...no not that one – his equally irrepressible father, Stanley, who at 82 retraced Marco Polo's journey from Venice to Beijing, riding a yak and reciting Kubla Khan en route

Mr Johnson goes to China and gets into trouble – AGAIN!

Books



Yak of all trades: Stanley Johnson takes part in a game of Buzkashi

BY YSENDA MAXTONE GRAHAM

BOOK OF THE WEEK

In the Footsteps of Marco Polo by Stanley Johnson (Telensky International Editions £29.99, 224pp)

STANLEY JOHNSON'S initial effort to retrace Marco Polo's journey along the Silk Road from Venice to Beijing hit the buffers when a bulldozer driver threw his car, a 1932 Sunbeam Talbot, into a large hole beside Marble Arch.

The year was 1961. Stanley, a 21-year-old undergraduate at Oxford, whose Tiggerish attitude to life was already in evidence long before he'd passed it on to

any offspring, had set his heart on making this arduous journey overland, by motorbike, with two friends.

Before setting off, he visited an expert on China in Oxford called Professor Needham, who questioned the enterprise (‘Are you sure you will find petrol for your motorcycles in the Gobi Desert, Mr Johnson?’), but gave him a letter of introduction to the Chinese Ambassador — the only person who could give the young men visas for China.

Driving back to London, Stanley’s Sunbeam Talbot gave up the ghost beside a construction site at Marble Arch, blocking the road. Knowing the extortionate cost of repairing it, he asked a bulldozer driver whether he would kindly throw the car into the excavation hole. Which the man did, at a cost of £5, burying it under a heap of rubble.

Only then did Stanley remember he’d left Professor Needham’s letter in the glove compartment. ‘We would just have to wing it when we reached the Chinese border,’ Johnson merrily writes, at the beginning of this fizzingly entertaining account of his two attempts to retrace Marco Polo’s late 13th-century journey — first in 1961, when they were, indeed, turned back at the Chinese border, and then again 62 years later, by which time Stanley was 82 and no less enthusiastic.

This time, his capable, Mandarin-speaking youngest son Max came with him, plus a film crew, and they travelled in an air-conditioned Land Cruiser, sometimes hopping on to a train around the edge of a desert, unlike Marco Polo who had to trudge from oasis to oasis.

Highlights of the thwarted 1961 journey included being wined and dined by the Mayor of Venice, and being served mutton stew by nomads in Afghanistan, who dished it up into their guests’ motorbike helmets (due to a shortage of bowls).

Lowlights included the front fork of one motorbike snapping off, and Stanley’s friend, Tim, breaking his foot when his motorbike skidded.

So, after being turned back at the Chinese border, the three limped home through India crammed onto a single motorbike — a sight immortalised in black and white on the cover of this book. Stanley is helmetless, as he’d given his stew-helmet to the nomads to keep.

For decades afterwards, he longed to complete the journey to Beijing. He made one attempt in 2021, but was holed up in isolation on the 20th floor of a hotel in Chengdu, due to Covid rules, and didn't dare even walk along the corridor, let alone proceed towards his goal.

But at last, on Coronation Day 2023, thanks to generous sponsorship, he and his team set off 'on the journey of a lifetime'.

As soon as they cross the border into China, Stanley does his first of many 'pieces to camera'. Sometimes, he admits, the cameraman signals to him to 'wrap it up', for example in Shangdu (Xanadu), when he starts reeling off Coleridge's Kubla Khan, a poem he knows by heart from prep-school days.

We cross China in the irrepressible company of Boris Johnson's father. He seems happy about this being his claim to fame. Before a balloon journey, the producer Dandan says: 'We wouldn't want to see a headline in the Press: "Former father of UK Prime Minister lost in balloon over Chinese mountains!" '

'Some people might be quite pleased,' Stanley replies. 'Anyway, I'm not the former father of the Prime Minister. I am the former Prime Minister's father.' He knows he looks faintly ridiculous in 'full Lawrence of Arabia mode' on a Bactrian camel, or wearing a chef's hat at a noodle factory. This self-teasing instinct is one of the things that makes his book so endearing.

Against the majestic backdrop of deserts, mountains, caves, Buddha statues and the magnificence of the Great Wall, the daily minor challenge of chopstick-wielding is a running theme. 'Hitting the moving target' on a constantly-moving 'lazy susan table' is never easy for Stanley; trying to fish noodles out of a bowl of soup particularly tricky.

In the beef-noodle capital of the world, Lanzhou, which has 2,000 beef-noodle restaurants, Stanley celebrates a moment of victory: 'There was a sudden "whoosh" as the whole coagulated ball of noodles emerged like a nuclear submarine from the surface of the soup . . . random strands of pasta flew into the air, but the bulk of the noodles was still attached to the chopsticks. "Gotcha!" I exclaimed.'

When he and Max have a go at more esoteric pursuits, things go wrong. Stanley tries to make a clay pot on a wheel in Kashgar, putting his thumbs into the

middle of the ball and using his palms to mould the shape, all the while controlling the machine with his feet. ‘I produced something which resembled a blancmange with a hole in the middle. “I’ve cracked it!” I cried. “Cracked” was the mot juste…’

They watch a Buzkashi match — a kind of polo played on yaks, with the carcass of a headless sheep as the ball. Stanley begs to have a go on a yak, gets a leg-up onto one and has a splendid time, shouting and cracking his whip. Then, ‘just as I was thinking of jumping off my steed in the manner of Frankie Dettori, my yak suddenly stopped. He (or she) had decided she had had enough. I slithered to the ground.’

‘Pure gold!’ says cameraman Pete. (We can look forward to a forthcoming documentary of the journey.)

Later, when Max asks for a demonstration from a wrestler in Inner Mongolia, Stanley describes his son ‘emerging from the doorway of his yurt like Achilles emerging from his tent outside the walls of Troy’. The wrestler doesn’t get the memo that this is meant to be a demonstration, not an out-and-out fight. He throws Max to the ground three times, breaking two of his fingers.

The journey is expertly planned by the producer Dandan. Whenever they arrive at the next city or famous site, a local historian is there to meet them and give them a private tour and history lesson. The eco-minded Stanley is particularly impressed if any enterprise is good for the planet — such as the molten-salt solar power plant in Gansu: ‘Clean, green, low carbon . . . Bob’s your uncle!’ He’s also taken with a vast vineyard estate in Ningxia, and feels certain we’ll all soon be drinking Chinese wine.

The arrival in the Forbidden City in Beijing, 62 years after the original scheduled date, lives up to expectations. Triumphantly, Stanley reads aloud from The Travels Of Marco Polo, the book he’s kept with him since undergraduate days.