

Merzouga, 31 March 2019

## AFRIQUIA MERZOUGA RALLY In at the deep end in Morocco!

**The competitors are raring to go! The 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the Afriquia Merzouga Rally will start with a 208 km special on Monday 1 April and last until Friday. A total of 107 participants are ready to hone their rally raid skills in a kaleidoscope of landscapes in south-eastern Morocco, including dunes and stony sections. Now more than ever, the pivotal event continues to live up to its reputation as the "Dakar Academy".**

### Key points:

- 127 competitors are set to start the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the Afriquia Merzouga Rally, with 107 vehicles including 68 motorbikes, 20 side-by-sides and 7 quads
- The race, held under the high patronage of King Mohammed VI, is a pivotal event for all drivers and riders who want to get better at rally raids and lay the groundwork for a future Dakar start
- Reigning Dakar champion Nasser Al-Attiyah is making his debut in a side-by-side
- Monday's opening stage will consist of a 208 km special

### **THE ATMOSPHERE. Pumped up for the race, rain or shine**

If the participants in the Afriquia Merzouga Rally still harboured any doubts about how constantly adapting to change is the name of the game in rally raids, they were completely dispelled after they reached the bivouac next to Hotel Xaluca in Erfoud. The scattered showers of the last few days made the terrain even more treacherous than usual but did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm of the competitors. "We're all here to have fun and disconnect from the day-to-day routine", smiles the French amateur biker Olivier Hembert, who has already raced the Dakar once. "This is the place to be for any rally raid enthusiast", continues his fellow countryman Éric Croquelois (Side by Side). "This is my very first rally raid and I'm itching to hit the track", says the South African biker Robert Gibbon adamantly. "I'll try to finish on time every day so I can go to the evening courses." Indeed, two coaches will run workshops throughout the week to help drivers and riders improve their abilities.

The atmosphere at the bivouac is charged with excitement, helped by the sunshine bathing the technical and administrative scrutineering on Sunday. "It's a fun and lively event, but it's also a race that really puts your navigating and handling skills to the test", explains Yamaha's Adrien Van Beveren. Reigning Dakar car champion Nasser Al-Attiyah will be tackling the challenge in a side-by-side. He is already relishing the prospect: "The Afriquia Merzouga Rally is known for the professionalism of the organisers, the depth of the field and a frame of mind that sets it apart from all other races." The time has come for the talk to stop and the action to start. After the prologue on Sunday, the drivers and riders will get down to business on Monday.

### **A FIGURE. 127 competitors in this new edition!**

127 competitors in 107 vehicles have answered the call of the Afriquia Merzouga Rally this year. As usual, the motorbike category boasts the largest field, with 68 bikers, along with 7 quad riders, 20 drivers and as many co-drivers in the Side by Side category. 12 amateur riders will duke it out in the KTM Adventure on the fringes of the race.

### **HEARD IN THE BIVOUAC**

**Jean-Rémy Berghoune** (France, Side by Side, 1<sup>st</sup> start): "I had to withdraw from my first Dakar last January. It's part of the rally raid learning process and you just have to accept it. I'm really excited to pick up where I left off and discover this extremely challenging rally. I know just how much you can learn here, and the atmosphere is really nice."

**Ross Branch** (Botswana, motorbike, 1<sup>st</sup> start): "I took part in my first Dakar [where he was the best rookie, *ed.*] in January and it was a dream come true. The Afriquia Merzouga Rally is a very exciting challenge because there's always so much to learn. The bar is set very high for navigation, but the experience will pay off in the future."

**Margot Llobera Farré (Andorra, motorbike, 1<sup>st</sup> start):** "Like so many others here, my dream is to take part in the Dakar. The Afriquia Merzouga Rally is the best place to gain experience and secure a place for the Dakar. The changing conditions, with the rain that fell over the last few days and the wind, will make navigating even harder. But I really can't wait to start!"

**Nasser Al-Attiyah (Qatar, Side by Side, 1<sup>st</sup> start):** "I'm delighted to be here. This rally has already proved its worth, and it's an opportunity for me and [co-driver] Mathieu Baumel to experiment with a side-by-side. We're really excited about this new adventure, even more so knowing that the frame of mind of all the people here guarantees we'll have a good time. There are also some things we aren't used to, such as getting the road book in the morning, which is what's going to happen during this week. It'll be a valuable experience."

**Adrien Van Beveren (France, motorbike, 2<sup>nd</sup> start):** "It's a fantastic rally. The landscapes shouldn't distract us from the fact that this is a very challenging rally is, with tricky navigation and a course that exacts a terrible price for every handling error. I might end up opening the race at some point this week, which will only make it harder. Experience is what makes or breaks a Dakar, so every minute out there on the tracks is worth a lot."

### **TOMORROW'S PROGRAMME. Stage 1: Xaluca–Xaluca**

The first of the five stages that make up the Afriquia Merzouga Rally will take place on Monday. An 8 km liaison will take competitors to the start of a 208 km special divided into two parts (86 km and 115 km). "The stage features two major difficulties: a big dune sector around Merzouga and another sector with smaller dunes but just as fiendish", points out sports director Edo Mossi. It will be a long day —just the ticket for those who want to polish their rally raid skills.

**CHECK OUT all the results of the prologue on Sunday afternoon on our site and dedicated social media pages**

More information on the site of the rally [www.afriquiamerzougarally.com](http://www.afriquiamerzougarally.com)

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