

Diary of a Rally Virgin – Tuareg Rally 2011  
Words by Mike Robertson, Pictures courtesy of Orga

### Introduction

Paul Carlyle, Mike Shepherd and my good self had a go at the desert riding lark a number of years ago and it was decided that the next step should be taken. (The links and report for Agadir are on [scottishenduros.co.uk](http://scottishenduros.co.uk) – thanks Charlie)

The idea of trying something bigger than the Agadir enduro was considered and so the Tuareg Rally was the obvious choice. Preparations were advancing with suitable equipment bought and preparations being made. I even got going with additional bike training.

This, unfortunately, was where it went wrong for me and after a crash, fairly intensive surgery with lots of steel and screws (which I still have) and ever such a long spell in plaster, my hopes for the event at that time were dashed. Paul and Mike continued and rode the event. In the intervening years between then and now they went on to compete in the Dakar acquitting themselves very well indeed.

Moving on to today then - lots of talk was had about going back to have a go at the Tuareg for a bit of fun. I should say that in the intervening years since then and now, calories, good living and a disdain for any exercise other than walking to the pub have had their effect – and none of it good for riding a bike!!

That aside and with lots of bravado the entries were submitted and bikes were bought/prepped in readiness for the event. Things were going well and we were all getting quite excited when the day finally arrived and we were off on the adventure that is rallying.

### Prologue

Our number had swelled with Duncan Tweedy joining in. Duncan is also a Dakar standard rider – so I was in quite exalted company, not bad for a fat, old bloke?

We met up in a transit hotel at Gatwick in preparation for the trip down to Almeria the next day. Up early and off down to Spain where we had a relaxing day drinking cafe con leche and the local hooch, swapping stories with the rest of the team that we met down there and generally having a relaxing time. Sunday arrived and with it, all the competitors, kit, organisation and general noise and bustle that was to be the bivouac for the next 8 days of the event. The whole thing was colourful, busy and a touch frenetic even if it was slightly overwhelming for this rally virgin. There was a fair bit of queuing to be done given the administration, preparation, scrutinising and general procedures of the event for loading and transport to Nador in Morocco.

Riders were registered, safety equipment was collated, road books were issued and made up, Moroccan paperwork was written up and stored for later use and all the kit loaded into the vans/trailers for embarkation. We walked onboard the ferry that night and settled into the cabin for as restful a night as possible.

The next morning and we had arrived at Nador where everything reversed and we got dressed for the bike. Our own formalities having been swiftly taken care of then it was getting sorted out as quickly as haste would allow and then ride out of the port to a holding area for the start of the rally.

### Day 1. Nador to Missor

It was with a touch of trepidation that I mustered along with the rest of the competitors in the holding area outside the dock in Nador. We were all waiting



for the off and like any event it was bullshit, bravado and a fairly strong desire to find a portaloo!!

That aside it was time to go and then start to use the nav gear in anger. It proved quite time consuming and needed not inconsiderable attention.

Thankfully Paul looked after me (did I mention he was top Briton when he did his Dakar?) and in effect was doing the navigation on behalf of us both to get us down the road to Missor.

Out of town and on to the trails we embarked onto the enduro path – a well known obstacle to regular competitors in the event. If this was an indication of the terrain then this was not going to be at all easy. The enduro path might have been an easier proposition on a trials bike but the levels of skill displayed by some of the riders of the big rally bikes was quite astounding. I was already beginning to feel that any talent pool I possessed really was quite shallow!!

The enduro path used up enormous amounts of energy (and not an inconsiderable amount of that dwindling pool of talent!) but we did get past the obstacle and with Paul's help headed off down the road for the open track and trails that would eventually lead us to Missor.

We (or should I say, Paul) navigated us down the tracks with only very minor corrections to



departures from the prescribed route. I even felt playful enough to pass and race into the stage finish.

The whole circus that is the bivouac had moved on to the Hotel Barroudi, Missor. Mike Shepherd (another Dakar veteran and Agadir rider) had secured accommodations in one of the tents for us and so it was a case of handing over the bikes to Patsy and Zippy to fettle and make ready for the next day.

#### Day 2. Missor to Merzuga

Today was to be a day of revelations. The

first came as a bit of a surprise at about 0630 when the alarm call was played over all of the tents in the hotel grounds. German thrash metal (Rammstein, Sonne - for info) at ear shredding volume generally had the desired effect and everybody was up and about fairly quickly. Today was the day that I was to be left to my own devices to see how I fared. I didn't start at all well as I took a wrong turn about 200m from the hotel and headed off in the wrong direction from the days' stage start. I wasn't the only one getting used to how it worked and a few followed. Realising the mistake we all turned round and headed for the start of the stage. As was usual by now it was a bit of a wait until the appropriate paperwork was handed out and the start procedures implemented.



The rest of our group had their own rally to run and as I was going to do my own thing I made sure I at least got the first turn on the stage correct. I will admit it was 50m from the start line (so not too difficult then? – Ed). These guys were really racing as we barrelled down a narrow, incredibly rocky track where, I admit, I followed the hordes through the short first part to the secret check and then sorted myself from there. As it turned out things did seem to get relatively organised with only very minor corrections required (slightly lost on parallel tracks – with a few others I may add). I did find myself dropping back through the

field trying to find my way and not really racing as hard as the others riders – I really needed to start getting a move on. Coming through a more challenging navigation part of the second special I found myself timed out when arriving at the stage finish check point. I elected to take the road down to Merzouga at this point and not to go through the sand. This turned out to be quite a momentous decision on my part.

This next stage introduced the riders to the first sand of the event and with it being late in the day I thought it safer to run the road and take the penalties.

Day Four. The Three Ergs day.

This was the first real day of sand in the rally and the atmosphere was one of anticipation. It seemed like everybody was really into the day and this part on the event. By this time the routine of being scared awake with a loud rendition of Rammstein in the morning, ablutions, breakfast, donning of kit, GPS and bike setup for the day ahead; it was beginning to get familiar. What I wasn't aware of at the time was that a number of the competitors were well used to this having participated in the event on previous occasions.

I thought I was beginning to get the hang of this navigation thing and would set off to the start line for that day's stage. I rode confidently out under the arch of the hotel to join the main road and turned left as indicated in the road book – in completely the wrong direction!!

The thing is that others followed as if I knew where I was going and that was the scary part.

It turned out there was an error in the roadbook but the compass bearing was correct. Those in the know followed the compass bearing or knew where to go from their previous experience. After several kilometres I eventually worked out that I was wrong, about turned and hammered back to where I should have been in the first place – maybe I wasn't just so practiced in the navigation lark after all?

The start of the stage could be seen from some way away and for me the easiest way to go was cross country – over humps, bumps, wash outs and terrain that lead to me being knackered before I started the stage. After the excitement of getting to the start my minute came round and I was all ready to move up to the start with other three bikes. Therein lay the first problem – I got stuck in the sand just getting to the start line. This didn't bode well for up-coming stage.

The minute clicked over and we eventually were off. I attacked the first dune which must have been at least 30 or maybe 40 centimetres high. Over it and onto the next dune – at least that was the plan. Look - this is me after the 30cm dune (that's the one directly to my left – I got very used to picking the bike up and that was only the start). The pool of talent that I thought I had ran out very abruptly and I can tell you when. It's when I realised that I had, in an instant, gone from being the operator of the bike to being an object in motion; I was horizontal above the handlebars during this revelation.



I thought I would show a picture of the correct way to get to the secret check and here is Mr Carlyle showing some style in the sand on his 525.

After lots of effort and picking of the bike out of the sand I got to the first secret check after about an hour. The thing is that the check was about 400m from the start line so my speed across the ground was measured by calendar. Even Bianca – one of the members of the organisation - took pity on me and walked over to mark the timecard. Never mind – onwards to the next check



and needless to say it was a case of attacking dunes and falling down the other side. I knew I was getting into trouble when the falling off frequency went from 500m down to getting on one side and falling off the other!

The funny thing was I wasn't last – what a mad event. I got to the end of that first section having collected all the timecard stamps on the way and then set off to the next part of the day. There was an intermediate check where I was told I had seven minutes before timing out. This is where I made a mistake that would affect me later.

I pushed onto the next of the three ergs and set off into the sand. By this time it was beginning to get quite hot and I had used up lots of time (in fact, timed out by the time I got to this sand). I set off and got maybe about a kilometre where I ended up at the bottom of a sand bowl and from there I couldn't extract myself.

Nothing else for it but to contact the organisation and ask for help, settle down, erect as much shade as I could and wait.

Christian from the organisation arrived and came down into the bowl and checked me over ensuring I was OK from a hydration / injury point of view and then started to extract me and the bike. Even he had a bit of trouble riding the bike out but we got out and he got me back to the road after which I got my card to check point finish and returned to the hotel.

#### Day five. Kings Stage.

This is the big day of the event and it was the one that most everybody was looking forward to. Given my exertions of the previous day and the encounter with sand riding I decided that discretion would be the better part of valour and was a non starter on this day. The route for the day was four laps of the dunes with the finish line being on the top of the Cathedral dune. It's called the Cathedral dune for good reason – but more of that later.

I decided that I would have an attempt at the first part of the day and at least try to make it to the first check. You could see this quite clearly from the start as it was at the top of a dune. The usual format of four riders at a time set off into the dunes and I was getting on not too badly and then I came to the dune where the check was. It was even steeper and higher close up that it initially seemed. I was beginning to understand that picking the line in sand is at least as important as actually riding it. I stopped and watched others in their line choices and which gear and start they were using to get up to the check.



I admit, I did watch others for a while but it was quite steep as might be seen from the photos. These photos are



looking at the same point – the first, on the left, looking up at the secret check on the King stage day. The second photo (of rider 105) looking from the check back to the direction of travel. Seriously - it was that steep!!

It took me six attempts to make it up to the check with each failed attempt resulting of going all the way back down and trying another line. I should say that in the interim most of the field lapped me – on several occasions. I did, however, make it up to the check and then found a way back to the start to watch the fantastic racing. As is the way with all events all

starters are to hand in their time cards to the finish check and so I headed off to the base of the Cathedral dune. I picked my way through the sand to get to the check at the base of the Cathedral dune. Handing in the card at that point would signify a finish but would incur a penalty. That said I had picked up a few time penalties by this stage in the rally and so another didn't really have a huge effect on the overall position for me. The Cathedral dune (or House dune as it was sometimes called) was an imposing lump that dominated the skyline in the surrounding area all the way out to the horizon and as indicated above, the organisation put the check point finish on the top of it. This sorted out the men from the boys and there weren't many that made it to the top. There was, however, a concession. The organisation would accept timecards if you wished to walk to the top. This wasn't something that everybody relished as the photos might indicate. It started to get real steep at the top!!



#### Day Six. Messuga to Missor

This was the first of the two return legs back to the port of Nador. The thinking must have been that all the competitors were getting used to the navigation as there were several parallel tracks making navigation difficult. I did manage to miss a navigation point and as such ended up lost losing a bunch of time. By the end of that morning's stage the navigation had become much easier and good progress was made. In terms of riding I maybe was beginning to get a bit quicker. I had timed out and so was directed up the main road for the rest of the day back to the Hotel Baroudi. In the process picking up time penalties for missing the checks. This was the first day that I had to stop to fix something on the stage. A hangard fixing had worked itself loose and as it turned out it was the only thing I had to tighten during the event. I'm sure this was down to Patsy and Zippy for their hard work as I suspect they did loads of stuff that I never saw.

#### Day Seven. Missor to Nador.

Today was a bit of a copy of day six but with some interesting going namely the Boiler pass. Seemingly named because either the bike boils or the rider does!

The day started off from the same start point that we used on the way down but the appropriate track was used to get us back North. Again my navigation failed me but this time I really made a mess of it.

Several hours of trying to find my way to the end of the first stage meant that I was hugely late for anything. A sighting compass and heading for a road going NNE did the trick. Not sure if I was anywhere near the correct route though. The rest of the bivoac were several hours and a few hundred kilometers in front of me. Some of the fast guys (and girls) having made it back to the port with me still having 200 – 250 km to go. I didn't get a chance to see any of the other stages or terrain as I had to get back to the port to be in time for the ferry back to Spain. I rode along with one of the service trucks to the port being the last rider in.

Day Eight. Almeria to Mojaccar.

This was short day with the day starting with a liaison section to the stage start. The stage itself was a route through the hills back from the coast to bring us up to the short timed section. This section was a bit of a enduro special to get us down to the beach and corralled for the mass ride into the village and the winner party. After everybody had gathered at the beach then it was a mass ride back to the Hotel in Mojaccar for a bit of a prize giving in front of the hotel. I was still in pegs after all the exertion. See – no camera trickery for this shot.



There are number of questions that seem to be obvious.

- Would I enter again?
  - Yes - but with the proviso that I'm better prepared. I took my eye off the ball. In my own defence, I did change jobs two months before the the start of the event and this did mean relocating to another country;
- Would I enter again with the same bike?
  - Yes – the husky was a fantastic thing. Before anybody gets bent out of shape - there is nothing wrong with the KTM's, Honda's, husabergs etc and so on. Just personal preference;
- What would I do differently?
  - Get fit and get trained. Sand is a terrain that requires a particular technique and so practice and direction is what is required;
  - Get my navigation gear prepared and test it twice, then once more to be sure – under real conditions;
  - Ensure my kit, tin contents and bike packs were better prepared/organised;
  - Lower the gearing to get a better top end and ultimately go a bit faster;

What went well?

- Bike preparation. The bike and accessories worked – consistently and reliably. No drama, no excitement, just dependably and every day without question;
- Suspension. This was done by a experienced tuner and it was fantastic;
- Logistics to, from and during the event;
- Help and support from the group.

As with all of these things there are myriads of people to thank for all their help, encouragement, efforts, patience and company.

- First there is, of course, Rainer and the rest of the team at Orga ([www.tuareg-rallye.com](http://www.tuareg-rallye.com)) for the event, planning, logistics, their time, help (and rescue – thanks Christian).

The photos are all supplied by Orga – my own camera didnt survive a coming together with with a big rock thrown up when a rider passed me.
- The logistics, support and encouragement of Desert Rose from Patsy and Zippy for all their fettling, help and advice with getting the kit down and back as well as keeping it, and me, going. ([www.desertroseracing.com](http://www.desertroseracing.com))
- All the guys in the group (no particular order – you were all great) Vince, Chris, Max, Ludo, Duncan, Mike and Paul.
- Chris (Dr Shox) for the suspension, Alex (core racing) for the tank, Kelly and crew (Motorsportz) for the damper and chassis advice, Justin (Nomad carriers), Dan Bartol (Cafe Husky) for his help on the wiring front and all of thoses others that I have missed/not mentioned please excuse me.

For those that might like to have a go at a real adventure I can think of no better event than enter the Tuareg. It will be frustrating, challenging (physically and mentally), exhilarating and fabulously satisfying. Above all its about riding your bike in places that most of us only ever imagine or look at on Google Earth.

The people that you meet, ride and live with are all genuinely lovely people that all have that passion for the sport that makes the whole event a great experience.

Thanks again and hope to see you all again – hopefully not too far – in the future. Mike