

Merzouga, 1 April 2019

AFRIQUIA MERZOUGA RALLY

Van Beveren and Al-Attiyah come out on top while the girls step to the fore

31 March to 5 April 2019

The 10th edition of the Afriquia Merzouga Rally is under way! 127 competitors, including four female bikers who fervently hope to take part in the next Dakar, tackled a drawn-out 208 km long loop around Xaluca on Monday. Adrien Van Beveren (Yamaha) dominated the motorbike stage, with Axel Dutrie (Yamaha) winning the quad race and Nasser Al-Attiyah victorious in the Side by Side category.

Key points:

- The opening stage pitted the competitors against a 208 km special with a large dune sector that put them through the wringer.
- Van Beveren (motorbikes), Al-Attiyah (side-by-sides) and Axel Dutrie (quads) took the spoils
- Four women started the rally in the motorbike category and another three in side-by-sides
- Drivers and riders were given a GPS navigation course after the stage
- Another loop, this one 212 km long, awaits the competitors on Tuesday

STORY OF THE DAY. Girls dream of racing the Dakar too!

These smiles are a rather unusual sight in the bivouac. South Africa's **Kristen Landman** and **Calheine Perry**, Greece's **Polytimi Kriakopoulou** and Andorra's **Margot Llobera** are all beaming. The four female bikers in the Afriquia Merzouga Rally have one objective in mind: starting the Dakar next January. "*Coming here is a great opportunity to keep getting better and secure a ticket for the Dakar*", explains Margot Llobera. "*I'm not really used to tackling dunes*", stresses Polytimi Kriakopoulou. "*Back in Greece, you only see sand on the beach!*"

Meanwhile, Kristen Landman and Calheine Perry could become the first South African women to start the Dakar in 2020. "*It's always been a dream of mine, but if I want it to come true, I need to be patient and learn to fight on the track*", says Calheine Perry. "*Our project has sparked the interest of people in South Africa, so that is an extra motivation*", chirps Kristen Landman. However, they absolutely do not want to get a free pass. "*Once you put your helmet on, it's all the same for men and women*", confirms Margot Llobera. "*It's a tough challenge, but it's the same for everyone.*"

STAGE OF THE DAY. Van Beveren draws first blood

There were a lot of itchy legs out there! The competitors took their machines out for a spin in Sunday's 2 km prologue, won by **Michael Metge** (Sherco) in the motorbike category and **Nasser Al-Attiyah** (Can-Am) in side-by-sides. "*It was fast, but it gave us a glimpse of what we can expect this week*", emphasises the French biker **Charlie Herbst** (KTM). It was an industrious evening for the competitors, who spent the time poring over their road books ahead of the inaugural stage.

The 208 km opener, featuring a large dune sector, was a brutal affair. However, Yamaha's **Adrien Van Beveren** was unfazed and trounced the opposition, beating **Štefan Svitko** (KTM) by 5'12" and **Michael Metge** (Sherco) by 8'13" at the line. **Axel Dutrie** and **Clément Jay** made it a 1-2 for the Drag'on Rally Team in the quad race. Meanwhile, Nasser Al-Attiyah won the Side by Side stage without breaking a sweat. A GPS navigation course was given at Hotel Xaluca after the stage. "*I'm learning a lot*", stressed French co-driver Arnaud Verdoy. "*I'm looking forward to putting it into practice tomorrow!*"

HEARD IN THE BIVOUAC.

Adrien Van Beveren (1st in motorbikes, Yamaha, FRA): "*I messed up my navigation in the prologue and lost some time. I wanted to do well this morning, so I set a high pace to try and win the stage and open a sizeable gap. I went fast but without throwing caution to the wind altogether. Tomorrow will be another long day, and this time I'll be opening the race.*"

Axel Dutrie (1st in quads, Yamaha, FRA): *"It feels good to be racing! After my mechanical problems in the Dakar, the prospect of hitting the track again made me feel a bit apprehensive. I even asked my mechanics to take the head gasket apart yesterday to make sure everything was in working order. I didn't want to go on the offensive today, considering that it was a stage with tricky navigation. But I'm delighted to kick off the rally with a win!"*

Dani Solà (Spain, side-by-sides): *"The last Dakar was an awesome experience, even though a mechanical sent me home. I'm eager to keep improving and the Afriquia Merzouga Rally is the ideal place for this. I know just how far this race pushes your navigating and handling skills. This is my first step towards a potential return to the Dakar."*

PROVISIONAL* STAGE CLASSIFICATIONS.

MOTORBIKES

- 1- Adrien Van Beveren (Yamaha) 3 h 29'10"
- 2- Štefan Svitko (KTM) + 5'12"
- 3- Michael Metge (Sherco) + 8'13"

QUADS

- 1- Axel Dutrie (Yamaha) 4 h 31'18"
- 2- Clément Jay (Yamaha) + 4'04"
- 3- Viel Facondo (Yamaha) + 36'14"

SIDE-BY-SIDES

- 1- Nasser Al-Attiyah (Can-Am) 3 h 52'33"
- 2- Dani Sola (Can-Am) +19'40"
- 3- Frédéric Pitout (Can-Am) + 36'14"

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PROGRAMME: Stage 2: Xaluca–Xaluca (212 km)

Tuesday's stage will take the competitors on a new loop around the Xaluca Hotel, where the race has set up its bivouac. The drivers and riders will face a 212 km special divided into two parts. At 86 km long, the first part is the trickiest one because it features the dunes of **Erg Chebbi**, the landmark for which the Merzouga region is famous. After a neutralised section, the competitors will tackle the remaining 120 km, which are faster but put a greater focus on navigation. *"Understanding that haste makes waste is the key to success"*, underscores sports director Edo Mossi. Participants will be given a navigation course at the end of the stage.

More information on the site of the rally www.afriquiamerzougarally.com

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