

Mad dogs and Englishmen...

The inaugural run of 'The Riyadh 300' Desert Rally was held in April and was organised (very loosely) under the auspices of the RGBB Off Road Motorcycle Group.

The idea originated in January this year following the cancellation of the world famous Dakar Rally. By April we had 24 entrants from 15 nations from across the ex-pat community in Riyadh, all planning to ride 300 km north through the Ad-Dhana dunes (the sandy bit about 120 km outside Riyadh on the way to Dammam, for those of you who notice these things). Ages ranged from 18 to 65+ and experience ranged from relative novice to expert.

The assistance of the Riyadh Rovers (Roger & Leslie, Andrew & Cheri, and Kevin & Sarah amongst others) was invaluable in the lead up and on the day. Experienced 4 x 4 drivers with sand driving skills, they helped in the initial recce, set out waypoints in the desert, got stuck, got unstuck, acted as 'sweepers' (follow on vehicles to pick up the lost, injured, broken down, babbling or loony) and generally helped out in every way they could.

A 75 km route was set out in the dunes a few weeks in advance of the run and waypoints recorded. The intention was to run 2 laps a day over two days with an overnight camp, to give a total distance of around 300 km. Safety plans were drawn up with the intention of making sure that everybody got back OK, and disclaimers drafted up in case anybody didn't. Unofficial Rallying is illegal in KSA so we emphasized that the event was not a race but more like a jaunt in the country for like-minded individuals to enjoy the delights of the desert landscape.

That was the plan, anyway. Of course, and like all best laid plans of men, on the day it all went wrong and we had to improvise, which is another way of saying that we made it up as we went along.

We left Riyadh early Thursday morning in small groups on the weekend of the run and drove out to the rendezvous off the Dammam highway and then onwards to the camp site in the dunes. One group of riders was delayed due to a burst tyre and other complications. Then the setting out of the waypoints

took a lot longer than we had anticipated. So instead of our intended 10-00 am start we were not ready to line up until 1-30 pm.

The temperature was a rather balmy 42C on the start line. Unbeknown to us, this was the precursor to the big sandstorm in the Riyadh area that evening and the heat was rising accordingly. Brains were boiling before we even set off, dressed as we were in jackets, trousers, helmets, heavy boots and gloves. I did question whether we were doing the right thing momentarily, but then the flag went down and we were under way.

The first ten kilometers were uneventful apart from my realising that it was way hotter than I had expected. I dropped to my usual position at the rear of the field with Chris and Jarkko. Chris and I were relative novices and Jarkko was on an old trail bike.

We noticed that the trail of the leading pack was slowly veering north whereas the first checkpoint was located due west, so we pulled up to check GPS's. For some unknown reason the whole advance pack of riders were heading off into the desert in the wrong direction. After some discussion as to the correct heading (none of our GPS units were in agreement), we set off. The heat was pretty unbearable when we stopped, with no shade and being swaddled up in protective clothing from head to toe.

At around 15 km we found the first waypoint, a solitary flag sitting on top of a dune with a small bottle at the base for each rider to place a numbered token. There was only one other token there. I couldn't help but laugh at the prospect that we might take the podium places whilst the more experienced riders continued northwards towards Iraq.

We set off for waypoint two, picking up another rider, Sam, en route. Originally one of the leading group, he had realized after heading in the wrong direction



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