

## AFRIQUIA MERZOUGA RALLY — MAGAZINE

### Fun and solidarity

The Afriquia Merzouga Rally got the show on the road with a 206 km stage packed with dunes. The gruelling effort did nothing to dull the friendly atmosphere at the bivouac near the Toumbouctou Hotel. "We're here to learn and have fun", chirps a competitor. The "Amigos" team, a regular fixture at the Afriquia Merzouga Rally, are also all smiles after taking advantage of the opportunity to carry out their humanitarian project.

#### STORY OF THE DAY. "Amigos" with a heart of gold

The "Amigos" have good humour in their DNA. Éric Abel and Christian Manez, racing in a Side by Side bearing the logo of this family-run non-profit founded in Perpignan, are beaming at the start of the Afriquia Merzouga Rally. "We've been coming here for eight years", explains Éric, "and it's still as fun as ever". This does not mean that the duo have not had their share of problems over the last couple of years. "Last year our engine blew up, and the year before that we smashed up the entire front of our SxS", says Christian Manez. However, giving up on the Afriquia Merzouga Rally has never crossed their minds. "It's a special event where sharing and a friendly atmosphere are a given", continues Éric Abel, who also notes that "the level of the field, with 32 vehicles this time round, has increased over the years". The "Amigos" are chasing a different goal: "having fun and making our participation count for something", adds Christian Manez.

A night to remember

They carry out a humanitarian project every year. "We joined force with Alain and Agnès Biard, who are also racing for our team in the Side by Side category, to collect 300 kg of school supplies and medical equipment." They headed to Talsint, a small town over 200 km to the north of Merzouga, before the start of the rally to donate these goods to the free clinic there. "A few years ago, we were racing in a rally raid when we were surprised by mud and rain", reminisces Éric Abel. We then came across Larbi, who let us stay at his home in Talsint." It was a night to remember. The competitors from Perpignan are now "getting even" with their erstwhile host. "Sure, it won't make a world of difference, but we think it's important to make our participation count for something." Éric and Christian are now looking to "have fun" throughout the rally, always with a smile on their faces, even after what can be some extremely gruelling stages. "We have the best aperitifs in the whole Afriquia Merzouga Rally", jokes Christian, determined to live this new adventure to the fullest.

#### FIGURE OF THE DAY: 10

10 of the 124 participants in the Afriquia Merzouga Rally are women. Spain's Laia Sanz, a star of rally raids, is one of them. The KTM rider has finished in the top 20 in each of the last five editions of the Dakar. However, she and Spanish rally champion Sara García (Yamaha) are the only female bikers in Merzouga. The Side by Side category has a greater female presence. Italian Camelia Liparoti is at the wheel of her famous pink SxS, with Frenchwoman Sophie Kreisberger also racing as a driver, while a further six women are taking part as co-drivers.

#### Q&A. What should you do to cross dunes fast?

*Frans Verhoeven has 10 Dakar starts under his belt. He is on duty at the Afriquia Merzouga Rally giving customised tips to amateur competitors:* "It's important to pick up speed as you approach a dune. You need to be carrying plenty of momentum at the foot of the dune. It's a bad idea to accelerate hard when you're halfway up the dune because you might end up stuck. Accelerating too soon after reaching the top is also a no-no. It's better to wait until the front wheel is over and only then stop accelerating. The bike slows down and the risk of jumping is low. Remember not to use the front brake before the dunes, or you might end up flying over your bike. You should try and surf the dune without any fits and starts."

#### FOCUS ON... Merzouga, the ideal place for a rally

Southern Morocco is perfect for rallies. "What really sets this place apart is the consistency of the sand, which is extremely soft and forces you to ride very carefully", explains a quad rider. "The terrain here is every bit as hard as what you'll find in the toughest rallies in the world", adds a biker, pointing to the varied terrain, which ranges from dunes and stony areas to fast tracks.

For more information, visit the rally's website [www.merzougarally.com](http://www.merzougarally.com)

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