of woman I wanted to marry, namely one who, at 175mph, would scream, 'Faster!' I know I'm not the only man like this – so, over the years, and after various relationships failed to go the distance, I started thinking: could it be that driving together for hours on end, day after day, is a sure-fire compatibility test?

My wife, Angela, and I had been colleagues for two years before we got together as a couple. I was in Europe on a business trip, she was in Italy at the end of a holiday, and we decided to meet up for a road trip. As it turned out, there was indeed no better test than my wife-to-be and I driving thousands of miles together before tying the knot. I may have had a very clear idea of who my ideal partner was, but so did she – and it wasn't a petrol head with grease under his fingernails. Unfortunately, men who had a passion for driving came dangerously close to this no-go zone, but by driving together she could learn whether I was the sensitive-and-considerate type she was hoping to marry. (I wasn't at first, but got better, I think.) And I was soon able to determine whether she was the back-seat-driver-controlling type that I was hoping to avoid. (She's not.) When Angela tilted back her head and closed her eyes on a full-moon night to allow me to kiss her for the first time, she had absolutely no idea that she was in for one hell of a ride.

Get the motor running

We met up in Milan on a September day when the chemistry, at last, was right. Standing in front of the picturesque cathedral, holding hands, with white doves circling around us (thinking back, they must have been drab sparrows, but who cares when you're in love?), it was a touching beginning to a beautiful courtship. In the afternoon we planned to drive from Milan to Salzburg and stay there for a few days. Could it get more romantic?

'Darling, can you please park straight,' she suggested. 'What do you mean? I am parked straight!' I replied. 'No, I don't think so. Just go and have a look,' she tried to

convince me. I looked. 'I am parked straight,' I insisted.

It was our first argument, and it continued for a while until we discovered that we were both right. She had based her claim about my crooked parking on the orientation of the car parked next to us. I, on the other hand, was referring to my car's alignment with the markings on the ground. Same situation; different points of view. We were both right!

Fast forward one year, to our engagement. It was both the best and the worst of days. The evening before we had arrived in Austria from Hong Kong, where we both live. Being jet-lagged, she was wide awake

by 6am, which made it easy to drag her out of bed to go for an early morning drive. What she didn't know was that I planned to take her to Birnau, a beautifully restored baroque church overlooking the northern, German shores of Lake Constance. In the lovely May sun and among the vines of the convent's vineyard, I took the plunge and proposed.

After lunch, we took off on our engagement driving holiday. Our destination was Lake Annecy, in France, just south of Geneva. We drove along the foothills of the Alps, marvelling at the beauty of Switzerland's picturesque landscape. The highway drive was bliss for my fiancée. I enjoyed it as well, but was secretly thirsting for the last 75 miles of enticingly winding roads in the approach to Annecy. My wife-to-be became increasingly silent until about seven miles before Annecy, when she suddenly cried in alarm, 'Aiya! Pull over!' As soon as I came to a stop, she opened the door and threw up. We had obviously reached a new low-point in our relationship.

We also clearly had a lot more to learn about each other. I, for one, needed to become a lot more considerate: for example, I now tell her about any speedy manoeuvres well in advance so that she can prepare for the roller coaster or say, 'Not now, please.' And she needed to find ways to prevent her motion sickness: she now either pops pills or focuses on the road and leans into turns the way I do.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Evora, Portugal, after a port-buying pit stop; on a high in Phuket, Thailand; en route to Spain in 2005



Slowly, we ironed out the kinks and learnt more about each other.

Pit stop in Paris

Ever since, driving has been such an integral part of our lives that it often helps us turn an adverse situation into something beautiful. Just the other day was a great example. We had been spending two beautiful weeks driving through Spain: gorgeous roads, blue skies, dark-green olive trees, white houses, red roofs.


On our second-to-last day, we were negotiating the way to our hotel in Barcelona. As we pulled up to the boutique hotel and breathed a sigh of relief at having made it, my wife's handbag was snatched from the car while we were still in it. The good news was that it was the only thing the thieves got away with. The bad news was that her handbag

contained everything that made up her identity: credit cards, passport, driving licence, mobile phone, plane tickets. And her favourite lipstick. We spent the next 24 hours either at the police station or on the phone to embassies, banks and phone companies. By 6pm the following day, it had become clear that the quickest and most reliable way for my wife to get an emergency passport was to drive to Paris, just over 1,000km north of Barcelona. If we arrived at the Australian embassy in Paris before noon the following day, we were told she should be able to get an emergency passport just in time for her to catch her flight back home to Hong Kong. Within the hour, we had packed, checked out, loaded our car and set out on the road again. After

passing over the Pyrenees, the rain stopped and the roads dried and cleared up. By 11pm, a few sparkling stars were visible behind a fine cloth of clouds.

By 6am we were on our way to Paris, arriving at the embassy by 11am. After a brief interview, my wife picked up her passport by 3pm that same day. We began to relax and take advantage of a sunny autumn day in Paris – an hour later we were lunching in a sushi bar at La Defense. Before returning to the embassy, we detoured into a music store to buy *Buddha Bar VII* as driving music for our journey to Zürich that day.

Clutching her regained identity, my loved one beamed – she was ready to depart from Paris. It was 5pm. We drove eastward as the sun fell behind us and lit up the sky. Day became night. In Strasbourg, we bought our dinner and headed deeper into the night. We crossed the border into Germany and cranked up the volume to wrap ourselves in music and motion. The noise of the engine and the tyres faded away and we picked up speed, leaving behind the memories of being robbed

in Barcelona. All that remained were the throbbing rhythms of *Buddha Bar*, the bright white street markings on the pitch-black Tarmac rushing toward us, and our love thriving in the night.  To order a signed copy of *On The Road* by Peter Schindler (On The Road Editions, £16.99), p&P free, visit ontheroadeditions.com

'She opened the door and threw up. We had reached a low point in our relationship'