

Frank Manning, the 'Van Man', heads to Mongolia in a Ford Fiesta for Susie Long Hospice Fund

Ballyfoyle man Frank Manning, the 'Van Man', is undertaking one of the most novel fundraisers yet for the Susie Long Hospice Fund. Frank and his friend, Mayo man Martin Sweeney, are driving their 9-year old Ford Fiesta from Kilkenny to Mongolia as part of the Mongol Rally 2009. As part of their fundraising efforts, they are organising an Independence Day Mongol Rally Party at Willie Byrne's Pub, John Street, Kilkenny on Saturday 4th July, with a table quiz at 8pm, followed by music from The Bar Flies outside in the marquee. Donations can be made on the night or directly to the Susie Long Hospice Fund bank account at AIB, High Street, Kilkenny, Account number 34627051. Further details from www.susielonghospice.com

Frank and Martin came up with the idea while overseas on a previous trip. "I was just looking for a new challenge", says Frank, "and I also wanted to do something to help the Susie Long Hospice Fund, so we hit on the Mongol Rally". The Mongol Rally is an annual event, organised by the League of Adventurists International Ltd. Each team pays an entry fee to take part, which covers the costs of running the event. The participants can then fundraise for a charity of their choice in the knowledge that every penny they raise will go directly to their nominated charity. "We pay the entry fee ourselves and there are some other costs, such as visas, fuel, camping equipment and food, which we'll take care of", explains Frank. "Every cent that we raise in the name of the Susie Long Hospice Fund will go directly to the Fund. People can donate to our campaign at the Mongol Rally Party at Willie Byrnes on 4th July or, if they can't come along on the night, they can donate directly to the Susie Long Hospice Fund bank account at AIB, High Street, Kilkenny: Account number 34627051. They should state clearly on the lodgement that the donation is for the Mongol Rally, so that we can track what's being raised by our event".

Travelling overland to a European country would be a big enough challenge for most people, but getting to Mongolia is a huge undertaking. Is Frank prepared for this? "Yes, we have done a lot of research and we know the route we're going to take, which will be from the UK through Europe as far as Prague, where there's a big get together of all the teams. Then we head on to Eastern Europe to Turkey, on to Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Russia and down into Mongolia. Our ultimate goal is the capital of Mongolia, Ulan Bator".

Frank estimates that the whole trip, in his nine-year old Ford Fiesta, will take about six weeks. "We should make it in that time. Although the closer we get to Ulan Bator, the worse the roads get. There's only 80km of tarmac in all of Mongolia, so there are very few real roads. We'll be crossing deserts and meeting all kinds of terrain. Luckily, we don't have to drive back! The cars involved in the rally are all sold in Ulan Bator and the money raised goes to charity. In some cases, the cars are modified and turned into police cars or emergency vehicles..."

Accommodation along the way will be quite primitive: "We're bringing a tent each, so we'll be camping every night, although previous participants have told us that many locals along the way have been very hospitable and kind and have actually brought teams into their homes for the night". And what about any language barriers? "Well, we think we'll be drawing lots of pictures and becoming very expressive with our body language in order to make ourselves understood!", explains Frank. As for the return trip, "We're planning to head to Beijing for a look and flying home from there".

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