

# Enduring challenge

As the famous Dakar Rally rolls into Saudi Arabia and the Middle East for the first time in history, competitors prepare themselves for 9,000 kilometres of mountains, deserts and “infinite possibilities”

The Dakar adventure began in 1977, when Frenchman Thierry Sabine got lost on his motorbike in Libya's Tenere Desert during the Abidjan-Nice Rally. When rescuers found him, he was not in a good way. But it did not quell his love for the landscape, and he promised to share his fascination with as many people as possible. The Paris-Dakar Rally was born.

Sabine plotted a route that started in Paris and travelled through Europe to Algeria, crossing Agadez in the Central African nation of Niger and ended in Dakar, the capital of Senegal on the West coast of the continent.

The first ever start line took shape on 26 December 1978, with 182 vehicles turning up in

the Place du Trocadéro, in the 16th arrondissement of Paris, for a 10,000-kilometre journey. Among the 74 trail-blazers who made it to the Senegalese capital, Cyril Neveu, at the handlebars of a Yamaha 500 XT, went down in history as the winner of the inaugural race.

Saudi Arabia will become the 30th country to host the Dakar Rally, when the 2020 festival opens in the Middle East for the first time on 1 January. Over the following 17 days, the 42nd edition will start in Jeddah (5 January), paying respect to the country's deep historical roots. Today, Jeddah is a modern commercial hub and gateway for pilgrimages to the Islamic holy cities Mecca and Medina, but the

city's Al-Balad historic district dates to the 7th century and still boasts traditional homes made from coral.

The race will rest in Riyadh, the capital, and it will finish in Al Qiddiya where an entertainment, sports and cultural destination is being built in the framework of the Saudi 'Vision 2030', which aims to diversify the income resources of the country. The Dakar will be the first world-class sporting event held in Al Qiddiya, a city whose foundation stone was laid in 2018. The vast complex, located about 40 kilometres from Riyadh, will include attractions such as a theme and amusement park, world-class sports facilities and multidisciplinary art centres. It is set to open to the public in 2022.

Saudi Arabia stretches over more than two million square kilometres – approximately four times the surface area of France. The largest country in the Middle East, whose population is concentrated in the towns and cities close to the sea, boasts a mosaic of landscapes that will put Dakar competitors through their paces on all fronts: driving and riding, navigation and endurance.

A wide range of landscapes will colour the rally, including canyons, dunes, mountains, wadis and more. Close to the border with Jordan, mountain climbers can crown the famous

**Below: The Dakar Rally is no stranger to sand – but never before in the Middle East deserts**

Jabal el Lawz – the Mountain of Almonds – peaking at more than 2,500 metres above sea level. For Dakar competitors, however, this vast mountain region that extends all the way to Ha'il Region will be more of a maze, zigzagging through the valleys.

In the far south, almost a quarter of the country remains uninhabited but for a handful of villages and oases. Even expert dune surfers will be put to the sword, with dunes more than 250 metres high, while lesser drivers and riders are in for a tough ride.

Entry for motorbikes and quads starts from €14,800, with cars from €25,100 and trucks from €37,400. Though the race does offer some prize money (US\$50,000 for the motorbike), the bigger incentive for the hundreds of competitors is a chance for a lucrative

sponsorship deal with companies. With day stages sometimes topping 900 kilometres, the overall distance is 9,000 kilometres in 10 stages. Dakar director David Castera described the relocation to Saudi Arabia in a five-year deal as “a voyage into the unknown”.

“By going to Saudi Arabia, it is of course that aspect that fascinates me,” Castera said.

“I'm convinced that such a feeling will be shared by all the riders, drivers and co-pilots.

“As the director of the event, it's a massive challenge to be faced with a blank page with limitless possibilities.”

Founder Thierry Sabine coined a motto for his inspiration: ‘A challenge for those who go. A dream for those who stay behind.’ Courtesy of his great conviction and that modicum of madness peculiar to all great

ideas, his plan quickly became a reality in the 70s and today the unique event, sparked by the spirit of adventure, is still open to all riders. It carries a message of friendship between mankind and it has never failed to challenge, surprise and excite. It has generated innumerable sporting and human stories over the last four decades.

The route has been constantly tinkered with, and in 1992 it crossed the whole African continent from north to southernmost tip. The Paris-Cape Rally comprised 22 stages and passed through 10 countries on a route stretching 12,427 km.

In 1995, it started in Granada; in 2000, it finished at the foot of the Gizeh Pyramids, where the pharaohs of Ancient Egypt lie. Lisbon hosted the 2007 departure, with all-terrain action

hero Stéphane Peterhansel taking his total number of Dakar victories to nine (six on a motorbike).

Finn Ari Vatanen holds the record of four titles on four wheels, after winning the 1991 edition and Jutta Kleinschmidt became the first woman to win the overall event in 2001.

It's remarkable to think that barely 18 months since women were granted the right to drive in Saudi Arabia, some of the world's best female drivers will be fighting it out for the title.

The race has often clashed with politics, with various protests creating hurdles along the way. In 1988, the leader's Peugeot 405 Turbo 16 was stolen in Mali and in 1983, the interminable Tenere Desert sandstorm claimed 40 abandonments due to the loss of bearings. Some of those that ➤





kept going had to spend four days getting on the course.

In 1982, Mark Thatcher, son of the then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, along with his French co-driver Anne-Charlotte Verney and their mechanic, disappeared for six days. The trio became separated from a convoy of vehicles after they stopped to make repairs to a faulty steering arm. They were declared missing on 12 January; after a large-scale search, a Lockheed L100 search plane from the Algerian military spotted their white Peugeot 504 some 50 kilometres off course. Thatcher, Verney, and the mechanic were all unharmed. They were lucky. More than 70 people, including 28 competitors have paid for their passion for the desert with their lives.

Tragically, Sabine became one of them when, at the age of 37, his helicopter crashed into a dune during a sudden sandstorm in Mali during the 1986 race. His ashes were spread at the Lost Tree in Niger, now known as the Arbre Thierry Sabine. The race went ahead that year, and it has done every year since 1977, with the exception of 2008. After the murder of four French citizens and three Mauritanian soldiers in the days leading up to the 30th edition, a strong recommendation



was received from the French Ministry for Foreign affairs not to go to Mauritania, and the rally was cancelled. Terrorist acts identified by the French authorities threatened the rally directly. Three weeks later, a terror attack in the heart of Nouakchott vindicated the

precaution. South America hosted the event for 11 years from 2009, with Lima, Buenos Aires, Valparaiso and La Paz all marking start and finish points and the race crossing the Salar de Uyuni (Bolivia's Salt Flats) in 2015.

dakar.com ■



Top: South America's beautiful desert Above: Off-road skills are tested Above left: Peril is always around the corner Left: Bikes in South America Below: Saudi Arabian Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al Faisal Al Saud with Dakar Rally CEO Jan Lamonier

