

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD RACE

There's nothing like a good challenge, and the elation that comes with its completion. Ralph Edelstein tackles the Gibraltar Rally - 8000km of on and off-road through the heart of Europe...

Photography Alessio Corradini and Werner Hollaender

WITH A LOUD CRAAAACK my front wheel dives into the 1.5m deep ditch. My bike and I are tossed to the left and just as my helmet hits the wall I see my mirror snap off. My left leg is stuck under the bike, my right is sticking far into the air, parallel to the rear wheel. The engine stalls and before I self-examine for anything broken or bruised, I assess my situation. Which is not good. It is 36°, my water is finished, I've crashed way off route and I can't possibly get my bike out of this ditch by myself. I screwed up. I screwed up big time...

Back at the start...

Five days earlier the Gibraltar Race started high up in the hills of Romania. The rally, in its third year, is an 8000km long

off-road motorbike rally through the heart of Europe. In fourteen long days the caravan of riders, service teams and race direction crosses nine countries, to finally finish in the most southern tip of Spain, on the rock of Gibraltar. Most interesting to us mere mortals is that this rally is specially designed for non-professional riders on big all-road bikes.

So, it's not as expensive, dangerous or impractical as, say, the Dakar but it is still a full-on, hardcore, long-distance rally experience. Daily distances are a severe 450 to 600km, which means you spend ten to 12 hours per day on your bike. But much like the Dakar its daily stages consist of off-road 'specials' and on-road 'liaisons', connecting the specials. The liaisons are longer distances, but since off-road riding isn't as fast as on-road the balance in time is about 50/50.



The hills of southern Spain: up, up and a-wahey

The atmos in the bivouac is friendly and matey - everyone wants everyone to make it to Gibraltar



I've crashed way off route and I can't get my bike out of this ditch by myself. I screwed up. I screwed up big time...



Taking a wrong turn can seriously set you back



Many riders travel in groups - it's all about consistency



BMW's F850GS turned out to be an excellent choice



There are no mechanics on route so a tool kit is a must

Under starter's orders and there are scores of GSs in a variety of displacements, multiple generations of Africa Twins, a Multistrada, many KTMs, some Huskys and a few others. My bike is a BMW F850GS, it is brand new and hardly run-in. There are questions from my fellow rallyists that probe the logic of taking a brand new bike on a tough rally such as this one. My response is the combination of off-road and on-road is exactly what this bike was made for. GS stands for Gelände/ Straße, meaning off-road/on-road. I'm giving my bike 8000 harsh kilometres to earn its name...

Mist, cold, rain

Each day, the first rider heads off at 7am, followed at one minute intervals by the rest of us. I've been assigned the sacred number 46, which means my adventure starts at 7.46.

After a restless night I open the curtains to Day One, pouring rain, fog and icy cold. While the first two specials are 100km in total, they are uphill and very technical. I have some off-road experience, but not much.

After the first 95km liaison we turn onto a gravel road. Despite my rain gear I'm already soaking wet. And freezing. The latter is soon forgotten, because the two 50km specials instantly divide boys from men: they are working, slogging, trudging, pushing, drudging, hauling and heaving specials. It had been raining for weeks which meant the entire route is knee-deep clay, soaking wet grass, slippery rock paths and motorcycle misery. 1.5 hours is allocated for each special, but I need 3.5 hours... for each.

Yet despite all the above I have Werner Hollaender in my corner. His company, BERRT, organises the Dutch participation in the race and Werner is a very experienced rally rider and a BMW off-road instructor. And he's right on my tail shouting tips as we go: 'Look forward! Butt back! Let her roll!'

Despite this I crash four times. I consider giving up several times and don't reach the sanctuary of asphalt until late in the afternoon. This means I can't finish the remaining 350km and two specials in time for the mandatory briefing at 7.30pm.

Eventually, several hours behind and completely run down I reach the bivouac. It is now the very late evening. Yet I am euphoric because, despite the sheer endless fiddling, I've made it in one piece! And despite four crashes, my BMW doesn't have a scratch! Bring on the next 7500km.

Roller coaster

It transpires this first day becomes the blueprint for the rest of the rally: a continuous, high-speed roller coaster of emotions, surroundings, weather and road conditions. One moment I feel euphoric, the next I curse everyone and everything to do with this race. But, giving up is not an option.

Fortunately my F850GS is proving to be an excellent travel companion. It is light and nimble enough to get me through the specials without any trouble. Thanks to the huge 21-inch front wheel, I can take on logs and rocks as if they aren't there. And on the liaisons it's a comfortable and fast blast to the next special, without a sore behind.

Every night, when I arrive at the bivouac, I leave my bike in the caring and capable hands of Bennie and Rodrigo - through his company, Memo Tours, Bennie provides technical assistance for Team BERRT. Out of his impressive black service truck he has successfully assisted dozens of riders to the finish of the Dakar rally. He knows a thing or two about motorcycle rallies, yet here I am an easy customer because, despite multiple crashes, my bike doesn't need the slightest bit of work.

Navigation

From Romania we move into Hungary, then Slovenia and Italy. The beauty of Europe is overwhelming. Every morning I receive a GPS-device, updated with the liaisons and specials for that day. The liaisons are just tracks that you have to follow, nothing difficult. They stay clear of motorways so we see countless medieval villages and churches, farms and wineries, forts and castles. We ride through forests and woodlands and alongside vineyards and fields. There are hills and valleys. It's all absolutely stunning.

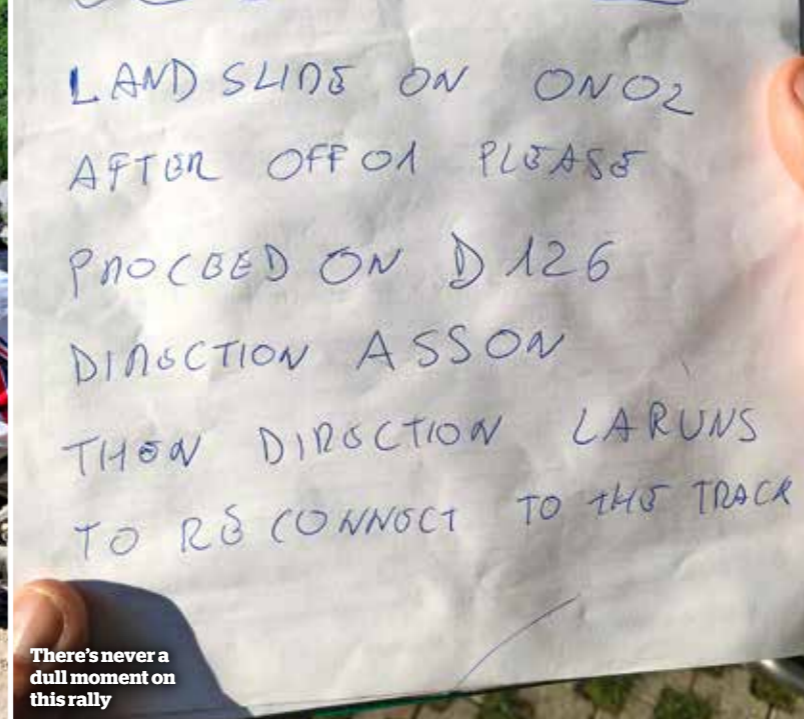


'One moment I feel euphoric, the next I curse everything to do with this race. But, giving up is not an option'

THE GIBRALTAR RALLY



Get up, brush yourself down and try again



There's never a dull moment on this rally



Team BERRT/Memo Tours reaches the finish line

The challenges are the off-road specials. Here navigation is via waypoints. This means reading the landscape, zooming in and out on the GPS and checking whether you are still on the right track/path to the next one. The specials are all on unpaved roads. Although they are public the majority of them are used perhaps twice per year, by a farmer on his tractor.

On one particularly beautiful special, through vineyards and truffle forests, I coast confidently on my foot pegs. Things are running smoothly when suddenly the track ends. It's strange, because I can clearly see that Waypoint 9 is straight ahead of me. But between me and it there is a meadow, about one kilometre long, with man-high nettles, thistles and other weeds. And there is no track.

I decide, against my better judgement, to go straight through the meadow. Up on the foot pegs my BMW easily finds its way through the vegetation. Before I know it I'm almost halfway there, when suddenly my front wheel dives into a 1.5m deep ditch.... CRAAAAAACK!!! Picture the scene: I am down, in the middle of an almost unreachable Italian mountain field that is covered by man-high weeds. I am completely invisible.

Solve it myself

I tell the lady at BMW's SOS-centre that she doesn't have to send an emergency service (if the F850GS tips over an emergency signal is automatically transmitted to this centre, at

which point you are asked – via your dashboard – whether you need medical or technical assistance). I assess my situation. It is not good. My first thought is to call Werner. He always has an answer. But then pride gets the better of me. I wanted this rally. I wanted an adventure. Well, here is your adventure!

To find my way back I create a waypoint on my GPS, put the Garmin in my pocket and start walking. Now that there's no air flowing through my three layers of gear I can feel just how hot 36° is. And how stupid it was to not refill my Camelbak at the last stop. After half-an-hour on foot I see a farmer, and his tractor, working the land. Red-faced and streaming sweat I deploy elaborate gestures and mime my predicament for him.

Fortunately the farmer is receptive to my appeal for aid and tells me to hop on his tractor and together we go in search of my bike. We find it without too much trouble, but it turns out righting it isn't going to be quite so straightforward; my new best friend doesn't have a rope with him, which means our only option is human, rather than tractor, power. Physically, I'm completely breaking down, but after twenty minutes of hard labour the BMW is back on its wheels. I hit the starter button and, without hesitation, the engine starts. I see the surprise on the farmer's face. Surprise and relief that the struggle is over. He points me in the right direction and sends me on my way shouting, 'piano, piano' (slowly, slowly) as I go. He climbs back on his tractor and heads back to his field. Once

I find asphalt again I decide to forget about the rest of the specials for the day and take the fastest road to the bivouac. I've had enough sweat and excitement for now.

In the following days our rally caravan rides through France and into Spain, and Portugal for a short stint. And although I've visited all these countries multiple times, I am again completely flabbergasted by the incredible beauty and variety of the landscapes. One moment I'm ploughing through a lush green river bed, an hour later the surroundings look like I've landed on Mars. Then, not much further on, I find myself in the Grand Canyon.

With each day my confidence grows and my off-road skills improve. And with every day that lump of rock in southern Spain comes 500km closer. And finally, after two hard weeks of long days, short nights, endless miles and countless incredible experiences I reach and cross the finish line in Gibraltar. I have to admit that I am completely at the end of my rope, but with a heart that almost explodes with pride. It's an exhilarating and intoxicating combination. I bloody made it. And in one piece. Me and the bike.

Without hesitation I fill my boot with lukewarm prosecco and drink long and hard. This is a euphoric moment. This is the life! And I know one thing for sure – I have a new hobby. So, when is the Dakar? **Bike**
gibraltarrace.com

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EVENTS 2019

Ralph considers three more European rallies that are worth getting hot and sweaty about...

» 16-23 March Tuareg Rallye, Algeria

The Taureg is probably the closest you'll get to the full-on experience of the Dakar. This rally is completely off-road and takes place in the Algerian desert, which means no liaisons or roads. The organization offers two levels of difficulty: Expert or Pro. Not one for the happy amateur.

tuareg-rallye.eu



» 19-26 May Hellas Rally Raid, Greece

Another harsh, seven-day Greek adventure that's now also open to amateur riders. Which means, if you feel up to the challenge, you get the opportunity to watch the big boys play from very close up indeed. Although clearly they'll disappear over the horizon before you know where you are.

hellasrally.org

» 28 Aug/3 Sep Serres Rally, Greece

This tough seven-day off-road rally has been around for a number of years, but since 2017 the organisers have also offered a more relaxed Adventure Tour version, that runs parallel to the race. They call it 'Living the passion without the pressure'. Clearly...

serresrally.com