**MORE THAN HALF 2024’S DAKAR CARS ARE MADE IN SA!**

*Epic7,900 km two-week Dakar starts in Saudi Arabia 5 January*

Dakar 2024 is only three weeks away. On Friday 5 January 2024, 354 crews comprising of 72 cars, 137 motorcycles and 10 quads, 78 Challenger cars and SSVs, and 46 Trucks will line up to start Dakar 2024’s 157 km prologue through the Arabian Desert around the Saudi city Al-Ula.

That sets the starting order for the next day’s first 532 km Arabian desert stage to Al Henakiyah before 4,727 km of racing and 7,891 km overall, to the finish at Yanbu on Friday 19 January. This preview covers all you need to know about the gruelling 2024car, four wheeler and truck race.

Of the 72 cars entered in Dakar 2024, thirty eight of them, 23 Toyota Hiluxes, 12 Centurys, three Red-Lined, and two Ford Rangers, were built in South Africa. That’s more than half the field! Twelve South Africans will also either drive or navigate. And there will be a literal army of South Africans in the bivouac following and supporting the race.

Double reigning champion, Toyota Gazoo Racing has entered no less than five made-at-Kyalami Hallspeed Dakar Hiluxes, three of them driven by South Africans, two of which have South African navigators, too. Giniel de Villiers and Dennis Murphy lead the team, aided, and abetted by Guy Botterill and Brett Cummings, and rookie Saood Variawa with French notes man Francois Cazalet. They will be backed by two international crews in Brazilian Lucas Moraes Lucas and Armand Monleon, and American Seth Quintero and Dennis Zenz.

The rest of the Toyota Hilux army comes from all over the world. Among them, another South African crew, 2018 Rookie winner Hennie de Klerk and Juan Möhr’s TreasuryONE Hilux is not a Hallspeed car but built around the corner by WCT Engineering in Kyalami. Among the notable other Hallspeed Hiluxes, expect Saudi home hero Yazeed Al Rajhi and Timo Gottschalk to be on the pace, former Le Mans winner Frenchman Romain Dumas and Max Delfino are an interesting entry and never underestimate their compatriots, Guerlain Chicherit and Alex Winocq at the Dakar.

Among the biggest news at Dakar 2024 is Ford’s official return with a pair of NWR Pietermaritzburg built, SA rally raid developed M-Sport Ford World Rally Team Rangers. One of those will be driven by South African rookie crew Gareth Woolridge and Boyd Dreyer, with Spanish Dakar legend Nani Roma and Alex Haro Bravo aboard the second Ranger. Czech privateers Martin Prokop and Viktor Chytka are another regular Dakar threat in their Ford Raptor.

Sticking with the South African theme, Johannesburg-based Century Racing is back with a split two-car factory effort. South African crew Brian Baragwanath and Leonard Cremer step up to Century’s all-new all-wheel drive T1+ class CR7-T, while Frenchmen Mathieu Serradori and Loic Minaudier continue for their quest for that illusive T1.2 class win with their rear-driven CR6-T. A fleet of ten privateer Century buggies are driven by crews from all around the world, headlined by Dutch twins Tim and Tom Coronel, and former bikers, Spanish lass Laia Sanz and Maurizio Gerini’s Astara version.

Last but not least among the South African cars, Red-Lined machines are also built alongside the Grand Prix Circuit at Kyalami. Red-Lined, whose cars won the amateur T1.1 class in 2023, has teamed up with Chinese T1.2 4x2 class winner Wei Han and Li Ma. They make their top class T1+ debut in a Red-Lined-based HanWei Motorsport entry. Two other Red-Lined REVO+ T1+ cars are entered for teen lady 2023 Dakar SSV sensation Aliyyah Koloc and South African notes man Riaan Greyling, and Belgian rookie Stefan Carmans and Antonius van Tiel.

The South African armada must first however first overcome one or two significant rivals to win again. Not least of whom is Gazoo Racing refugee, and reigning driver and navigator champions, Qatari Dakar legend Nasser Al-Attiyah and Mathieu Baumel aboard a Prodrive Hunter for the 2024 race. If that’s not enough, that dynamic duo is backed by no less than nine-time World Rally Champion, Frenchman Sebastien Loeb, still looking for his maiden Dakar win alongside Fabian Lurquin.

Speaking of mega experience, Audi Sport brings an unchanged team to its swansong Dakar aboard its trio of sophisticated petrol-electric hybrids. Mr. Dakar, Frenchman Stéphane Peterhansel is looking for no less than a fifteenth Dakar win on both two and four wheels alongside Edouard Boulanger. Spanish teammate, double former World Rally Champion

Carlos Sainz Snr is looking for his fourth Dakar victory with Cruz Lucas reading the notes. And never ignore Swedes Mattias Ekström and Emil Bergkvist in the third Audi.

Other Dakar cars to keep an eye out for are any of the X-Raid Minis, and notably Pole Krzysztof Holowczyc and Lukasz Kurzeja, and Lithuanian Vaidotas Zala and Paulo. There’s also fleet of MD buggies chasing 4x2 honours led by the likes of Christian Lavieille and Valentin Sarreaud, and Simon Vitse and Frederic Lefebvre. A pair of Chinese BAIC entries for Guoyu Zhang and Zi Yunliang and Sha He, are also worth keeping and eye on.

The Dakar Challenger class Can-Am factory team has Lithuanian Rokas Baciuska and Oriol Vidal, Chilean Francisco Lopez Contardo and JP Latrach, and fast Spanish lass Cristina Gutierrez Herrero and Pablo Moreno in its line-up. They face Taurus-mounted Polish family Goczal, Eryk and Oriol Mena, Marek alongside Maciej Marton and Michal with Szymon Gospodarczyk. Add American Red Bull Juniors, Mitch Guthrie and Kellon Walch racing a Taurus and Austin Jones and Gustavo Gugelmin in a Can Am. And Chilean Yamaha X-Raid pair, Ignacio Casale and Alvaro Leon.

The SSVs see Can-Am crews, Portuguese João Ferreira and Filipe Palmeiro and Spanish crew Gerard Farres Guell and Diego Ortega up front and fighting Sebastien Loeb Polaris teams Xavier de Soultrait and Martin Bonnet, and Florent Vayssade and Nicolas Rey. Add Saudi home hero Yasir Seaidan and Adrien Metge’s Can-Am and Japan’s Shinsuke Umeda and Maurizio Dominella in another Polaris

Dakar would however not be Dakar without the trucks, and 2024 is no exception. Iveco is taking no chances on repeating its 2023 win with victors Janus van Kasteren, Darek Rodewald and Marcel Snijders back at the head of an armada of the Italian behemoths driven by among others, countrymen Mitchel and Martin van den Brink, and Richard de Groot, and Czech Martin Macik. Tatra has Czech drivers Valtr Jaroslav and Martin Soltys at the helm, while countryman Ales Loprais pilots the lone Praga, and Teruhito Sugawara drives the only Hino in Dakar 2024. Dutch drivers Gerrit Zuurmond and Pascal de Baar drive two MAN trucks, and Gert Huzink a Renault.

In addition to the full 4,727 km that the regular cars attack in anger, nine ‘next technology’ vehicles will race in the new alternative energies Dakar Mission 1000. Catering for fully electric, hydrogen and hybrid cars, Mission 1000 races ten 100 km sections for a total of 1,000 km through the Dakar fortnight. And the Dakar Classic regularity rally once again caters for 20th-century Dakar vehicles running at their own pace through 3,586 km of timed sections and a total distance of 7,366 km.

"We have made sure that the fifth edition of Dakar in Saudi Arabia will be the toughest race since we have come to the Middle East," race director David Castera warned. “We will race 4,727 km and cover 7,891 km of special stages, including a new two-day ‘48h chrono’ marathon stage, where competitors must stop at the nearest of eight bivouacs at 4pm and crews will have no contact with their teams. This one will be tough. Good luck to all competitors and teams!”

Also the opening round of the third season of the W2RC World Rally-Raid Championships Dakar 2024 starts with the 157 km Al-Ula Prologue on Friday 5 January. Day 1 on Saturday races 532 km to Al Henakiyah, before 662 km to Al Duwadimi, and 733 km on to Al Salamiya on Monday. Day 4 races 631 km to Al Hofuf, before 727 km to Shubaytah, an 818 km lap around there on Thursday, and on to Riyadh on Friday. Saturday is the rest day before an 873 km trek to Al Duwadimi on Sunday 14 January, before 678 km to Ha’il, and then 639 km Al-Ula. A 609 km loop around Al-Ula follows on Wednesday, before 587 km to Yanbu, and finally, a 328 km sting in the tail loop to the Friday 19 January finish at Yanbu.

*\*Motorsport Media’s 2024 Dakar Car, Four-Wheeler & Truck Preview is powered by Gazoo Toyota Racing. Find Motorsport Media’s Dakar Motorcycle Report powered by Tork Craft Tools Here*