

# THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE

Sport gets inside the Dakar Rally  
– the toughest race on earth



**W**e were somewhere around Cordoba on the edge of the hills when the crowds began to convene. The rain had been falling in a thick curtain all day but still they came, strung out for miles along the highway, grouped under awnings and bridges to catch a glimpse of the famous Dakar Rally – the world’s longest and toughest motor race, which comes to a close this weekend.

The competitors are hard to miss: hundreds of motorbikes, quad bikes, cars and trucks form the diverse caravan making the 6,000-mile slog across South America. The race runs over highways and dirt roads, up mountains and down sand dunes. It starts in Buenos Aires, Argentina, runs north and west into Bolivia and loops the salt flats before crossing back over the border to finish in Rosario on Saturday.

The route aside, one thing that unites all of the competitors are the logos and text plastered over almost every inch of their vehicles.

A well-trained eye can glean a lot of information from these markings. The manufacturer-supported drivers have less blank space on their cars, with no expense spared in getting them ready to deal with the challenges of the race. These front-runners have spent time in altitude chambers to prepare for the thin air of the Altiplano, and in heat chambers for the

baking sun (exacerbated by the fireproof overalls they wear in case of disaster).

At the other end of the field, with much more empty space on their vehicles, are the privateers – the self-funded adventure-seekers who have often ploughed tens of thousands of pounds of their own money into entering the race, most with the simple goal of just making it to the end.

One bit of information on each vehicle particularly caught our eye, because it reveals something about the unique nature of the event. Neatly stencilled above the entry number, and alongside the names of the driver and co-driver, there are a handful of letters: blood type.

## FEAR AND LOATHING

Harry Hunt leans back in his chair, and folds his arms in a cross over his chest. “I didn’t even hit the brakes,” he says. “I just let go of the steering wheel.”

The 27-year-old Brit is competing in his first Dakar with the Mini ALL4 Racing team, and we spoke to him a few weeks before he departed for Argentina.

While preparing for the Dakar with a shorter race, Hunt and co-driver Andy Schulz veered slightly off course and ended up on a slightly different road, with hazards they hadn’t been warned about.

“It was a straight drop where an old riverbed cut through,” he continues. “If you

hit that at 100mph, you’re in all sorts of trouble. We did one front flip over 70 metres, then a 360 and landed. Just: bang.”

Like Hunt’s preparatory rally, the format of the Dakar is called ‘rally raid’ – the same kind of race that Hunter S. Thompson was (supposed to be) reporting on in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Competitive racing is done on timed special stages, but drivers also have to make their way between those stages – mingling with normal traffic.

There’s no prescribed route in rally raid – the racers are given waypoints, which they have to reach, but no set course for getting between them. There is, however, a thick road book detailing the recommended path and any potential hazards, so the co-driver can relay them to the driver. ☺

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The Dakar is dangerous. It always has been, ever since it was first staged in 1977. It is the brainchild of French motorcyclist Thierry Sabine, who while lost in the Sahara desert came up with the idea of a race from Paris to Dakar, the capital of Senegal. In 2009, the event switched continent amid security concerns in north Africa, with al-Qaeda threatening to use the competitors as target practice.

Walk around the bivouac - the vast travelling circus of tents in which Dakar's hundreds of competitors and support staff spend the nights working on their vehicles - and you can tell the race is not quite as chaotic as it was in its early days. Old hands fondly recall a time when competitors and support staff would eat and sleep on the floor of the same shared tent.

Today, the elite drivers are as likely to be staying in a hotel as a tent - although some of the bigger teams have pop-up beds on the roof of their motorhomes for when they're far away from civilisation. For the mechanics, though, there's a sea of one-man tents - pitched up around the giant support tracks that carry the spare parts and supplies the vehicles need to make it through the race.

"For the cars, the challenge is the distance, the temperature and the altitude," says Tobias Mederer, an engineer at X-Raid, one of the companies that provides support to the drivers. "For the teams and mechanics, it's the driving distance, the high temperature during the days, and the sleepless cold nights at high altitude."

When the drivers arrive in the bivouac each night, their teams get to work - stripping the cars down to their bare bones, cleaning out dirt and dust, and rebuilding them with set-up tweaks for the next day. In the bivouac on day one, we step around the mechanics while Hunt shows us round his car with childlike excitement - the spare

tyres and parts mounted on the back, the dials and switches, the tanks and pipes that will feed chilled water and electrolytes into his helmet to keep him hydrated during the race. Some of his opponents, including 11-time Dakar winner Stephane Peterhansel, and nine-time WRC champion Sebastian Loeb (competing in his first Dakar), are even able to adjust their tyre pressures from inside the vehicle - handy for the later stages, when the race switches from dusty tracks to towering sand dunes.

"It's the reliability of the cars that really struggles," explains Hunt, who had his first taste of motorsport racing motocross bikes along the beach in Weston-super-Mare. "It's such vast distances. And the speed they're travelling, the cars just get shaken to bits. The heat is massive, and the terrain: driving over sand just erodes everything."

### MODERN ADVENTURERS

For an agonising moment, it looked like Julian Merino wasn't going to get up in time. The riders in the Dakar are released at short intervals, but his motorcycle - top-heavy with the navigation and tracking equipment - was still lying on its side in the mud as his competitors approached.

Day three of the Dakar was the first day of actual racing - the first stage had been cancelled because torrential rain prevented medical helicopters from taking off - and the normally dusty roads were treacherous.

Early into the special stage, Merino had come sliding through a ravine, but he lost control of his bike. As he tried to extricate himself from the verge, still dazed, he fell again. Eventually, with the help of spectators, stewards and uniformed police, he was lifted back on to the bike and made his way onwards, looking dazed and with hundreds of miles still left to ride that day.

He was lucky. It takes only the slightest lapse in concentration to wreck the race.



A fortnight ago, 110 cars, 55 trucks, 143 motorbikes and 46 quad bikes gathered in Buenos Aires to be waved off, one by one, by the crowd. Only around half of those 354 vehicles will finish.

Some didn't even make it to the end of the first day. Chinese driver Guo Meiling, the first Asian woman to take part in the Dakar, lost control of her car in the 11km prologue, injuring a dozen spectators. Days later, on stage three, Polish motorcyclist Michal Hernik was found by the medical helicopter, dead, 300m off course. He was the fifth competitor to die since the Dakar moved to South America; the 70th fatality overall, including spectators and followers.

So why do they do it? The Dakar means two sleep-deprived weeks of long, bumpy, mentally-sapping days on the road, changing tyres under the baking sun, struggling to breathe at high altitude.

"You're completely alone," says Hunt. "You get a real sense [of that] when you come over some of the sand dunes and you look out and there's just no one for hundreds of miles. It's an adventure." ●

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