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FOLLOWING



THE

DAKAR

by Paul Pitchfork



The *Dakar Rally*—8500km of racing over 14 days, passes through some of the most inhospitable and inaccessible terrain in South America. Not exactly a spectator sport, and you might think that just keeping up with the race would be hard enough. When I decided to put my journey around South America on hold for two weeks and wait in northwest Argentina for the rally, I wasn't expecting much—some long rides connecting a few vantage points where I could watch the bikes speed past, and maybe the chance to peer through the fence of a bivouac. But how wrong I was. Following the *Dakar* on a motorbike is a unique spectator experience. No other sport I have watched allows you to get so close to the event, to get inside it and really “feel” it. On a motorbike, you don't watch the *Dakar*—you live it.

With its heritage in Africa, you would be excused for mistakenly thinking that the entire rally took place in uninhabited wilderness, but that's not realistic in South America. There are vast tracts of deserts and mountains

through which to race, but there are also towns, major roads, mines, farmland and private land. Therefore, the timed race sections, known as “specials,” are connected via “liaisons” using public roads. It is this format that makes it feasible to follow the race, allowing a vehicle-borne *Dakar* fan using public roads to leapfrog the racers as they battle through each special. Three days before a stage, the detailed route is published on the rally's phone app. Official spectator zones are set up along the route and the locations of these are published at the same time.

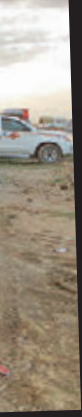
After only five years on this continent, the *Dakar* has become part of the culture in its host countries. I have been riding my *Tenere* through Chile, Argentina, Peru and Bolivia for over a year now and



I see the iconic *Dakar* emblem everywhere—on cars, motorbikes, clothing, even mobile phone cases. They love the rally. A few days before the race reached the small Argentine village of Guandacol, I caught my first whiff of this passion. While reconnoitering the route, I inadvertently pulled into someone's front yard. Within a minute I was surrounded by an entire, very excited, family wanting to pose for photos with me and the bike. This was my first glimpse of "Dakar Fever," and only the tip of the iceberg. It set the tone for what was to come.

The *Dakar* caravan—comprising the racers (472 bikes, quads, cars and trucks at the start), support vehicles, officials and sponsors in their 4x4s, and of course the helicopters—becomes one big and impressive beast. When the rally comes to town, things get a bit crazy. The liaisons are lined with flag-waving and cheering locals. Petrol stations, which are used as official refueling points, are inundated with camera-wielding fans and curious bystanders. Whole families set up camp outside their houses, barbecues alight, to watch this amazing spectacle pass. Riding amongst the *Dakar* vehicles, a moto-spectator is immersed in the carnival atmosphere. But here is the twist, the key that really unlocks this event for a rider on a *KTM 990*, *Tenere* or *BMW*. To a local, anyone on an "off-road" bike is a racer. So you don't just watch their enthusiasm and delight, you experience it first hand as they cheer and wave you on, thinking you are the real deal.

A wily moto-spectator can take advantage of this mistaken identity, of which the police are also guilty. One day I was riding hard along a particular liaison, thinking I was falling behind the racers and thus trying to make up time. As I approached the start of the special, I was waved into the refueling point by police controlling traffic, where the likes of Marc Coma and Chaleco Lopez were relaxing. On another occasion in Bolivia, I arrived in Uyuni where the bikes were bivouacking overnight.



There I was confronted by a depressingly long queue for the town's only petrol station. However, after the obligatory photo shoots, I was ushered to the front of the queue, being told that "las motos" took priority. I didn't argue and was soon on my way with a full tank (only to be mobbed when I entered the town center for more photos!).

While the *Dakar* pilots may not be racing on the liaisons, riding amongst them nevertheless affords the moto-spectator a taste of the rally. One morning I awoke at 4:00 a.m., drove to the bivouac and slipped into the stream of bikes setting off at one-minute intervals. Riding through the dark along empty roads, invisible to the outside world, occasionally being overtaken by a *KTM* or *Yamaha 450*, you cannot help but feel that you are in the heart of the race.

As well as riding the liaisons, I watched a lot of the racing. Every spectator zone was different. Some were fairly tightly controlled. At others, the police were more relaxed and easy to evade; on occasion I was able to get right to the edge of the race route. In Bolivia, they seemed determined to keep a tight rein on things, it being the first time the race had entered their borders. However, armed with some local knowledge I got around this. After following a little-used track fording a river, I found myself amongst hundreds of locals at the most spectacular setting from which to watch the race—in a beauti-

ful sandstone gorge, raucous locals atop every rocky outcrop, with the throaty sounds of the 450s' exhausts echoing off the cliffs. Without a single policeman present, we wandered up and down the race route at will.

By the time I bade the *Dakar* farewell in northern Chile, I had covered nearly 3,000 km, visited three countries, ridden roads that bikers dream of, and all against a stunning backdrop of the Andes, the Bolivian Altiplano and the Atacama Desert. I had met and ridden with *Dakar* enthusiasts from all over South America and beyond. I was warmly welcomed and helped by the locals at every turn. I had watched the world's best racers in action, been swept up by the energy of the rally and afforded a glimpse of this extraordinary event from within. The week felt more like a month.

The *Dakar* is so much more than the racing. It's an eclectic community of racers, organizers, press, support crews, spectators, and the locals who live along the race route. It's a traveling town, a sports match spread out over three countries—it's a legend playing out in front of you. To be part of it, even as a spectator, is an adventure, a challenge, an experience like no other. And there is only one way to do it—on two wheels. So clear your diaries for January 2015. I'll see you in Peru. **ADV**

