

# PARIS TO DAKAR

Sand, Bandits, Ruts and Rocks Test Men and Machines

by Nick Kurczewski



Former World Rally champion, Colin McRae, fights to maintain grip through the treacherous soft sands that are synonymous with the Paris-Dakar. McRae would eventually finish 20th, in his fast - but fragile - Nissan.

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Auto racing is a dangerous sport where the slightest mistake or lapse in concentration can have a driver careening into a concrete wall or tire-barrier. The Paris-Dakar Rally Raid is different—there are no walls or barriers to cushion the blow should a mistake be made. In fact, the accident itself might be the least of a driver's worries should he or she find themselves in a tight spot on the Dakar. Desert creatures hungry for dinner, bands of ruffians out for a quick buck (and a rally car or two) along with the occasional decades-old land mine are all very real fears for Dakar participants. Despite huge efforts made each year to ensure the safety and physical well-being of the drivers, it is the element of danger which has preserved the mystique and allure of the rally for 26 years.

Since its inception in 1979, the Paris-Dakar rally has proven to be an irresistible challenge to the crème de la crème of desert racing who seek to pit themselves against some of the most grueling terrain on the face of the earth. Each year on January 1st, competitors from around the

*Locals were eager to greet drivers as the rally wound its way through tiny North African villages, where strict speed limits gave the rallyists a welcome respite from the heat of competition and the desert itself.*

world arrive at the race's start in a dizzying array of vehicles that range from dirt bikes and desert buggies to factory-backed sport-utility vehicles and monstrous highly-modified tractor trailers. The vehicles are divided into three main groups: motorcycles, cars, and large trucks. The car class is the fastest in the field and featured strong manufacturer support this year from BMW, Nissan, Volkswagen and Mitsubishi. The rally itself was broken down into 18 stages, with public road sections linking the timed stages. These 'special stages' were the ones that counted towards victory and varied in length from as little as 27 kilometers to as many as 700km. per day.

The 2004 Paris-Dakar provided the latest chapter in the classic duel of man versus machine as the race wound its way from Clermont-Ferrand, France, south through Spain, across the Strait of Gibraltar via ferryboat and into Africa. The rally then snaked through Morocco, Mauritania, Burkina-Faso, Mali and Senegal — passing through exotically-named towns like Tan-Tan, Bobo-Dioulasso and Bamako. Oftentimes, it was the elements and unforgiving desert landscape — which included towering dunes, deceptively shallow-looking creeks or suspension-mangling rocks and ruts — that got the best of





Stephane Peterhansel celebrates his first Dakar victory on four-wheels alongside his navigator, Jean-Paul Cottret. After coming so close last year, Peterhansel's excellent driving ensured nothing came between him and victory in 2004.

even the most experienced racers.

Yet, for a rally that prides itself on breathtaking Saharan backdrops, it was ironic that this year's Dakar began under gray skies and a blanket of snow. The 400 participants got off to a slippery start from the outset in Clermont-Ferrand during the very first of over 11,000 kilometers of racing. The short European legs of the Paris-Dakar are often regarded as little more than a warm-up to the latter marathon stages in Africa. Nonetheless, there were genuine surprises in the early going, as well as bitter disappointment for some teams. A definite surprise — and a possible harbinger of things to come in the motorcycle class — was the strong performance of the two-wheel-drive Yamaha motorcycle driven by Dakar rookie David Fretigne. In the first three stages Fretigne conquered the low-grip conditions using the

A Volkswagen Touareg blasts its way through camel-grass. Getting lost is always a threat on the Paris-Dakar, where drivers are faced with miles upon miles of stark desert landscape.



Yamaha's superior traction as compared to the conventional rear-wheel-drive-only bikes. Fretigne scored early wins on stages two and three. Despite suffering a frightening crash in the race's final leg, the Frenchman would finish a respectable 7th overall.

Meanwhile, dramas had begun even before the rally started for the stalwart Schlessler team. Jean Louis Schlessler, team leader and two-time Dakar champion, crashed his experimental V8 powered buggy in testing and was forced to use the older Ford V6-engined model. Schlessler eventually settled into a

comfortable third place, his only hope of victory dependent on the mighty Mitsubishi's faltering.

However, Mitsubishi did not falter and 2004 will be remembered as the year in which Stephane Peterhansel established himself a legend of the rally. The flying Frenchman matched his six Dakar wins on motorcycles with his first victory on four wheels as he piloted his Mitsubishi Pajero Evolution to a popular win. After coming within one stage of victory in 2003, only for mechanical gremlins to strike at the last moment, Peterhansel

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An early time penalty ended any realistic chance of victory for Hiroshi Masuoka. However, the 2003 Dakar champion drove spectacularly and finished a strong second behind his Mitsubishi teammate, Stéphane Peterhansel.

was determined to keep his driving very tidy. The occasional flat tire or directional miscue that he suffered with his navigator Jean-Paul Cottret was simply not enough to give his Mitsubishi teammate Hiroshi Masuoka (2003's Dakar champion) a shot at victory. However, Masuoka's second place finish gave Mitsubishi the two top spots on the podium.

As is expected of the Paris-Dakar rally, panoramic African landscapes provided a stunning mix of natural beauty and isolation. Soaring dunes posed a unique challenge in that they had to be crossed at just the right speed to allow the car, truck or motorcycle to waft over the soft and shifting sand. Going too fast meant that the vehicle's front end would plough into the sand, yet, going too slow ensured that the wheels would sink and spin helplessly. Even rally legend Colin McRae found his first Dakar to be a humbling experience. McRae's Nissan pickup fell foul to numerous mechanical woes — which at one point left him stranded in the desert for two days. The former World Rally champ would eventually finish in 20th position.

In the motorcycle class, Spanish driver Nani Roma proved wrong those who doubted his mental toughness. Roma learned from the mistakes he had made when running strongly in previous Paris-Dakar rallies and took his bike to victory, despite being under enormous pressure from fellow KTM driver Richard Sainct for much of the event. Sainct's second place was all the more impressive considering that a crash at high speed early in the race required him to receive eight stitches for a gash on his arm. In the large truck class it was the Russian crew led by Vladimir Tchaguine — his fourth Dakar victory — that took home the win in their Kamaz.

Of the original 400 who started the Paris-Dakar in 2004, less than half would make it to its conclusion on January 18th. Yet, the allure of the rally will bring back even those whose race ended well short of the final beachside run along the ocean and past Dakar's famous "lac rose" [pink lake]. Broken bones will be mended and engines repaired as hundreds of racers return on January 1st, 2005, for another attempt at rallying glory.