

DESERT



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STORMER

The McRaes – Colin, Alister etc – are behind this madcap rear-wheel drive Dakar Rally buggy. They're no strangers to extreme motorsports, but Mark Walton is. And he's at the wheel

ALISTER McRAE IS laughing at me. 'Keep digging,' he says, as he stands, arms folded, watching me scabble sand out from beneath my beached car with my bare hands. It's good training for the Dakar.

Ah yes, the Dakar. I drift off, in my imagination, to the dry and unforgiving Sahara. The Dakar – that legendary race, the romance of the desert, hundreds of competitors strung out across vast, barren landscapes. Yes, that's why I'm here... in Devon... digging. The Dakar! Because this buggy is a new kind of Dakar machine, built by one of the most famous names in rallying. A lightweight, affordable single-seater, designed to entice new entrants into this classic endurance event. And today is my chance to drive it, and to impress the team with my considerable driving skills. And then dig myself out again.

The Dakar rally celebrated its 30th anniversary last winter, though the event has changed beyond recognition in the last couple of years. It was created by Frenchman Thierry Sabine, who got lost on a motorbike in the Libyan desert during a rally-raid event in 1978. Undeterred by the fact he nearly died a crusty, desiccated death, Sabine thought, 'Hey, wouldn't it be fun if HUNDREDS of people got lost in the desert!' And the Paris-Dakar was born.

Dakar, capital of Senegal, remained the destination for all but four of the events, though the start moved from Paris to Granada to Marseille – wherever the most accommodating mayor could be found. Then terrorist trouble forced the organisers to cancel completely in 2008, and the 2009 Dakar abandoned Africa and all those Al Qaeda headaches, and moved to South ▶

[[11]] OFF-ROAD TEST | McRAE T1



Shouldn't it be metallic blue on gold wheels?



America instead. It kept the name 'Dakar' because 'The Buenos-Aires-Valparaiso-Buenos-Aires Rally' doesn't exactly trip off the tongue.

The event's changed, and so have the cars. In the early years, privateers led the way, driving ordinary road cars; then the big factory teams moved in: Peugeot, Mitsubishi, Nissan.

But mad, amateur enthusiasts have always been its lifeblood and the organisers – along with the governing body, the FIA – have been thinking of new ways to keep the entry lists healthy. Our story really starts in 2002 when a letter from the FIA lands on the desk of Chris Bibb at Lola Cars (yes, that Lola).

'Dakar is split into two categories – T2 production cars and T1 prototypes,' says Bibb. Within T1 there's 4x2 and 4x4, and the FIA was looking at a new, diesel-powered T1 4x2 – a rear-drive diesel car that would be cost-effective enough to open it up to lots of people. We couldn't find the right

transaxle off the shelf, so it had to be a bespoke competition part. Too expensive.'

Lola's interest dissolved, but Bibb was convinced the FIA was onto something: 'I went back to the FIA and said, "Look, we have all these four-wheel-drive Porsche Cayennes and supercharged Land Rovers – if we used standard components, we could build a prototype chassis with a production diesel driveline, a hybrid between two existing classes." They thought that made sense.'

While investigating the market, Bibb met up with the McRae family, Colin, Alister and Jimmy, who were looking at developing the family name into new areas. With Colin busy with his McRae R4 stage-rally car, Bibb teamed up with younger brother Alister, former World Rally driver for Hyundai and Mitsubishi, and in 2004 he left Lola to start work on the new venture.

The result was last year's McRae Enduro, with a Land Rover Disco's 2.7-litre turbodiesel and

running gear in a racecar-style spaceframe. Four Enduros entered the '09 Dakar; three finished – including first-timer Alister (see next page).

So, job done, end of story. No, wait...

'The problem was,' says Bibb, 'that vehicle had crept up to around €200,000, which is still very competitive in terms of the market place, but we still weren't capturing those new customers the FIA wanted us to attract.'

Meaning younger, daring individuals who can't afford a full team assault; or bikers, looking to move to four wheels. Weirdos, in other words, who like to be out there, billy-no-mates, with only a bottle of water to talk to in the evenings.

So the FIA met again and – in the face of the recession – immediately agreed to a completely new, affordable class: a lightweight, 600kg, rear-drive T1. Now it was back to the drawing board for Bibb and McRae. Looking around for inspiration, the team turned to Rage, manufacturer



Children play here. People walk dogs here. The SAS trains here. And now CAR goes berserk here



Not luxurious: land mines would wreck leather and walnut

Climbing so steeply I'm staring at the sky, I bury my foot and hear the engine yell furiously. The rear wheels spin, and then the buggy takes off like a lizard across a hot rock

of the weapons-grade 'leisure buggy'. Supplier to the Race of Champions, Rage makes Honda Pilot-style buggies with motorsport-standard components – Colin McRae owned one for fun, so the company was already known to the family. Could it make a new Dakar vehicle? The McRae Enduro outfit tested one, and decided it could.

'Rage was working on a continuously variable transmission and a cost-effective snowmobile engine,' explains Bibb. 'We took their vehicle as the basis, stripped everything down and upgraded it for Dakar use.' For which read bodywork, bigger wheels and tyres, beefier roll cage and suspension, and an 500-mile fuel tank.

For a tiny manufacturer like McRae, the resulting T1 Lightweight 4x2 means a second car in its stable, but with a much lower entry price – around €65,000 for the car, or arrive-and-drive in the 2010 Dakar for €110,000. Deposits are already paid, the new car is well into its development,

and now it's time to go testing. Alister McRae is flying in from his new home in Australia, CAR is lined up for an exclusive drive; all we need is a venue. The dunes of Morocco? Or maybe the high deserts of Bolivia or Chile?

We arrive in Devon, surrounded by soldiers and guns. Braunton Burrows near Barnstaple is the largest area of dunes in the UK, with 100ft-high mountains of sand rising out of a long white beach. While it's open to the public for dog walking and children's picnics, it's also – unbelievably – a key desert training ground for the likes of the SAS, before they go to Iraq.

'Mummy, what's this I've dug up?'

'Darling, don't play with the land mines.'

And today, it's where I drive the new McRae.

The T1 is small and awkwardly proportioned, like a chubby white frog, but there has clearly been some effort put into the styling. Wearing my white suit (inspired by Lawrence of Arabia) ▶





Getting stuck in. Stuck in the wilds of Devon, that is. If only he had a spade

Hint of 911? Fixed-head E-type Jag? Er, a chubby white frog?



I squeeze in, feet-first through the tubular frame, and jam my hips into the central bucket seat. It's strictly a working environment in here – bare metal floor, fire extinguisher, a few rocker switches – but it's roomy too. Plenty of space for your Dakar essentials, like the flip-flops and sunscreen.

The view out is screenless, past the knobbly spare wheel, to the sand dunes that tower above the grassy scrub. I push the starter button, and the engine fires immediately, making the whole car fizz with energy. Built for daily torture in the hands of Eskimos, this bulletproof Yamaha snowmobile engine has only 1050cc, but it sounds waspish, with a busy, angry tickover, and it's good for 140bhp. CVT means there are only two pedals, so it's hardly rocket science – just boot it. After a word of encouragement from Alister to that effect, the NASCAR-style mesh is closed over the doorway, and I prod the accelerator.


The rear wheels spin momentarily, and then the buggy takes off like a lizard across a hot rock. The revs climb, but CVT means they level out almost immediately, right in the sweet spot, so the maximum torque is there on tap under your toe. The buggy squirms and dances but climbs relentlessly, and when the car feels like it's flagging I just jab the throttle some more, making the engine growl harder. The traction is incredible – there's no slack in the CVT, so a mere flex of my right ankle sees the car dig in and catapult forwards with supercar urgency.

At first it defies logic – remember, this isn't a 4x4, it's rear-drive only, so how the hell does it achieve so much traction over mushy sand? The key is keeping it afloat on the surface, and that means light weight (check), good momentum (check), and enough bottle to nail it when the dune turns vertical (Negative! Mayday!).

Climbing so steeply I'm staring at the sky, I bury my foot with a gulp and hear the engine yell furiously. The car squirms but somehow keeps going, then suddenly I pop over the top – a delicate jump that the suspension absorbs with total calm – and suddenly I'm pointing straight down looking at nothing but sand. Now I'm addicted.

But the best part is the sideways fun. With so much power and rear-drive, the McRae is a proper, tail-sliding, throttle-steering, sideways-whoopie maniac. Any angle on the wheel and a jab of throttle induces a tailslide, caught with the lightning-quick steering. On a longer flat section I open up the throttle and drift through sandy bends, effortlessly soaking up bumps and ruts. Sand is chucked into the cockpit, into my helmet, gloves, underpants, but I can't remember the last time I felt so fearless and fast – it's just so flattering, and so much fun.

My brain wilts with envy when I imagine doing the Dakar in this car. Benign and grin-inducing, yet blisteringly fast and built for one of the world's most heroic motorsport events, it makes you feel like a child and a racing god at once.

And then this particular racing god gets it stuck. It's my fault – I get carried away doing a turn at the top of a dune, and the rear wheels dig in. Alister McRae trudges up to offer me some technical advice (see above) and I get to work, sweating under the exhaust. Okay, so maybe it's not quite child's play, but after today I've added the Dakar to my list of 'must-do' lifetime ambitions. While cars get more homogeneous and roads get more congested, the McRae 4x2 just offers pure, high-adrenaline, escapist fun. I smile all the way home from Devon. And find sand in my underpants for weeks. 

ALISTER McRAE

THE MAN WHO WENT UP LOTS OF DUNES. AND CAME DOWN AGAIN



'THIS YEAR WAS my first attempt at the Dakar, though I was always interested of course, and Colin had done it in 2004 and 2005.

Talking to other drivers, they said South America was similar but actually more difficult than the Saharan Dakar. There are the same kind of surfaces – a lot of dunes, some of them bigger than you get down in Africa, but a lot of tracks through grass as well, very similar to what we have here [in Devon] in fact. The other drivers said that normally you'd expect to have four or five what they'd call "really hard days" when everybody's struggling, but last year in South America it was more like

11 or 12. And it showed: attrition at the start of the rally was pretty serious.

"There's definitely still a romance to the Dakar. About 200 cars take part, 80 trucks and something like 320 bikers. An amazing sight, yet you can go five hours without seeing anyone and, if you go off the track, you get pretty lonely quite quickly.

"For us to get three cars out of four to the finish on our first Dakar was a result in itself, and we learned a hell of a lot. And what we have learned we put in Enduro for 2010, upgrading from the V6 TDI to Land Rover's diesel V8. And with luck I'll be there again this year."