

Merzouga, 17th of April 2018

AFRIQUIA MERZOUGA RALLY — MAGAZINE

Ali, the rally's star ambassador

Tuesday saw competitors in the Afriquia Merzouga Rally tackle a dune-packed 175.3 km course around the Toumbouctou Hotel. The stakes keep getting higher, but good humour still permeates the atmosphere at the bivouac. Ali Annaam, a quad rider who moonlights as a hotel manager, is a great example. The flamboyant one-legged Moroccan is one of the stars of the rally.

STORY OF THE DAY. Back in Ali Anaam's cave

Monday evening. The sun has just set behind the dunes that surround the Toumbouctou Hotel. The air is cool and the competitors are preparing their road books or getting some rest. Just a few kilometres away, however, a celebration is going on. Over at the Ali El Cojo Hotel, competitors are mingling with Spanish fans who are here for the rally. The air is heavy with the scent of tea and aperitifs and a friendly atmosphere. Ali Anaam looks on from the corner of his eye as he rests comfortably on some cushions. The 43-year-old landlord relishes the rally atmosphere. He chats with the competitors in the seven languages he can speak fluently —particularly Spanish— and chuckles at the beers on the table: "someone seems to have forgotten there's a stage coming up tomorrow!".

Ali, on the other hand, is raring to go. The hotel manager is racing in his third consecutive Afriquia Merzouga Rally, this time on a Can-Am 800 quad. It is "a pleasure day after day" for the 43-year-old Moroccan, who knows the dunes and deserts of the area like the back of his hand. "I've been taking tourists for 4x4 tours around the desert since the late 1980s", he explains. He bought a quad in the early 2000s. When not showing foreigners around the dunes, Ali patrols the desert, rescuing tourists whose vehicles are stuck in the sand in exchange for a handful of dirhams. Back in 1996, he decided to open an inn. It was a simple affair, with four rooms, a kitchen and a plot facing the dunes to accommodate his guests —including a certain Edo Mossi, the creator of the Afriquia Merzouga Rally.

The rally has grown over the years, as has Ali's hotel, which now boasts 40 rooms. Ali loves nothing better than watching the stages from atop his quad, helping out competitors or showing them the way, like in 2015, when leading biker Laia Sanz followed him in the mistaken belief that he was also a participant in the Afriquia Merzouga Rally. The following year, Ali decided to throw his hat into the ring and signed up for the race. Knowing every nook and cranny of the region gives him an edge, as he showed with a promising third place in the opening stage on Monday. The sole Moroccan in the rally dreams of racing in the next Dakar at the wheel of a Toyota Hilux. In the meantime, he is leaving a lasting impression on his guests and on other competitors. "He's a beast", says a Spanish friend in awe at the energy Ali shows day after day. Ali was born with just one leg and only lets go of his crutches to stow them in the back of his quad during the stages. "It has never limited me in any way. I can ride bicycles, quads, and automatic or manual cars", he lets go in between two bursts of laughter. "All that's left is an airplane!" In the meantime, he says he is ready to jump onto his quad to tackle one stage after another and, why not, fight for victory. Ali sure knows how to make the desert the most beautiful place on Earth.

ANECDOTES OF THE DAY. 60 km in a Side by Side... without a steering wheel!

Some competitors got unlucky on the very first day of the rally. The bivouac is buzzing with stories of setbacks and the determination of all the competitors to make it to the stage finish. On Monday, Portugal's Bruno Afonso Martins managed to take his Can-Am Side by Side across the line without a steering wheel! "We lost it with 60 km to go and had to jury-rig a solution with a self-locking clamp", he explains. Then, close to the finish, their brakes failed! "It was epic, but we managed to make it to the finish", continues co-driver Pedro Miguel Marques da Silva. Furthermore, several bikes had to be airlifted, mostly due to battery and clutch issues. "I didn't expect it to be so tough", pants one of the survivors of the day.

FIGURE OF THE DAY: 33

33 of the 123 competitors in the Afriquia Merzouga Rally come from France. France has the biggest contingent in the race, with 15 bikers, 4 quad riders and 14 Side by Side drivers. The second biggest one is the Spanish Armada with 22 competitors (15 bikers, 3 quad riders and 4 Side by Side drivers). The Italian contingent stands in third place with 16 competitors.

Q&A. How do you stay focused during long specials?

Frans Verhoeven has 10 Dakar starts under his belt. He is on duty at the Afriquia Merzouga Rally giving customised tips to amateur competitors: "The key to success in rallies is acquiring a taste for riding and navigating. Being overly cautious or defensive is a big mistake. Everyone has a way of forgetting about the rest and focusing on riding, navigating and making the right choices. When I came back home from the Dakar, people would tell me that "the landscapes were gorgeous", but I hadn't seen anything because I just kept my eyes ahead of my bike! I would often focus on my breathing to deal with fatigue. I practised yoga to improve my breathing. After each obstacle (a pool of mud or a wadi), I would take the time to focus by breathing in, breathing out and making sure to let my body fill with oxygen. This little trick worked wonders!"

FOCUS ON... Tourism in Morocco shoots through the roof!

Tourism in Morocco has bounced back after several years of decline. The Kingdom smashed through the 11 million tourist barrier for the first time last year. Minister for Tourism and Air Transport Mohammed Sajid announced last week that "the first figures for 2018 are outstanding". Some regions have attracted over 20% more tourists than over the same period last year. The largest share of tourists come from France (3.7 million in 2017, a 9% increase), followed by Spain. The wide range of sports activities available, including motorised tours around the Merzouga desert, is one of the ingredients that make Morocco such a popular destination.

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

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