

TRANSCENDING SYBERIA

4,400 MILES, 24 TEAMS, 6 TIME ZONES, 2 WEEKS, 1 WINNER:
WELCOME TO THE TRANSSYBERIAN RALLY



>>> Ulan Bator. To the indiscriminating xenophobe, this may sound more like a Fantastic Four baddie than a country's capital, but as nefarious as Mongolia's largest city sounds, it is actually a place of grand (pre)historic significance, sweeping natural majesty and uncompromising manmade beauty. However, alongside UNESCO World Heritage sites like the Bogd Khan Uul mountain, which rolls the landscape into frozen pastoral swells, or any of the hundreds-of-years-old monasteries, temples and palaces that dot the city and countryside, there is something else particularly special about the city; something a bit more, dare we say it, extreme. For two years, Ulan Bator has played the role of final destination for Porsche's annual Transsyberian Rally, a hair-raising, chassis-rending race that ends abruptly in a grit of rubber on stone, and a cloud of dust and steam. Of course, much like life, this rally is more than just the destination; it's about the journey.



Ripping ruggedly onto the scene in August 2007, the Transsyberian Rally has since been described by many of its participants and fans as an "old school" endurance race, and it's easy to see why. There's a certain amount of fire in your belly and spit in your eye that you need to even have the guts to enter this race, let alone complete it. Taking place over a span of about two weeks, the grueling contest sees a growing number of international teams race from Moscow, Russia to the aforementioned villainously-named Ulan Bator. The route of the rally looks like a crooked



< CHRISTIAN LAVIEILLE AND FRANCOIS BORSOTTO TEAM 17 FRANCE >



< TEAM RUSSIA >

frown, carved with a rusty knife on the grizzled features of one of the world's most dynamically treacherous landscapes.

Throughout its history, the vast region of Syberia has seen the migration of a rich cultural tapestry of nomadic tribes and established nations, sometimes clashing violently in their back and forth bids for power. That heritage remains true today in the region, but instead of armed combat and steely armaments, the weapons are semi-modified Porsche Cayennes, Toyota Land Cruisers, Mercedes-Benz G320s and Land Rover Defenders, just to name a few. The sinuous strength of arm and hardened spirit that pounded through the warriors of yesteryear are still employed by the combatants of today, though the means and ends of battle are markedly different. Or are they? The struggle may no longer be based on the capture of land and power, but if it's one thing the rally does prove, it's that domination is still everything. Of course, in order to achieve that ascendance to supremacy, the victor will have to first defeat another enemy: Mother Nature; and she's a bitter, bitter mistress.

Over the entirety of its approximate 4,412 miles (7,108 km), drivers are forced to do battle with literally every type of terrain, from the rampaging power of whitewater rapids to dense defence of narrow forest paths to the howlingly high winds of the haunting Gobi desert. Nothing is off-limits, and though it seems contrary to the reality of a given situation,

no obstacle is un-traversable. Since this is a Porsche-inspired event, most drivers and co-drivers captain the Porsche Cayenne S Transsyberia, an initially criticised bit of automotive ingenuity, which has forced many of its detractors to eat their shoes thanks to the car's championship durability and victorious performance in this race. While the Cayenne has been laying down its dominance over the race since its inception, other makes like Mitsubishi and Suzuki are showing up, rising through the ranks and finding out what it takes to grit through the gristle of the ground and bring home the win. Most of the time, a check mark in the "W" column is primarily thanks to the skill of the driver, but small adaptations to the body of the chariots have also increased performance; these include a pared down rear bumper and higher angled front, a smoother surface and exhaust system to reduce jutting pieces and eliminate snags, a harder, thicker undercarriage and skid plate to provide armoured protection, reinforced A and B pillars, increased sealing to make driving through water less ... you know ... "wet," an advanced navigation system and, our personal favourite, a roof-mounted snorkel. Alternatively plodding and racing through the muck, water and gravel of the rally, competitors can usually expect to race daily tours that can take upwards of 15 hours to complete; even more if something should go wrong like, say, "death." In all seriousness, the Transsyberian Rally is nothing if not perilous, but while there is a substantial number of accidents and smaller injuries, there have as yet been no mortal consequences during the rally. That, of course, doesn't mean that it can't be considered a "death race," for surely that possibility is ever-present given the danger levels.

And yet, despite the fact that this race contains all of the bed-wetting terror and shrill-peeling excitement of the other major rallies the world over, it is still somewhat looked down upon or worse, ignored, by some of the racing community. Admittedly, this might simply be a case of its age. Unlike other similar races, like The Dakar, which can trace its roots back to 1978, Transsyberian is really still in its infancy. However, the disrespect and disavowal with which it has to currently contend is changing. Already rallying royalty like Armin Schwarz, René Metge and Rod Millen have stepped into a car and slogged it out in Syberia, each stating that it was anything but a walk in the park. Christian Lavieille, a former FIA World Champion who has been turning heads with impressive racing and endurance runs since 1994, and latest winner of the 2008 Transsyberian with a time of 27 hours and 13 minutes, famously said, "The Transsyberia is magic." We can only assume that he means dark magic, of course.

It seems that the strategy for each race differs depending on the driver. The overall feeling, however, is that while boosts of speed are important,



< TEAM USA >



< TEAM SWITZERLAND >



< TEAM PORTUGAL >

slow, steady and a bit cautious sometimes do win the race. "It isn't just driving fast. It's surviving to cross the finish line," says Millen. "Forget about driving flat-out all the time." Even some of our local Gulf boys, who are largely unperturbed by the rigours of their craft, have said that the Transsyberian is one of the most contentious races in which they have competed. Adel Abdullah, a local Qatari and Transsyberian veteran, spoke with Sur la Terre and offered personal opinions and anecdotes about his experiences in the rally, all of which can be read in our exclusive interview with him in the following pages. After speaking with him, we were further impressed by the sheer scope of the race; and by "impressed," we of course mean "frightened."

In its relatively small time on the international racing scene, the Transsyberian Rally has established itself as a formidable institution. As it grows, welcoming more and more representatives from varying countries across the globe, it will continue to delight its fans and push its drivers to even higher levels of competition and performance. Regardless of how it changes and evolves, one thing is for sure about the rally: it is and always will be one hell of a ride. ●

For more information about the Transsyberian Rally, including driver information, results and the latest news, rumble over to <http://www.transsyberia-rallye.de>



< TOP 3 TEAM 5 >



< SAID RASSHID AL HAJRI TEAM # 13 (QATAR) >



ADEL ABDULLAH: The Transsyberian Survivor

What is the Transsyberian Rally for those who don't know? What is the feeling? What's the importance of the race? Is it different from other rally experiences you've had? If so, how?

Well, I started racing about 19 years ago, in 1990. I've done many rallies and cross country races in the region since then. Transsyberia is completely different. There is everything in this rally: trees, grass, forest, mountains, rivers; everything you can see, everything you can feel. Everyday, especially in Russia, is something different. When we started in Moscow, it was muddy and slippery, through water and forest, and it becomes very hard to keep control of the car. On the second day, there was sand in the forest, which I've never seen before. The race goes from one element to another and requires more concentration than in any other race. You see, the organisers for Transsyberia do not prepare the drivers as much as in other rallies, so everything is a surprise and

it is easier to get lost. In Mongolia, there are many ditches, storms and times when it's raining so hard that you can't see. All of these challenges are harder to overcome than anyone imagines.

Also, there are experiences that you wouldn't believe, like once in Mongolia when our car suffered from electrical problems. It was pouring rain and we had lost our way. We tried to stop and restart the systems in the car, but it didn't work. I needed a jumper cable, but of course I didn't have one, so I had to explain to the people in this small Mongolian village that I needed a cable. We finally managed after 15 minutes to get this cable with prongs on one end and open wires on the other. Luckily, it worked and once the car started everyone jumped up and celebrated! You're not only dealing with the ride and the car, but different cultures and situations as well.



So, as a whole, you have to be ready for anything. It sounds dynamic and must be difficult to prepare for physically and mentally. How do you get ready for this kind of race?

For the Transsyberian Rally, you have to work on endurance. Your body needs to be fit enough to push yourself to the maximum for four to five hours a day or more. The first year we went, we met a French driver who had done rallies for 25 years. When we finished the Transsyberian, he told me it was the most difficult race he'd driven. The race goes into undeveloped places, so again, the terrain can change and get worse as we go along. If you see asphalt, you're happy! [laughs] In 2007, the water that we had to pass through caused a big problem for us, especially because I was not experienced in driving through water. I learned that watching other racers go first and watching the currents of the water was important. You learn from your own mistakes, and you learn from the mistakes of others. It's not just speed and power.



The Transsyberian race is getting more and more popular, isn't it? Many drivers and aficionados used to not take the race seriously. Why is that, and do you think that mentality is changing?

Some people don't take the challenge seriously, since the rally is only three years old and hasn't gotten much media coverage. But, if you talk to the drivers that race there, they will tell you that it is no joke. These are world-class rally drivers who know that the difference between winning, losing and crashing in this race is very small. The status of our drivers is increasing as well. Transsyberia is now seeing former European and world champions racing in it. The talent and recognition have both grown since its start, and even from 2007 to 2008. The rally is getting more and more media attention, as well. Journalists and fans are everywhere now, which shows that it is getting more popular. ●

