

Tackling Africa's toughest terrain in a classic air-cooled Porsche 911

17/12/2025 Film director and racing driver Jeff Zwart takes on his greatest challenge yet: the East African Safari Classic Rally.

At the age of 70, there aren't many things left to tick off Jeff Zwart's to-do list. When he's not directing award-winning commercials, thrashing a Porsche up Pikes Peak or choreographing the now iconic Luftgekühlt gathering, he spends his time at home on the ranch in Colorado, from where he shares images of breathtaking snow-covered scenery, beautiful Porsche models and his beloved Bernese Mountain Dogs with his online followers.

But even Jeff Zwart has the occasional itch that needs scratching. Which is why, more than 50 years after he first heard about it, the American Porsche racer has just completed what he describes as "probably the hardest event I've ever done": the legendary East African Safari Classic Rally, in a competition-prepped classic Porsche 911.

East African Safari Classic Rally

For a man with many marathon rallies under his belt, it's testament to the brutality of this event, which this year ran over nine days and covered 2,220 competitive kilometres of extraordinarily testing terrain. The heat was searing, and there was no shortage of mud, dust, water and wildlife to keep the focus sharp. But like so many epic rallies, it's the challenge that appeals most – especially from behind the wheel of an air-cooled 911.

"I read about this race while I was in high school and I'd always hoped that I'd one day do it, so to be able to compete here in a car from the same era as my school days has made this whole experience feel even more special," says Zwart who, alongside co-driver Alex Gelsomino, wrapped up the event at the weekend in 17th place. The pair were up against a starting list of about 60 cars, more than half of which were classic 911 models hailing from Stuttgart-Zuffenhausen, including the winner, driven by British endurance racer Harry Hunt and his co-driver Steve McPhee.

The East Africa Safari Classic Rally traces its roots back to 1953, when the East African Safari Rally was created to celebrate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. It crossed Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania and pushed competitors to the limits, with kilometre after punishing kilometre of tricky topography. Following several changes to the format over the decades, the event was relaunched in 2003 to cater to classic car enthusiasts, running every two years and this time around crossing the wild terrains of Diani, Voi and Amboseli against a breathtaking backdrop of Mount Kilimanjaro. Demanding from start to finish, the modern event – like its predecessor – is widely acknowledged as one of the hardest on the planet. Zwart, whose early 911 (F-series) was packed with spares and tools, doesn't disagree.

The most difficult automotive event in the world

"In the 1970s, this was considered the most difficult automotive event in the world, and I don't think it's got any easier," he says, with a smile. "It was super rough and super fast with lots of wild animals on the course. But the scenery has been unparalleled, the other competitors and all the support crew have been fantastic, and being in a classic 911 just feels like home to me. Every day the 911 surprised me by how well it handled things. The team looking after the cars has done an absolutely extraordinary job and there was such a super-human effort from everyone involved."

Zebra, camels and elephants aside, another element that made the rally particularly special for Zwart was the man sitting beside him: Alex Gelsomino, who was co-driver to the late Ken Block when the world-famous driver and drifter entered the event in 2022.

"I remember a conversation with Ken where he told me how incredible this rally was. He said "Jeff, you've got to do it" and so to be able to come here with Alex as my co-driver has felt a little like coming full circle. He has been awesome and at times it has been pretty emotional for us both."

Despite sustaining suspension damage on day three, along with a problem with the transmission on the penultimate day that forced them to drive almost 40 km out of a stage in first gear, the pair only lost minimal time. Zwart marvels that the car took “an incredible beating” but was running in top form when it crossed the finish line ahead of an awards celebration on the beach.

“Glad to be back in the snow”

Spent, but elated, Zwart is still processing everything that he and his fellow competitors experienced on “the adventure of a lifetime”. “It was definitely the toughest event I’ve done, but it was challenging in so many ways that I’m so happy we went for it,” he says. “But after so much heat and humidity I’ll be glad to be back in the snow.”

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