

AFRIQUIA MERZOUGA RALLY Joan Barreda draws first blood!

The race is on! The five-stage Afriquia Merzouga Rally began today with a 206.71 km stage featuring fast tracks and several tricky dune sectors. It was an ideal start for the multitude of amateurs eager to tackle a real rally-raid course like the ones specialists are used to. Elite riders also had a blast, with Spain's Joan Barreda claiming the opening stage ahead of Franco Caimi (Yamaha) and Ricky Brabec (Honda).

Key points:

- A 206.71 km inaugural stage
- Joan Barreda (Honda) wins the bike race
- Franco Caimi (Yamaha) finished ahead of Ricky Brabec to prevent a Honda 1-2
- Stefano Pelloni (Yamaha) won the Side-by-Side race and Frenchman Axel Dutrie (Yamaha) triumphed in the quad category
- The 175.3 km long second stage will deliver another shot of adrenaline tomorrow

The landscape on the edge of the desert looks like something out of a dream. The surroundings of the Toumbouctou Hotel, where the bivouac of the ninth edition of the Afriquia Merzouga Rally is located, are peppered with imposing dunes baked by the sun and shaped by the wind. "It makes you want to have fun", blurts out a quad rider in the early hours before heading to the track. The 124 competitors tackled a 206.71 km course consisting of two loops on varied terrain, ranging from very fast tracks to a slew of dunes. The aim was to put the competitors' navigational skills to the test. To shake things up a bit in the opening stage, bikers and Side-by-Side drivers started the race and tackled the first kilometre together.

The tracks at the beginning of the stage were fast but treacherous, with several competitors hit by mechanical problems. A bit further down the road, at km 50, the focus shifted to navigation and many competitors were forced to wander around in their search for the waypoints. The favourites, on the other hand, did not miss a beat. Joan Barreda racked up another win for Honda after Kevin Benavides took the 5 km prologue yesterday. The Japanese maker placed three bikes in the top 5, with Ricky Brabec in third place and Kevin Benavides in fifth. Franco Caimi (Yamaha) finished second and Pablo Quintanilla (Husqvarna) came in fourth.

PROVISIONAL CLASSIFICATION:

MOTORBIKES

- 1- Joan Barreda (Honda) 3 h 15'58"
- 2- Franco Caimi (Yamaha) + 8'03"
- 3- Ricky Brabec (Honda) + 11'25"
- 4- Pablo Quintanilla (Husqvarna) + 12'17"
- 5- Kevin Benavides (Honda) + 13'46"

SIDE-BY-SIDE

- 1- Stefano Pelloni (Yamaha) 4 h 18'03"
- 2- Bruno Varela (Can-Am) + 2'57"
- 3- Ruben Faria (Can-Am) + 2'57"

QUADS

- 1- Axel Dutrie (Yamaha) 4 h 54'34"
- 2- Anaam Ali (Can-Am) + 6'53"

QUOTES

Joan Barreda (Honda, 1st): "I'm delighted with this result. It's a great way to start the rally. I went under the knife for a wrist operation at the end of February and it still hurts a bit, especially towards the end of the special. My sensations aren't as good as my bike right now. I hope it'll get better."

Ricky Brabec (Honda, 3rd): "It was an awesome stage. Some parts were hard to navigate, with up to four notes in just one kilometre. However, it made for some great training thanks to its nice variety of landscapes, with dunes, *fesh-fesh* and faster tracks. This race has the ideal terrain to get used to your bike, make adjustments and tackle each stage with ambition. The next stages promise to be hard, so we'll need to recover!"

Pablo Quintanilla (Husqvarna, 4th): "The tricky winding sections made the first stage hard. At the beginning of the stage it took me a few kilometres to ease into a good pace and get used to the navigation. I've got a good feeling with my bike, and I hope it'll be the same for the rest of the week."

Toby Price (KTM, 7th): "I made a navigational mistake at km 68 and lost some time [15'23" behind the winner], but the end of the rally is still many kilometres away. I'll give it my all to continue having fun on my bike, avoid surprises with the road book... This is a great place for a rally. I'm eager for more!"

TOMORROW'S PROGRAMME. Taming the dunes!

Just like the opener, stage 2 consists of two loops —one to the north and one to the south— for a total of 175.3 km. Both stages feature fast tracks and finish in a sea of dunes. It will be a technical stage with lots of navigation. The start, finish and neutralisation will all take place at the Toumbouctou Hotel, where assistance crews are based.

For more information, visit the rally's web site: www.merzougarally.com

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