

The spirit of Dakar

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Now known as The Dakar, the first Paris To Dakar Rally was held in 1978. The world-famous endurance rally, recognised as the most gruelling off-road motorsport event in the world, has a fascinating history and its inception has been described as “something of a happy accident”.

Despite the ordeal of getting lost in the Ténéré desert while competing in the Cote-Cote Abidjan-Nice rally in 1975, Thierry Sabine decided that the desert would be the perfect location for a regular rally. The concept wasn't exactly foreign as the London-Sahara-Munich World Cup Rally (an automobile race) had taken place in 1974 in the Sahara Desert. Sabine's dream came to fruition and the flag was raised at the first Paris-Dakar Rally on 26 December 1978. The 10 000km adventure saw 182 vehicles depart from Place du Trocadéro and head into the unknown. Destination: Dakar, Senegal's capital.

Only 74 made it to the finish in the first year and Cyril Neveu made history on his Yamaha motorcycle as the first event winner in a race that pitted ordinary men and vehicles against the desert elements, and which immediately captured the imagination of the public.

The long-distance event – it's almost as long as an entire World Rally Championship season - continues to attract a few hundred professional and amateur drivers to this day, with amateurs making up about 80% of the participants. The five categories – motorbikes, quads, cars, lightweight vehicles and trucks – allows a wide range of drivers to test their wits. Even the massive support trucks need to be able to cover the terrain and they actually race against other support vehicles in their own truck class.

In the early years most events were staged from Paris to Dakar. In 1992 the special edition north to south route started in Paris, crossed 10 countries on the African continent, and ended in the Cape - a total route of 12 427 km. In 1997 it ran exclusively in Africa, taking the adventurers from Dakar to Agadez, Niger and back to Dakar. The race was cancelled on the eve of its start in 2008 due to security threats in Mauritania – a good call as three weeks later there was a terror attack in the heart of Nouakchott. Following this, the rally was moved to South America where it was held from 2009 to 2019 and then in Saudi Arabia since 2020.

No matter where it's held (and even if it's in the same country, the route changes each year), the drivers will always face over 500km of challenges across sand dunes, mud, grass and rocks each day for 15 days. It's not for the faint-hearted and 76 people have lost their lives since the competition began. Among the 31 competitor fatalities, 23 were motorcycle related, six car related, one truck related, and 2 competitors died as a result of local rebel conflict. The bulk, fortunately, survive to share their trials and tribulations.

In 1983, competitors were caught in a huge sandstorm in the Ténéré desert, with 40 drivers losing their bearings, some taking up to four days to get back on course, while in 2016 the route through Argentina and Bolivia meant that the drivers had to scale the Andes Mountains. At its highest point, the route was close to the same altitude as an Everest base camp. Due to lower oxygen levels at this height, not only do the drivers struggle for oxygen, but the vehicles too, with engines losing up to 20% power in low air density.

Add to that ‘small’ issues like loo stops... With some stages requiring 12 hours of driving, many drivers don't want to waste time going for a leak, so they have sacks in their race suits to be able to urinate while they drive.

While the entry requirements are gender neutral, there are obviously fewer women competing in the event, but compete they do. Jutta Kleinschmidt first competed in 1985 on a bike, became the first female stage winner in 1998 in a Schlesser

buggy (a specially designed off-road competition car) and the first woman to win the overall event in 2001 in a Mitsubishi. Seventeen women competed in the 2019 Dakar and in 2020, Taye Perry and Kirsten Landman were the first African women on a motorcycle to compete and complete the race.

Despite the race's rough and masculine image, the colour pink is closely linked to the event – and that has nothing to do with the fairer sex. According to redbull.com, “The finish in Dakar used to be at the Lac Rose, 30km north of Dakar, which is so called because the lake is bright pink. This is caused by a unique type of algae, *dunaliella salina*. The lake is so striking that it can be seen from space, and the mere sight of it – after two weeks of unrelenting mental and physical punishment – has in the past caused even fully-grown bikers to spontaneously burst into tears.”

The 2022 Dakar Rally, which starts in Ha'il in north-western Saudi Arabia, on January 2 and finishes in Jeddah, the port city on the Red Sea, on January 14, marks the 44th edition of the cross-country endurance event. The organisers say that 80% of the route will be different from the previous two events in this country and will test drivers over 4 800 kilometres in the Middle East. Hino Motors, which has been competing since 1991, announced that it will be racing against the typical monster trucks with a diesel-electric hybrid truck in the 2022 event. No mean feat...

Sources: Dakar.com; redbull.com