

The Marathon

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08/10/2015 The London–Sydney Marathon rally first took place in 1968. Now a brave Porsche 911 S is coming home.

Amore unusual 911—from the Porsche factory, at any rate—has never been seen. The gently flowing body of the early years is bedecked with pipes and prison bars, the elegant roof is packed to the hilt with tires and canisters, and the rear sports a bizarre set of exhaust geometry.

It takes a bit of imagination to grasp the beauty of the sculpture, perhaps by finding in it the promise of unexpected adventures. Motor racing in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India in 1968 was a decidedly bold undertaking.

No exercise in tourism

So where did this adventurous spirit come from? England. Notwithstanding all their enthusiasm for these areas of the world, their eccentricities, and their proud tradition of sportsmanship, one thing had to be clear: this was no exercise in tourism, but motor racing at the highest level. The lion's share of the 98 starters had outfitted themselves with extensively customized factory cars from seven nations, including some old favorites such as BMC, Simca, Hillman, Moskvitch, and DAF.

One thing was reasonably certain: the borders in conflict zones would re-open for the first time in ages; the Daily Express and the Sydney Telegraph, as sponsors of the event, had done their diplomatic homework. Codriver pros John Davenport and Gunnar Palm were charged with putting together a roadbook; and in cases of doubt, they showed a strong predilection for flexibility: whether to take the northern route (over the Elburz Mountains) or the southern one (through the desert) between Tehran and Kabul was the prerogative of each team.

One other thing was reasonably certain: the S.S. Chusan would be waiting at the port of Bombay to transport all remaining participants to the west coast of Australia. Once there, a series of sprint stages clear across the continent of Australia would provide the counterpiece to the preceding wild drive.

The 911 was one of the few coupes in the field

With the 917 just around the corner, in 1968 Porsche was on its way to the pinnacle of motor racing; but it was also working on a future in the rally business and, with the customary modesty of its patriarch, had little intention of letting its horizons be defined by the standards of the big carmakers. In the end, three 911 S cars were prepared for London–Sydney, though only the one for the Poles Sobiesław Zasada/Marek Wachowski (European champs in 1967 in a Porsche) was regarded as a factory car. The identical cars for Terry Hunter/John Davenport and Edgar Herrmann/Hans Schuller were supported by private sponsors.

As the highly defensive appearance of the cars indicated, the greatest danger was thought to be external factors (flying rocks, kangaroos—thus the "roo bar" construction on the front). The 911 was one of the few coupes in the field; the other teams first had to figure out if they should use two or three drivers. The issue was the sleep quota for each driver, not to mention the muscle needed for digging and pushing.

Factors mitigating against the three-driver concept, of course, were the weight and a possibly difficult group dynamic. Be that as it may, at the starting line the balance between two- and three-person squads was relatively even; one British female team even opted for four drivers. Spoiler alert: the winners were a threesome led by a Scotsman who thought group dynamics was probably some sort of illness.

Desert shoveled sand into every air intake of the engine and brakes

Improvisation was the order of the day. Teams could help each other, but not tow each other. Pushing, by contrast, was allowed. A top-notch crew from Cortina had trouble just outside Turin; a colleague drove up from behind, and with all their cushions and blankets between the two, pushed them all the way to Belgrade, where a service stop put things aright.

Turkey, high-speed by night, was a dicey undertaking even back then; the northern Persian desert shoveled sand into every air intake of the engine and brakes. The teams picked up additional oil rations in villages—as welcome guests who were treated to tea with bitter buttermilk before the oil was served up. It was a moving, remarkable moment when the border gates between Iran and Afghanistan opened for the first time in years, and when the cars were driving past Kabul as Pakistan and Khyber Pass suddenly lay open, as in the tales of ancient days. At the time, newspapers around the world reported that motor racing had flung open the gates to a flourishing, peaceful future.

Nine days of passage to the west coast of Australia

In the flatter areas of Pakistan and India, the drivers encountered a phenomenon that none of them were prepared for in the slightest: thousands, tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of people. They had no idea what was going on; it was pandemonium on a grand scale, day and night, with people even pouring into the roadways or throwing rocks—more as welcome greetings than hostile acts. No barriers, no authorities, and defensive driving was not a solution. Would the cars simply be caged in and swallowed by the masses? No one wanted to find out. If any accidents occurred, the drivers didn't stop, and the statistics told the story of a race without incidents.

Nine days of passage to the west coast of Australia restored the sixty halfway-intact crews to some degree of physical and psychological balance. Working on the cars was prohibited while at sea. The 4,000 kilometers to Sydney did then produce a riveting contest between the leaders, before the British crew of Andrew Cowan in the Hillman Hunter finally pulled ahead for good.

There are plans afoot to restore the car

What happened with the three 991 S teams? Zasada/Wachowski came in fourth after brake trouble and a calculation error at a time check. Herrmann/Schuller took fifteenth place. Hunter/Davenport had too much sand in the wrong place and had to abandon the race in Kabul. A car collector from Hamburg bought the car after its return and cared for it for decades, before a fire destroyed much of the car. There are plans afoot to restore the car as part of a joint project involving several Porsche departments and then display it in the Porsche Museum to mark the grand occasion for which it was built.

In the 1970s there were a number of other marathon rallies, including to Africa and South America.

Paris–Dakar (on the original course) grew in significance until it became ever more dangerous and ultimately impossible. Thus, London–Sydney remains a lonely signal for a future that—in this form—could not come to be.

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