

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LYNSEY ADDARIO



Racing through the desert in North Africa breeds not only a competitive spirit but a lot of camaraderie as well, when 192 women from 14 nations snake their way across the Moroccan dunes in vehicles ranging from ATVs to SUVs to big rigs.

FINALLY ... DRIVERS WHO STOP AND ASK FOR DIRECTIONS!

THE RALLY OF THE GAZELLES, A BRUTAL 870-MILE TREK ACROSS SCORCHING NORTH AFRICA, ISN'T FOR EVERYONE. (LIKE MEN, FOR EXAMPLE.) WE LOOK BACK AT LAST YEAR'S RALLY TO PREVIEW WHAT'S IN STORE FOR THE 100 TEAMS, INCLUDING ONE FROM THE STATES, SET TO HIT THE SAND THIS MARCH 14.

BY MARISA KATZ



IT'S MARCH 18, 2008. JUST TWO MONTHS SINCE the annual Dakar Rally was canceled in response to terrorist threats. But on the eve of the 18th Rally of the Gazelles, there's no sign of anxiety among the nearly 200 participants, mostly amateurs and enthusiasts, who've ponied up \$18,000 per team. Plans come together over breakfast, a muddled chorus of dialects buzzing under the bivouac's main tent. As the sun rises, the predominantly French field of racers (Portuguese, Canadians, Italians and Russians help fill out the group) pack their vehicles and line them up to await the starter's signal. After setting off, some drivers stop a few hundred feet later to plot paths, while others disappear into the seemingly infinite sand.

The corridor between Morocco and Algeria that skirts the Sahara is dotted with roadside mosques humming with the Islamic call to prayer. But for the next nine days, villagers are drawn to the low-gear rumbling of more than 100 off-road vehicles caravanning across patches of red, rocky earth. In contrast to the legendary Dakar Rally, speed isn't the factor here; instead, the winning teams (in three classes) are the ones that clock the fewest miles between flags, using no more than a map and a compass. More noticeably, all of the competitors are women, some of whom have never driven with a manual transmission, let alone navigated sand dunes and steep hillsides.

This isn't a spectator sport. Action consists of teams digging out vehicles, deciphering maps and simply progressing along the cracked desert floor. But the slow pace is precisely why this event can continue to run through North Africa, while the more dangerous Dakar race—infernal for ripping through villages at breakneck speeds—has been shipped off to South America. Mounting public and political outcry over accidental deaths had made Dakar an easy target for terrorists, who saw the race as a vestige of Western imperialism. (The cancellation of the 2008 rally, spurred by threats from Al-Qaeda, was the first in the event's 31-year history.) The Gazelles have tweaked the rally concept, but they've kept the spirit of Dakar's outreach efforts, donating hundreds of bicycles to rural college students, offering health care for locals via a medical bivouac and employing villagers along the way—just to list a few examples.

"Car racing has always been a male domain," says Gazelles founder Dominique Serra, who came up with the idea 19 years ago in the shower of her Paris apartment. "I created this not only for women to have a proper place in the world of racing but also to show them what they're capable of doing." There are plenty of challenges to push these



Without GPS, cell phones or any other electronic guidance, each team must find its way using only a map, a compass and wits. One wrong turn can mean a cold night spent miles from the main bivouac—a tent city (below) replete with electricity, running water, catered meals and massages. But two well-equipped teams (left and above) create their own campsite and cap off a wayward day by washing down boxed meals with bottles of their own French wine.

"It's hard to explain all that you go through," says Sophie, a two-time race participant (and current volunteer) who lives and works in St-Jean, Quebec, as a security guard. "After this, people go back to their husbands and jobs and realize that things can change, because here it's all about survival."

Despite flat tires and evenings stuck in dunes, nearly all of the teams make it to the finish line. For Montreal native Francine, a mother of three and a four-time Gazelles competitor, the rally has had the kind of transformative effect that Hollywood adores. After her first rally, she got divorced and left a career in corporate training to become a mortgage broker. "I realized I was capable of doing extraordinary things," she says. "After the Gazelles, I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. I felt invincible." ●

Think you could survive the desert without your AC and GPS? E-mail us at post@espnthemag.com.



Although speed isn't a factor in this rally, steep dunes still call for aggressive climbs and perilous descents. Bonus points are awarded if teams follow more difficult routes, but the reward isn't worth the risk when a ruptured tank forces a Spanish duo (below) to dump drinking water to save their leaking gas. Local guides keep up on bikes and motorcycles to show the way, in exchange for food and T-shirts.



Competitors pack their own food but also get French army rations, which they often give to locals along the route, fostering goodwill and helping the Gazelles maintain morale over 870 miles and nine days. In the end, as all but six of the teams cross the finish line, frustration inevitably gives way to elation and a much-needed night of partying back at the bivouac.



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