

AFRIQUIA MERZOUGA RALLY

Joan Barreda takes the spoils as amateurs set their sights on the Dakar

After five days of racing in the desert of southern Morocco, Spaniard Joan Barreda (Honda) won two stages and the general classification of ninth Afriquia Merzouga Rally. Frenchman Axel Dutrie (quads) and Brazilian Bruno Varela (SxS) also won the race outright. For the field as a whole, including many amateurs, the number 1 goal was gaining more experience in ultra-tough stages as a further step towards their dream of taking part in the Dakar, the biggest rally raid in the world.

Key points:

- Spaniard Joan Barreda (Honda) won two stages and the motorbike classification of Afriquia Merzouga Rally
- Pablo Quintanilla (Husqvarna) took the closing stage by 3 seconds over Kevin Benavides (Honda)
- Frenchman Axel Dutrie (quads) and Brazilian Bruno Varela (SxS), both of them rookies in the Afriquia Merzouga Rally, won the race outright
- Arkadiusz Lindner (Can-Am) and Frédéric Henrycy (Polaris) claimed the fifth and last stage
- Anthony Boursaud (motorbikes) and Éric Abel (SxS), the leaders of the "Road to Dakar" classification, earned their tickets to the next Dakar
- All the competitors underscored the friendly atmosphere and tough challenges of the Afriquia Merzouga Rally, which emerges as one of the highlights of the season.

Erg Chebbi no longer holds any secrets for them. After five days of battling their way through the desert of southern Morocco, the competitors started the closing stage of the ninth Afriquia Merzouga Rally this morning. First the SxS buggies, then the quads and then the motorbikes took off in what turned out to be a thrilling mass start before today's 48.8 km special, which was all about dunes.

Joan Barreda crowned King of the Desert

It was the ideal terrain for the top teams, all of them present in the Afriquia Merzouga Rally. "It was a fierce battle", admitted Toby Price (KTM). Honda really pushed us to the limit." The Japanese maker shone against KTM (whose victorious streak in the Dakar goes all the way back to 2001), Husqvarna, Sherco and Hero. Only Pablo Quintanilla (Husqvarna) managed to prevent a Honda whitewash with his victory on Friday. Joan Barreda won two stages (1 and 3) and dominated the general classification throughout the week. He became the worthy winner of his first Afriquia Merzouga Rally.

Frenchman Axel Dutrie was also racing here for the first time. After three Dakar starts, and despite being here "mainly to test [his] quad", the rider from northern France easily won the quad race, bagging the first two stages in the process. The Side by Side category was a more closely fought affair. Former Dakar biker Ruben Faria and his Can-Am teammate Casey Curry saw their overall dreams go up in smoke due to mechanical problems on Thursday. Brazilian Bruno Varela (Can-Am South Racing), driving the same SxS with which his father won the Dakar in January, capitalised on the situation to claim the race. "Let the Dakar start already", he quipped!

An extraordinary atmosphere

"The level continues to rise year after year", points out Éric Abel (SxS), racing in his eighth Afriquia Merzouga Rally. "We've seen the event grow and the elite riders arrive, but the spirit remains the same." This "spirit" cherished by regular patrons can be felt all over the place: when competitors help one another on the rack, when they engage in lengthy afternoon conversations in the calm of the bivouac, and in the ties that develop among them. "Here we know we're going to see everyone, it's an event with a human dimension, a true family!"

Many competitors decided to share this week with their loved ones. Yamaha quad riders Antoine Vitse and Axel Dutrie brought their wives Aurélie and Valentine with them. "It's an amazing setting and a really pleasant atmosphere", says Valentine, who helps her husband to prepare his road book every evening. It's really cool to share his passion alongside him!" Spaniard Julio Luis García Merino is here with four of his brothers. "Our family is like a team", he says enthusiastically from on top the bike his brother Julián used at the last Dakar. "It's great to be together in a rally as nice as the Afriquia Merzouga Rally."

"Dakar school" at the Afriquia Merzouga Rally

Once again, the rally turned out to be the ideal place for all those dreaming of racing in the Dakar. Its tough course, the support provided by star riders such as Dutchman Frans Verhoeven and the evening courses given after each stage upheld the rally's *raison d'être*: "helping everyone to get better and become a good rally raid racer", explains the creator of the race, Edo Mossi. Two competitors stood out from the rest: Anthony Boursaud (Yamaha) and Éric Abel (Polaris) in the Side by Side category. They were first in the "Road to Dakar" classification for competitors who want to take part in the Dakar.

WHAT THE AMATEURS SAY

Luís Correia (Portugal, motorbikes, Yamaha): "I really wanted to take part in this race to check whether my preparation is good enough for a challenge like the Dakar. This rally boosted my confidence. As soon as I get home I'll start working hard to raise funds for the Dakar."

Vanni Cominotto (Italy, motorbike, Sherco): "The Afriquia Merzouga Rally was my first rally raid, but I'd already taken part in national races. It was also the first time I used this navigation system. I was a bit tense and nervous at the start! I'll see how it goes over the next few weeks, but I'm still dreaming of going to the Dakar. I learned a lot thanks to the evening courses and the tips the coach [Frans Verhoeven] gave us during the stages."

Thomas Roesslinger (France, motorbike, KTM): "It's my second Afriquia Merzouga Rally, and I'm here with a view to get stronger before the Dakar, which remains my big dream. I've still got a long way to go in terms of both navigation and riding. This week taught me I still need to take part in other rallies to get better before I can sign up for the Dakar."

Lorenzo Santolino (Spain, motorbike, Sherco): "I was having a good rally until I suffered a mechanical yesterday. But I'm still very happy with how the week went. It's an important stage for everyone who's training and gaining experience for the Dakar."

WHAT THE WINNERS SAY

Joan Barreda (motorbike champion, Honda): "I'm really ecstatic." It's crazy to win here! It was a very interesting and challenging rally that really put our navigational skills to the test. The field was very strong this year, so I'm strong to take this leap forward in my preparation."

Axel Dutrie (quad champion, Yamaha): "I was a bit stressed going into the last special, I didn't want to have any mechanical problems! Now that it's over, I'm delighted with how the week went, there were many positive things about my quad. This week has boosted my confidence. I'd also like to congratulate Jérémy Forestier (second) and Antoine Vitse (third) on their strong performances."

Bruno Varela (SxS champion, Can-Am South Racing): "It was my first race outside Brazil, my first experience on the dunes and my first victory! I'm over the moon! Now it's time to focus on the Dakar. Both me and my Dad, who won the Dakar in January, would like to take part. The Afriquia Merzouga Rally is the ideal place to train: we get to race on dunes, stony sections and fast tracks, which are all the ingredients of the Dakar!"

FINAL STAGE 5 CLASSIFICATION:

MOTORBIKES

- 1- Pablo Quintanilla (Husqvarna) 38'12"
- 2- Kevin Benavides (Honda) + 3"
- 3- Toby Price (KTM) + 6"

QUADS

- 1- Arkadiusz Lindner (Can-Am) 50'03"
- 2- Tomáš Kubiena (KTM) + 3"
- 3- Gary Aldington (Yamaha) + 11"

SIDE BY SIDE

- 1- Frédéric Henricy (Polaris) 4 h 09'07"
- 2- Juan Miguel Fidel Medero (Yamaha) + 10'24"
- 3- Éric Abel (Polaris) + 15'41"

FINAL GENERAL CLASSIFICATION MOTORBIKES

- 1- Joan Barreda (Honda) 13 h 28'19"
- 2- Kevin Benavides (Honda) + 6'10"
- 3- Pablo Quintanilla (Husqvarna) + 11'25"

QUADS

- 1- Axel Dutrie (Yamaha) 18 h 24'52"
- 2- Jérémy Forestier (Yamaha) + 1 h 43'28"
- 3- Antoine Vitse (Yamaha) + 2 h 29'36"

SIDE BY SIDE

- 1- Bruno Varela (Can-Am) 17 h 22'17"
- 2- Éric Abel (Polaris) + 1 h 35'36"
- 3- Annett Fischer (Can-Am) + 1 h 46'12"

THE AFRIQUIA MERZOUGA RALLY IN FIGURES

4 out of 5 stages went to Honda riders

6 sponsors contributed to the success of the Afriquia Merzouga Rally: title sponsor Afriquia, official race broadcaster 2M, KTM, Ain Soltane, Sigecont and Naviera Armas

20 nationalities

76 competitors took part in the Afriquia Merzouga Rally for the first time

156 riders, drivers and co-drivers started the rally

Q&A. How do you recover after a rally?

Edo Mossi, the creator of the Afriquia Merzouga Rally, runs the evening courses given to competitors after each stage: "All the competitors, but especially amateurs, are used to driving or riding once or twice a week. Racing several days in a row is very exhausting. This evening, after the stage, the best reward is having a nice beer next to the pool! [laughs] Afterwards, it's time to take a rest, stay away from your vehicle for 10 days and practise some sport. After that, you can gradually start training again on your motorbike, quad or Side by Side."

For more information, visit the rally's website www.merzougarally.com

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