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Rally drivers cross Canada

The father/daughter team drove over frozen rivers and saw stretches of wilderness.

By **ANDREW GOOD**

Sun Post News

Dirt bikes used to be San Clemente resident John Alkema's recreational vehicle of choice. But since 2000, he's traded the dirt for ice.

Alkema and his daughter, Gretchen, recently put 8,300 miles on his Chevy Z71 driving the [Alcan 5000 Winter Rally](#). The race, which runs from Feb. 17 to 26, starts in Kirkland, Washington and meanders across western Canada 5,000 miles to the tiny seaside town of Tuktoyaktuk (population approximately 870). Alkema drove from San Clemente to the race's starting point.

It's an exciting event for Alkema, who wanted to bond over the experience with his

daughter, Gretchen. About 60 people were in the race, including 24 entrants and six staff members. It winds through small towns, open wilderness, across frozen river roads, and even across a frozen sea.

Alkema used to ride in motorbike rallies before he gave them up for the Alcan 5000. It was his second time in the race, though he's helped devise its route three times before. For Gretchen, a 37-year-old San Clemente High graduate, it was a first – and definitely not a last – experience.

"She loved it," Alkema said. "She wants to go back and do it with friends."

They would spend each day checking maps, navigating how fast to go, and taking in breathtaking sights along the way. In the far north, the sun wouldn't rise until 10 a. m., and would set at 3 p.m. Their XM Satellite Radio would stop working, and they'd rely on Gretchen's iPod. They'd share their meals with other drivers, swap stories, and build friendships. Alkema said it was a fabulous way to bond – they'd talk about everything,

"We had a lot of times to talk about things, and a lot of time to just live life," Alkema said. Gretchen added jokingly that neither threw the other out of the car.

It's a unique way to experience

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Canada's wilderness, she said. British Columbia, famed for its forests, was striking, but the farther north they went, the more barren the landscape became.

"It's beautiful the way the desert is beautiful," Gretchen said. "There's this vast nothingness of rolling hills."

For several long stretches, there were expanses of trees that looked "like toothpicks" Gretchen said. A posted sign read that a fire had reduced the forest to a charred landscape in 1954, and nothing had grown back since then.

Along the way, they saw a moose, deer, and a pack of wolves. Alkema said on previous trips along the Dempster Highway, in the far north, drivers have seen grizzly bears off the side of the road. Another driver on this trip saw a lynx, he said.

Two of the trips highlights were not for Southern California drivers. One was when the rally traveled over the frozen Mackenzie River, and out on to a frozen stretch of the Beaufort Sea.

"You see the shoreline on one side and nothing on the other side. You're on frozen ocean. They take big trucks on it," Alkema said.

The week before they arrived, Alkema said,

the temperature had been minus 40 degrees Celsius. Fortunately, by the time they got there, it had warmed to a toasty -18 degrees. Regardless, the ice was very solid, even when you see cracks veining across its surface, Alkema said.

The other highlight, Gretchen said, was racing through a slalom course on a frozen lake. A course is carved out of snowdrift with a snowplow, and each car gets to drive through it as fast as they can.

"It's like an ice go-kart track, with a swooping, curvy course, maybe a mile in length," Gretchen said. "You try to drive as fast as possible and not spin out and fly into the snow bank ... It's very, very slippery. When I was watching people, they'd punch the gas hard thinking they could peel out. There is *no* peeling out on ice. You have to just crawl out the starting gate."

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