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From Aug. 15, 2005

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Grand Erg: Back from the toughest Amateur-Desert Rally.



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If someone says, the Dakar is hard - he don't know the one-week German Amateur-Rally "Grand Erg", which finished last Saturday in Tunisia. Organized the second time, only 13 cars and 2 trucks competed in the race, which started in Tataouine in the middle-east of Tunisia and ends in the Oasis-Town Douz, the "gate to the Sahara".

In only 8 days the competitors had to manage six legs with about 2.300 kolometres. The difficulties were not such long stages as like in the Dakar-rally, the difficulties were the single heavily, tricky and soft dune-fields - up to 120 kilometres and in one stage with no exit - in each direction - for 60 kilometres and more from the heaviest point.

The first leg from Tataouine to Tialet with 279 kilometres nearly to the Libyan border was fast with many pistes, sandy tracks and first little dune-fields. But this stage was only the "warm up" - on day 2 the participants had to master a 230-kilometres round-course through the high dunes around Tialet, a mix of dune-tracks with stronger sand, pistes and stony regions. Tricky, but not really hard - except for some first teams, which had to repair their cars the whole night after. "Wonderful first legs" said the Tunisian-based German Gerald Jacoby, who participated also in FIA-rallies before this Amateur-rally with his T1 Mitsubishi Pajero. "Fast, sandy, perfect for our car".

The mix of the participants and their cars was the major essence of this rally. Cars built after regulations of the FIA against regular 4x4-cars like a Suzuki Samurai - professionals against young drivers, who are the first time in the desert. The results surprised: Some of the "newbees" settled better times as some professionals; many regular cars (with better suspensions as the only modification) could relax every evening in the camps instead of repairing any damages. In the result the first positions changed every day - sometimes the FIA-cars were leading, on other days a regular built Land Rover Defender or Toyota Land Cruiser was in front.

With a perfect Organization and a well prepared medical-service (under direction of the Dakar-approved ORMS-Service) the rally started in the third leg back from Tialet to Tataouine about 393 kilometres, like the first stages not very hard but with tricky mountain-passages to cross.

The "big hit" was waiting on day four. None of the competitors could really know, how hard this leg from Tataouine to Douz should become. After 90 kilometres of high-speed pistes the participants had to cross a first Dune-belt with 120-metres-high Dunes, settled in the south of the oasis Ksar Ghilane. After the first belt the last chance to give up - the "point of no return" - was waiting after a "hardcore downhill". Every competitor could see, how tough this downhill was - 30 metres upwards the first truck, a Mercedes Unimog, rolled over and was lying in the sand (none was injured).

From here the route goes straight - 120 kilometres through pure dunes, with no chance to get out for 60 kilometres in each direction from the heaviest point. If you were here, you had to drive through.

The dune-fields varied between soft, small dunes, higher dune-hills and long sandy valleys - the target of the day was the "mysterious" sea between the dunes, "which cannot be visited with cars". All participants arrived at this sea, where the Organization pointed a CP - but not even one competitor should reach the finish in Douz at the same day. All had to make a nightcamp in the desert - the faster drivers nearer to Douz, to slower drivers in the near of the sea.

"This stage was incredible" said Eric Boecken from Cologne in Germany, driver of a 4x4 MAN Truck built after FIA-regulations. "We had three punctures with our heavy-duty truck, three times with hard work under a strong burning sun".

The temperatures varied during the whole rally, from rain in Tataouine with only 15 degrees up to 46 degrees in the sun during the dune-legs. Normally under rally-conditions you need up to 6 litres water to drink, here you need 15 litres - on one day!

The rally ended with two smaller stages, one as a 155 kilometres round-course through soft dune-fields nearly the Oasis-Town Douz, and one last short round in the Mountains between El Hamma and Gabes in the middle of Tunisia. After these strange days it was no surprise anymore, that a minimal-modified Land Rover Defender 110 won the race - and not a hightech-FIA car.

The Organizers under direction of the German Joerg Russler have been satisfied about the event - this new Amateur-rally was very hard, but with no bad crashes and injured participants. For 2007, Russler now plans a new, third edition of the "Grand Erg Marathonrally". "We have enough rallies for soft guys" laughs Russler, "our standart was and is to be the toughest Amateur-rally in the deserts of Tunisia".

For more informations please visit the official website at | www.granderg.de |.

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