



SHADOWING THE DAKAR

Words and photos: **Paul Pitchfork**

Paul Pitchfork retired from the Gurkas as a major; leaving military life after 18 years. With the wish to travel, being handy on dirt bikes as well as road, he set off for South America. Throwing his plans and caution to the wind, by chance he found himself caught up in the Dakar, an event where his heroes were going to be so close... Paul became the ultimate spectator, operating well behind the lines.

“ I rode 3,000km through three countries, sometimes alongside the Dakar riders ”



It was 8pm on Christmas Eve as I rode into the small town of Uspallata, nestled in the shadows of the Argentinean Andes. A few weeks earlier I had expected to be much further north at the end of the year, but plans have evolved and here I was. The infamous Dakar Rally, something I had been enthralled by long before I started riding motorbikes, would be passing through the town on January 8. I was keen to push on and head back to Peru, but the chance to witness the world's best rally riders in action was an opportunity I felt I had to take. Two weeks later, having bided my time in sleepy Argentinean villages under a relentless sun, I was watching

Cyril Despres, Marc Coma and Chaleco Lopez race past on their 450s, dust and stones kicking up behind them, only a few metres from me.

Was it worth the wait? Oh, yes. When I decided to follow the Dakar, I had expected to watch



the rally pass by from a few vantage points along the route, and perhaps visit one or two of the bivouacs to see a little of what goes on behind the scenes - nothing more. But this turned out to be only a small part of the experience. Over seven days, I rode 3,000km through three countries, sometimes alongside the Dakar riders, experiencing first hand the challenges of the race, the excitement of the cheering crowds and the buzz that surrounds this unique event. By following the Dakar on a motorbike, you don't just watch the race - you live it. You are part of it. No other sport lets the spectator get so close to the essence of the event. When the seven days were up I was exhausted, but I had just enjoyed one of the best weeks of my

15-month journey on the 'roads' of South America.

Having learnt about the Paris-Dakar when it took place in Africa, I had assumed that the rally was effectively one long race from start to finish, through inaccessible terrain. This is not the case in South America, where the much more developed infrastructure makes this unworkable. Here, the race sections, known as 'specials', are linked by stretches of public roads known as 'liaisons'. The racing does indeed take place along routes in the deserts and mountains, which are largely inaccessible, but the liaison sections remain open for public use. Someone following the race can therefore use these sections to leapfrog the racers as they make their way along the specials and intercept them at various viewing points.



UN-SECRETS OF THE INTERNET

The organisers of the race deliberately withhold detailed information about the race route until a few days before a particular stage. Only a rough map was available beforehand, identifying the towns where the bivouacs would be. I spent several days before the race driving along what I guessed to be the route, studying Google Earth and talking to the locals, hoping to identify places from where I could watch the race. This turned out to be unnecessary. Three days before a stage, the detailed route is published on the Dakar phone app. The organisers also designate official spectators zones along the special, often at the start and the finish where access is easier, and the locations of these are also published - but strangely only on the Dakar website and not the app.

Armed with this information, I assumed it would be easy to watch the racing. In some cases it was,

but on other occasions simply reaching these spectator zones on the motorbike was an adventure in itself. When I was approaching one near Salta, I found the road blocked by police and was told I would have to walk 6km to the designated site. However, after persevering a bit, one of the policemen told me of a track that led to the zone, although he suggested it was "very bad" and I probably wouldn't make it on my moto. He clearly hadn't ridden a decent adventure bike. I had a blast riding 15km down a meandering track, through sand, ruts and fording streams. By the



time I reached the spectator zone, I felt I had ridden a little bit of the Dakar myself.

The police were out in force at every spectator zone I visited, but their levels of attention varied at each. On one occasion we were able to walk a few hundred metres from the officially designated area and drop down into the dry riverbed along which the route passed. Here, we got so close to the route that some of the riders had to steer around the spectators. In Chile, I avoided the police checkpoint by driving through the desert. Continuing for about 3km, I found a small chicane in the desert track where I could watch the motos, cars and trucks speeding by. In Bolivia, I simply talked to some of the villagers who told me of another track which bypassed the police checkpoint and paralleled the race route on the other side of a river. When I reached a point where I could ford the river, I came across literally hundreds of locals lining the race route and perched atop every rocky outcrop - and not a

policeman in sight! I quickly learnt that local knowledge is the key.

Watching the racing is great, but it is 'the stuff in between' that makes the wider Dakar experience so unforgettable. The rally has only been held in South America since 2009, but in the intervening five years 'Dakar Fever' has well and truly taken hold here. Television coverage is extensive. You see the Dakar emblem everywhere, on cars, motos and even mobile phone cases. So when the race comes to a small town, it is a big deal. There is a carnival atmosphere all along the route: towns and villages come to a standstill as roads are blocked off, shops are closed and the inhabitants set up camp in front of their houses. Farmers stop working in the fields and settle in the shade of a tree to watch the vehicles drive by. Young kids perch on walls and in trees. Even the locals driving along the route will hang out of windows and sound their horns when a Dakar vehicle of any description passes them.



UNDER COVER...

Riding these stretches between the spectator zones or bivouacs, the motorbike-born spectator is immersed in this enthusiasm and passion for the rally. However, it is not simply a case of watching the locals applaud the racers close to you. There is one simple factor that shapes the entire Dakar experience for a motorcyclist on an adventure bike - the locals, and most of the police for that matter, think you are a racer! Their delight and excitement is directed at you. Whilst I felt a little uncomfortable at times at being mistaken for the real deal, I realised there was nothing I could do to change the locals' perceptions. I thus allowed myself to enjoy their passion for the event, their delight at witnessing such a unique spectacle, and the incredibly warm welcome that was so evident on everyone's faces. Stop at a service station or visit a bivouac and you will be besieged by Dakar fans requesting photos with you and your moto. On some occasions I was stuck for fifteen minutes or more.

This 'free pass' so to speak - the ability to ride the liaisons with the racers and being mistaken for a racer yourself - offers even more opportunities to experience the rally from the inside. One morning I awoke at 4am, packed my tent and headed for the bivouac on the edge of town. I had tried to visit it the evening before, but there were literally thousands of locals

doing the same and the police had blocked the road. The road was still blocked the following morning. As I pulled up by the police check point, the motorbikes were already on the road, setting off from the bivouac at one-minute intervals on the 200km liaison. I tucked in behind a Honda factory rider. Invisible in the dark, just another red tail light in a long line of taillights on the dead straight road, I rode amongst the racers for an hour and a half. As dawn broke, I arrived at a petrol station, which was being used as an official refuelling point. Pulling in to fill my tank, I was surrounded by about fifty Dakar bikes and their pilots. It was a surreal experience - in that moment I was literally in the heart of the rally.

After leaving the petrol station I continued to the end of the liaison, where I hoped I could watch the start of the special. Unfortunately, the actual start point was about 3km down a dirt track leading off the main road and the police were stopping all but the racers at the junction. At this point I was still a relatively novice spectator and thus dutifully stopped. Five minutes later a rider on a KLR, loaded with panniers, arrived at the same point. Instead of stopping, he brazenly turned right and followed the stream of KTMs and Yamahas to the start of the special. None of the police even blinked. I logged this lesson - and had the opportunity to use it to great effect four days later.

BLENDING IN BOLIVIA

For Stages 7 and 8, Bolivia played host to the Dakar for the first time, though only the motorbikes crossed the border. Following the race here proved more challenging, for there was only 100km of hardtop that we could use to gain time on the racers. The remaining 450km to the Chilean border was dirt road, and 200km of this was going to be used as part of the special. I continued on to Bolivia during the rest day after Stage 6, allowing me to get ahead of the race. My plan was to ride the first part of the special early the following morning

ahead of the racers to a spectator zone midway along it. Thereafter, I could continue behind the race to Uyuni and the bivouac. This was the only feasible way to keep up with the race, as this track is the only route across the mountains to Uyuni. But when I arrived in the small town of Tupiza that evening, I was told that the road was already closed. No amount of persuasion would change the policemen's minds.

The following day I learnt of an alternative, less known track, which led to Uyuni. After watching a hour of the special, I tried to find this alternative route, but to no avail. Every local I asked directions from gave me a conflicting answer. Then I received good news from a passer-by - all the racers had past and the main route to Uyuni was open. Time was short if I wanted to reach Uyuni before nightfall, so I forded the river, stood up on the pegs and opened the throttle. The route was still lined with both police and spectators, but this time I wasn't going to stop and ask if I could pass. From the front my Ténéré looks and sounds like a Dakar bike. Seeing me standing up on the pegs and gunning the engine, the police must have thought I was a racer; on every occasion they hurriedly cleared the road and waved me through. The locals stopped packing up for a few moments to cheer me on.



ABOUT ME...

I was a soldier for 18 years, an officer in the Gurkhas in the British Army. After my fair share of travel around the world, including time in Iraq and Afghanistan, I decided to leave in February 2012. I didn't know what I wanted to do next, I had a bit of money in my pocket from the military, so I bought an XT660 Ténéré and came to South America in October that year. I'm still here, loving the freedom after so long in the army. In theory, I'm heading northbound from Ushuaia, but haven't got past Peru and keep backtracking! Thus far I've been travelling solo, but in one week I'll be setting off with my Chilean girlfriend on her newly acquired Suzuki DR200 from Northern Chile to Mexico (we actually set off yesterday but she crashed in some sand on her first day and bent the bike).

The road obviously hadn't been opened at the far end - it was empty. I had this section of the special all to myself. I rode hard for three hours non-stop, through twisting hairpins, fast sweeping gravel stretches along ridge lines and across numerous fords. It was exhilarating stuff - and my own personal taste of riding the Dakar.

Throughout the week I was rarely riding alone. Every day I met motorbike enthusiasts from all corners of the continent and beyond: Argentinean fathers and sons riding together on their 250cc dirt bikes loaded with camping gear; groups from the United States on organised tours riding GSA 1200s; a Kiwi on his DR650, catching some of the race before meeting his wife for a holiday; for three days I rode with two Brazilians on KTM 990s; and I spent a day riding a dirt track cross the Bolivian Altiplano with a Colombian, Alejandro, on a Harley. Every day I would meet the same people, on their motos or in their 4x4s and trucks. We were a subset for the Dakar caravan, all on a common mission. As the days passed the camaraderie amongst us grew. I've made some new friends and now have places to stay as I continue north.

By the time I bade farewell to the rally in northern Chile, it felt as if I had been on the road for weeks. I had seen so much, driving from the mountains of northwest Argentina, across the beautiful and desolate Bolivian Altiplano and into the deserts of the Atacama. Against all my expectations, I had been totally immersed in the rally from dawn to dusk, literally. I had ridden some of the most beautiful and exciting roads in South America. I had met countless other bikers and been warmly welcomed by the locals at every turn. It had been intense, relentless and tiring, but also exciting, challenging and so much fun. From a spectator's perspective, no other event I have experienced comes close. The only way to make it better would be to actually race the rally.

Anyone want to sponsor me?



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