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Twisted sisters

No sat-navs, no GPS, no manicures. On the 'girls-only Dakar', over 300 feisty females abandon all pleasantries to take on Morocco's legendary dunes old-school style



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: OLD-SCHOOL NAVIGATION SKILLS RULE; A PINK FIT FOR THE 301 WOMEN ON THIS YEAR'S RALLY; SEEING RED IN THE MOROCCAN DUNES

DEAD RECKONING. It's the term coined by sailors in the days of Columbus, when ships navigated the seas by measuring from one known point to another using a chart, ruler and compass. Unless you're a boy scout or dabble in orienteering, it holds little relevance – and is far too difficult – in today's satellite-surrounded society. Which is why one of the world's toughest rallies still uses it.

For the past 22 years, the Rallye Aïcha des Gazelles has sent its ships off into the African desert, like Columbus on the high seas, with only a compass and some 50-year-old black-and-white maps. Aboard trucks, 4WDs, crossovers, bikes and quads, the competitors in this very French, all-female endurance rally are supposed to get lost... in order to 'find themselves'.

I can think of easier ways to both 'find myself' (a chick flick and a glass of wine) and 'lose myself' (many glasses of wine). And yet fellow journo Sally Dominguez and I find ourselves in Africa, getting very, very lost with 300 other competitive women for 12 hours a day, over nine days, without any 21st century navigation aids. Dust, dirt, and feisty, fatigued females – it's not nicknamed 'The RAG' for nothing.



We cast pleading looks at our fellow Gazelles... who drive straight past us

It begins in Paris, where hundreds of 'Gazelles', including our factory team of 11 Volkswagen Amarok TDI400s, are waved off at the ceremonial start under the shadow of the Eiffel Tower. Ahead is a four-day trek through Spain, across the Strait of Gibraltar, to central Morocco, where the landscape changes by the hour; from streets filled with people, donkeys and strange motorised contraptions, to desolate plains punctuated by dunes or volcanic peaks; the only signs of life being the odd camel, a nomad and his goats, or the children who seem to materialise out of the heat haze.

By the time our team reaches the bivouac – a series of rug-strewn tents, a refuelling station and a shower block – everyone is already exhausted.

We surrender to race officials our last ties to the real world – phones, GPS, anything with a satellite signal – pitch our tiny tents, and seem to have just hit the pillow before the rally organiser wakes the tent city with cries of: "*Bonjour, il est quatre heures!*"

Four o'clock? How do you hit snooze in French? (Perhaps we just hit *her*?)

To stretch our befuddled brains further, everything is in French, and the locals largely speak Arabic. In a *tres* French way, English is almost frowned upon – the handful of internationals are truly on their own, and this is made painfully clear on the prologue afternoon.

The Gazelles are sent out from the bivouac in staggered two-minute intervals on six separate routes to find a series of checkpoints (CPs), each marked with a red flag. Today is an easy day, with closer CPs, and the flags more obvious...

With only one day of navigation training, Sal and I muddle through the process of dead reckoning – taking bearings from large land features around us so we can trace our progress – and head off at 186 degrees at the wave of the starter's flag.

South for 16km – sounds too easy. Sure enough, our path is strewn with sand dunes studded with clumps of camel grass, and rocky steps that limit progress to a crawl. Constant stops for dead reckoning after the dune-dodging slows us further, and, after collecting three checkpoints, the sun is dangerously low. As light and landmarks fade, we team up with 11 other stranded Gazelles – we are allowed to convoy after 7pm – and flee to the north.

Bloody camel grass. It's the straw that breaks the proverbial back. We follow the first car into the dunes and are immediately beached on the stuff – our Amarok is alarmingly standard, optioned with only mud tyres and underbody protection. The 4Motion 4WD system and protective panels reduce clearance to 192mm (from 230mm), far less than, say, the lifted Landcruiser up ahead. We cast pleading looks at our fellow Gazelles ... who drive straight past us and disappear into the darkness – another Amarok among them. What happened to the apparently famous



FAR LEFT: THE AUSSIE TEAM OF SALLY DOMINGUEZ (WITH FLAG) AND AUTHOR SAMANTHA STEVENS. ALL SMILES NOW, BUT LATER...

RIGHT: THE GIRLS HAD A COUPLE OF DIGS THAT REACHED NEAR-ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROPORTIONS. THIS ONE TOOK OVER AN HOUR FOR SUCCESSFUL EXTRACTION



Show us ya maps

The Dakar-style event originated in 1990, with all-female teams pitted against each other armed only with a compass and set of 1:125000 and 1:100000 maps. The teams have to reach predefined checkpoints along their course in the least number of kilometres, rather than in the fastest time. There are penalty kilometres for missed checkpoints, and bonus points for the more difficult route through the mountainous dunes, ominously dubbed 'X'.





LEFT: "DO YOU REALLY THINK WE'VE GOT TIME TO MAKE YOUR MUM'S CREPE RECIPE?"



LEFT: A COMBINATION OF SOFT SAND AND CAMEL GRASS MEANS A WOMAN'S WORK IS NEVER DONE. BOTTOM: STARTERS ARE WAVED AWAY FROM UNDER THE EIFFEL TOWER

The very first cliff is so steep the car crests into mid-air then smacks back to earth

Gazelle spirit of helping one another?

Laughing – to avoid crying – we resort to the spade, rake, and grippy red traction mats that will become our closest allies. After hacking at the camel grass for an hour, we're free, and utterly alone apart from the bugs (scorpions?) shifting the sand underfoot.

We've heard that crews are often forced to make camp overnight and find their way home in daylight. Not keen on bunking down with the scorpions, Sally walks ahead with a torch, and we crest the dunes one by one until the bivouac lights finally appear.

Day One is equally forgettable. We spend two hours poking around in various volcanic valleys before finding CP1 hidden in a crater. But we're learning fast, and the tough mud tyres are proving their worth on the sharp shale. We amass an admirable haul of five CPs by 5:30pm, and the bivouac is only 30km as the crow flies. But our inexperienced eyes have missed the contour lines on the old map and the camel grass that obscures our path home. We stumble into the bivouac at 10pm.

The first marathon leg is a welcome reprieve from the daily stress of scarpering back to civilisation. The two, two-day marathon legs see teams sleeping literally where they stop at nightfall, resuming at dawn and finishing at a relocated bivouac. It also introduces the dunes, punctuated by seven monstrous 'ergs', or peaks, that we've been careful to avoid. Now we must dissect them.

Under a beating sun, the desert sand is dangerously soft and sucks the torque from the Amarak's wheels like a fat child with a lollipop. With only 120kW and 400Nm at our disposal, we find the best way to attack the dunes is to keep in high-range 4WD and charge straight up the face; wincing as the fairly standard 21.4-degree ramp angle clears the summit, then popping the throttle to coax-in a lower cog and belly-sliding down the other side under engine compression.


With simpler navigation and an emphasis on driving skill,

it's a welcome reprieve from the rocky black crap and camel grass. The Amarak simply smashes over the peaks, though some require a full circle and a run-up before we can snake up and over the top. We tow several stranded cars out in the process, our anger at our abandonment during the prologue mollified by the fact we're helping others.

The days between the dunes are a blur. Sally gets sick from dehydration – I'm simply sick of driving in second gear – and we eagerly anticipate the final marathon through the giant Ergs of Tagounite.

After losing a day's CPs to Sally's illness, we opt for the hardest route through the orange mounds – intimidatingly dubbed 'X' – as bonus points are on offer. The very first cliff is so steep, the car crests into mid-air then smacks back down to earth, actually skimming on its nose momentarily while ration packs and rubbish pepper the windscreen. As the rear wheels find solid(ish) ground, we break into hysterics – the cracks are really starting to show now – and dubiously look to our fellow Gazelles for help.

Convoy procedure is also allowed though the dunes, where teams can extricate each other from the unforgiving sand. We spot a girl, barefoot and in bright orange Harem pants, running ahead on the trickier dunes and picking the path for her three-car cavalcade. One is soon stuck, and we run over with rake and shovel, hoping to earn our place in the line-up. One dune later, it's us teetering on a clifftop. We wait for the others to whip by – but instantly, hands are all over the hot metal, and our Amarak is literally pushed over the dune. That's the spirit...

It's a fitting final leg of an unbelievably tough adventure, and somehow dulls the more painful memories – the fear of getting lost, the betrayal of being left behind, and the bloody awful 4am wake-up calls. Admittedly, no amount of wine could help you summon the courage needed to crest the ergs; no chick flick could match the high of crossing the finish line, proudly waving an Aussie flag tied to the handle of our well-used rake. 



Over the course of the rally's eight days, the only damage to the team of 11 VW Amaroks was a broken front damper, two bent steel rims (one of them ours), and a repairable front-end after one team crested a dune and landed on another car stranded on the other side. Amaroks claimed second and third outright behind the winning car (a dedicated buggy), and our Aussie car came 12th in the New Gazelle category and 44th outright.

