Uncharted Racing for Charity: The Project 356 World Rally Tour

01/09/2020 Renée Brinkerhoff is rally racing her Porsche 356 all around the world for a good cause, and now the ultimate challenge awaits in Antarctica.

Behind the wheel of her faithful 1956 Porsche 356 A, Renée Brinkerhoff is preparing for the final stage of her "Project 356 World Rally Tour." And when Renée says "world," she isn't being hyperbolic. So far, she has raced across six different continents, all the while raising awareness for her charity to fight child trafficking. This (northern) winter, she is planning to take on what she sees as the toughest challenge yet, where no Porsche has driven before: Antarctica.

Realizing a passion

For most of her life, nothing pointed toward the Colorado-based mother of four embarking on a global racing adventure. In fact, it wasn't until one day, while folding clothes in the laundry room, that a little voice at the back of her head became louder and said: "I'm going to race a car." The car of choice became apparent the first time she laid eyes on a small, German sports coupe her husband's cousin had purchased for restoration.

"We went over there and it was a 356. I'd never seen one before, and this happened during the time when I realized I was going racing," Brinkerhoff says. "I just fell in love with it and I thought *that's* the car I want."

Shortly thereafter, the same cousin helped source what would become Renée's automotive companion. "I didn't even look at another car," she remembers, and continues: "When I saw that one, that was the car."

She purchased her 356 in 2011, and from that point on, she didn't look back. In 2012, she visited the grueling Mexican road rally, La Carrera Panamericana, for the first time, and drove part of the race for a team who had entered a Porsche 356. This was enough of an appetizer that she knew she was coming back the next year to drive the entire rally herself.

Renée's 356 started undergoing a transformation to meet the regulations and maximize the potential of the car in the "Sport Menor" class. This included custom shocks and engine, a roll cage, fuel cell and more. Later on, the gearbox was also changed from a four-speed to a five-speed to better cope with the altitude encountered in some of the worldwide rallies. But it wasn't just the car that needed preparing.

"You have to learn how to drive, right?" Renée says. "How do you drive a race car?"

To help build her skills, Renée attended classes at the Porsche Track Experience where she had the Chief Driving Instructor – and America's most decorated endurance racer – Hurley Haywood in the passenger seat. "He kept me out there and kept taking me around the track, and that was such a confidence booster."

Not your average racing debut

In 2013, at age 57, Renée once again arrived at La Carrera Panamericana, this time to compete in her own car. The famed rally has strong roots in Porsche history as it happens to be the namesake of not one, but two models - Carrera and Panamera - commemorating the brand's major successes with the 550 Spyder in the early days of the race. Renée embarked on the 2,000 mile journey in a challenging position. She had not even had a chance to test her 356, as it had been in development right up until the main event. Even so, after seven days at full throttle across Mexico, she became the first woman ever to win her class. Renée had never planned to compete in more than one race, but found herself back in Mexico in 2014, this time finishing second in her class but with an impressive 14th place overall.

La Carrera Panamericana 2015

2015 marked the first time competing under the new team banner, Valkyrie Racing, named after the women in Norse mythology who would bring fallen warriors to Valhalla. This year would also see Renée encountering her biggest scare yet.

"We could have not come home. We could have gone over that cliff," she reflects on a moment when La Carrera Panamericana showed why it has earned a fierce reputation.

Driving on what later turned out to be tires overinflated by 20 psi, Renée struck a guardrail after executing an emergency maneuver to avoid hitting a crowd of bystanders, badly damaging the car. Although she made it back on the road with parts from a helpful, local Porsche collector, this would be the beginning of a year off for Valkyrie Racing – only to return on a mission.

Taking on the world

In the time after the accident, two key decisions were inspired by what Renée describes as an organic series of events. Firstly, the racing team grew a philanthropic branch, Valkyrie Gives, to aid women and children at risk, with a special focus on ending child trafficking. Secondly, a massive undertaking started shaping up as the "Project 356 World Rally Tour."

Renée had scoped out six races on all seven continents to challenge herself and raise awareness for the new charity. As the scale of the adventure grew, the U.K.-based rally experts at Tuthill Porsche joined in

to prepare the car, and in 2017, she was back at La Carrera Panamericana.

This time, she fared better than her last race in Mexico, once again winning her class and kicking off the World Tour in style. Renée proceeded to put the pedal to the metal in 2018, first traveling down under to the Targa Tasmania in Oceania, then rising to 15,000 feet in the Andes Mountains during the Caminos Del Inca to check off South America. The next year, she hit two birds with one stone as she drove for 36 days and 9,300 miles across Asia and Europe in the Peking to Paris rally, but the marathon was not without its hurdles. Mechanical failure meant that a new engine had to be flown in, and with tenacity and some creative shipping methods, it arrived in St. Petersburg - disassembled and in four different suitcases. Rounding out the decade, Renée tackled the East African Safari Classic Rally during its rainiest season in 40 years.

East African Safari Classic Rally

Valkyrie Racing crossed the finish line in Africa as the only female-driven team. This has been the case in several races, and along with her philanthropic work, it is a factor of great motivation for Renée. She recalls pulling in to be met by cheering crowds of all ages, where the women would thank her for being an inspiration.

“More than being on the podium, that whole team experience and having the ability to affect positive change in people’s lives and go out and be a motivation to them - that to me has been the most rewarding.”

Determined to continue her work for Valkyries Gives, which has raised nearly $200,000 since its inception, Renée is now looking to fulfill the inherent promise in the name of the Project 356 World Rally Tour. This means approaching the final frontier of the seven continents. There will be no cheering crowds, no competitors but herself and the terrain, and no precedence whatsoever when Renée arrives in Antarctica in January 2021. Valkyrie Racing is venturing into the unknown.

The goal for success is set by Renée and poses a challenge suitable for her ambitious personality: 356 miles – of course - across the toughest conditions imaginable while also attempting a land speed record.

“We’re not preparing. We can’t prepare,” she laughs, alluding to the fact that nothing can truly simulate the surprises of Antarctica. Still, “the preparation is anticipation” as she says, so she has practiced ice driving to hone her skills, and made sure to surround herself with the best possible crew. In fact, when she was interviewing Jason De Carteret – who has set world records for both skiing and vehicular polar exploration - she quickly realized that he was in fact interviewing her, assessing whether or not she would be up for the polar risk and dangers. The answer was yes.

Meanwhile, the Porsche from 1956 – manufactured the year Renée was born - is being prepared and undergoing another necessary transformation. Among the changes, the installation of a crevasse bar

will stop the car from falling down if it hits a large crack in the ice. It will also be running on skis and tracks instead of the familiar four wheels, and it will be wrapped in bright red because the silver paint essentially becomes invisible in the snow and ice, rendering filming and photography impossible. Lightness is also a key element to drive over the ice rather than sink in, and for instance, the heater has been removed from the car – not that it would likely be a match for Arctic temperatures anyway. Finally, the team is preparing measures of sustainability, such as solar panels on the crevasse bar, and using carbon offsetting to ensure the entire Project 356 World Rally Tour is carbon neutral.

As if racing a vintage car didn't pose enough obstacles in itself, there was one bump on the road no one could have foreseen. While impacting an entire world, it is no surprise that the global COVID-19 pandemic has also thrown a wrench in the Antarctic planning, particularly when it comes to parts supply and shipping logistics. Renée is still confident that Valkyrie Racing will make it to Antarctica in January, in the slim window when the ice is stable, and take on the final stage of the World Tour.

Only time will tell what the future holds after the quest of the seven continents has been completed, but one thing's for sure: Renée Brinkerhoff is a racer of determination, so you know there are many more miles ahead. Her answer, delivered with a wry smile: "I'm not finished quite yet."

Info

More about Valkyrie Racing and Valkyrie Gives.

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Image Sublines

Path: media/Images/img_1.jpg
Title: The philanthropic branch of the racing team, Valkyrie Gives, aids women and children at risk, with a special focus on ending child trafficking., Photo: John Bennie
Subline: The philanthropic branch of the racing team, Valkyrie Gives, aids women and children at risk, with a special focus on ending child trafficking.

Path: media/Images/img_2.jpg
Title: Endurance racer Renee Brinkerhoff (right) of Valkyrie Racing and her daughter/navigator Juliette Brinkerhoff (left) were the only female-driven team to compete in the 2019 East African Safari Classic Rally., Photo: Christina Brinkerhoff
Subline: Endurance racer Renee Brinkerhoff (right) of Valkyrie Racing and her daughter/navigator Juliette Brinkerhoff (left) were the only female-driven team to compete in the 2019 East African Safari Classic Rally.

Path: media/Images/img_4.jpg
Title: Artist rendering of Renee Brinkerhoff's Porsche 356 as it will appear for the Antarctica drive. Among the changes, the 356 will be running on skis and tracks instead of the familiar four wheels, and be featuring a bright red wrap instead of its silver paint, which would almost be invisible in the snow and ice., Photo: Dwight Knowlton
Subline: o Artist rendering of Renee Brinkerhoff's Porsche 356 as it will appear for the Antarctica drive. Among the changes, the 356 will be running on skis and tracks instead of the familiar four wheels, and be featuring a bright red wrap instead of its silver paint, which would almost be invisible in the snow and ice.

Path: media/Images/img_5.jpg
Title: The children of Kilifi County in Kenya were just as excited to see Valkyrie Racing's classic Porsche 356 as owner and racecar driver Renee Brinkerhoff was to compete in the 2019 East African Safari Classic Rally., Photo: Christina Brinkerhoff
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Dr. Ing. h.c. F. Porsche Aktiengesellschaft
Porscheplatz 1
70435 Stuttgart