

AUTOWEEK

Onward and upward in the Alcan5000

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1 OF 12

The driver of this Audi A4 walked away from this rollover uninjured and with a running car.

PHOTO BY JIM ELDER

The consensus of Alcan5000 veterans seeing three Minis and a Toyota Yaris on the entry list was succinct. "You gonna drive *that?*"

The Alcan5000 is oldest, coldest winter road rally in the world. The 2012 running attracted a variety of entrants, driving a mix of vehicles. There was the usual majority of Subaru, 13 of 25 vehicles. Notable in a field that is normally AWD/4WD were two Mini Cooper S's and one Mini Clubman, a Yaris, a Volvo 242, a Volkswagen Rabbit, an old salvaged BMW 325i (bought for \$700 on Craigslist), and a Chevrolet pickup. Audi, once popular on Alcan5000 Winter Rally events, was represented by only one A4. Rounding out the list were a BMW M3 and an X5 and a Honda CR-V.

Driver-navigator teams included men and women from Arizona, New Hampshire, Oregon, Washington, South Carolina, Montana, California, British Columbia, Alberta, Texas, New Mexico, New York, Ontario, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Florida, Nevada, Iowa, Alaska, Pennsylvania, and South Africa. One of the South Carolinians was actually from Bulgaria. There were two mother-son teams, a father-daughter duo and nine couples.

There were a few veterans, some who had pro-rally experience, 11 Alcan5000 regulars and 14 first-timers, including some who have road-rally experience but no major winter events.

The planned itinerary started in Kirkland, part of greater Seattle, then to Quesnel, New Hazelton, British Columbia, Whitehorse Yukon via the Cassiar road, Dawson City, Inuvik Northwest Territories with a bonus run to Tuktoyaktuk on the frozen Mackenzie River, then all the way down to Valdez, and finally to Anchorage--4,490 miles of mostly snowpack, ice, falling snow and blowing snow.

The Alcan5000 is not a race. There are long "transit" sections of 300 to 700 miles, planned to test vehicle reliability, team endurance, and--most important in winter--judgment. Then there are seven or more time/speed/distance (TSD) events, wherein cars must follow written instructions--"46 mph 4.2 miles, 34 mph 3.1 miles, etc."--while rally timers at undisclosed locations check down to fractions of seconds, early and late. Winter rallies also include speed runs on ice, usually lake or river courses also used by snowmobiles.

Day Minus One is registration and tech inspection, which includes essential gear for vehicle and personal winter adventure, including sleeping bags, shovels, flares, food and water, tow strap and clevises, fire extinguisher, and a two-way VHF radio. Auxiliary "road" lights and good fog lights are suggested, and a bright rear red or amber fog light is highly recommended. Also recommended are at least two full-size spare tires and five or more gallons of extra fuel--enough for perhaps a 500-mile range if road closures or closed gas stations become a fact.

North Alaska: Rally Day 1

Good weather, good roads. No problems at Canadian Customs, unlike as in some years. Only downer was a delay in the Fraser River Canyon where wreckers were dealing with the burned remains of two 18-wheelers that had collided when one tried to dodge a rockslide. No fatalities. We all got to Quesnel, British Columbia, after a TSD and 480 miles.

No snowplow and one less Mini: Day 2

Day two was supposed to start with an ice slalom at Quesnel's Gold Pan Speedway. The plow guy forgot to plow. Eight inches of crusty snow and impassable drifts at the entry. On to the "11 percent grade TSD." A timer, an experienced rally driver on previous events, missed a turn while getting into position. Stage canceled. Head for "Blackwater TSD." Truck vs. passenger car out on main highway. Highway closed for emergency vehicles. Five people killed. Half of our group trapped behind wreck, the other half ahead.

In the meantime, the team from New York and Ontario went off the road and into a tree with their Mini Cooper S. Major damage, driver and navigator OK. Last we heard the car was being shipped to somewhere and the team was trying to rent something with which to continue and catch up with the pack, and most important get to Tuktoyaktuk. The vehicle sweeping the route pulled several other off-roaders from snowbanks but no injuries to cars or competitors. On to New Hazelton via Prince George. Only 410 miles, but a long day.

Up the Cassiar. Day 3

The Cassiar was first all gravel with one lane war-surplus Bailey Bridges, long after the Alcan (now officially the Alaska Highway) was paved. It is now mostly paved, with few fuel stops open in the winter for 448 miles, snowpacked and icy, and more scenic than the Alcan route. No TSDs. Just a 733-mile transit to Whitehorse, Yukon.

Radiators, radials and racks: Day 4

The guy who had asked about Stop Leak on day three was now asking if anyone knew of a radiator repair shop, open on Sunday. No luck. The vintage BMW had a flat tire. It spent a few hours on a floor jack in the hotel parking lot. Looked like a big yellow dog lifting a leg to a fire plug. Finally got someone to fix the tire. No charge for the repair, but \$150 for the Sunday service call. And Team Germany discovered no gas cans on their rooftop luggage rack. After two TSDs, 22 cars headed for Dawson City. Roads slicker, some snowfall and much blowing snow. Passing sometimes impossible, oncoming traffic creating snow whiteouts. Those who had rigged up bright-red rear fog lights were running with them on all day. Only 363 miles but more work for the sweep crew.

Sweeps

Sweep is the most important position on a road rally, and vital on the Winter Alcan5000. On the 2012 event, Kevin Barrows/Paul Oscamp and Joe/Shirley Gardner had a record number of winch, strap and dig events. Barrows began serving as sweep/communications in 2002 with his Dodge Ram 4x4, highly modified for rescue service. In 2012, he showed up with a new Ram/Cummins 3500 equipped for almost any assist or emergency. Joe Gardner has been valuable sweep since 2004 and now drives a 2008 Ram/Cummins 3500 Quad with a topper crammed with rescue gear. Sweep teams also join other rally staff members as timers on TSD sections.

Days 5-6

This was supposed to be an easy 486-mile run up the Dempster Highway to Inuvik, Northwest Territories. Several vehicles off road during the first few miles; slick road and blowing snow to Eagle Plains, halfway up. Road closed. Barriers up. No promise on opening gates. Several trucks stuck near the Arctic Circle. Rally master Jerry Hines decided to head back to Dawson City. Seven teams stayed in Eagle Plains, hoping to

eventually run the ice to Tuktoyaktuk. After one day, four headed south, leaving three optimist teams. The main group ran for Dawson City, again in challenging conditions. Contrary to popular wisdom, the two-wheel-drive Yaris and the two-wheel Mini, along with an AWD Subaru Outback, drove to Tuk. Three 360-degree spins, one stuck and pulled out, but a calm, cold, bright-sun run south on marginal road conditions. One 100-mile section had been plowed, however. One lane.

Day 7

Seven hundred miles to Tok, Alaska. Cold, windy, but everybody stayed out of the ditch. Fuel, food, U.S. Customs and beds at Fast Eddie's in Tok. Not to be confused with "Tuk," Tok was one of the 1942 Alcan road-construction camps near the Tok River. Legend has it that the soldiers adopted a stray puppy, probably from an Indian village, named it Tok and then called the camp Tok.

Day 8

Easy 266-mile run down to Valdez, except for blowing snow on the notorious Thompson Pass. Mini blizzards behind any vehicle made passing--and meeting--a crapshoot to fools and patience for the wise. That most of us had bright rear fog lights, mounted high, and all had VHS radios, got us all to Valdez alive.

Valdez is normally a relative banana-belt city in Alaska. But this year's record snows have the city almost buried. And our scheduled ice-slalom track was buried, so we substituted a two-way timed speed run on an icy road. Front-runners Eklund/Kraushaar blew up their engine. Their DNF for the last two TSDs moved frequent Alcan5000 winner Gary Webb into first-place overall--a position he would not relinquish--in the Mini Clubman S. The lone Audi flipped after hitting a hard, high bank, but the driver was unhurt and the car was drivable.

Day 9

The morning TSD was complicated by snow-buried road signs, causing consternation among teams meeting earlier starters. Who was going the wrong way? Over Thompson Pass again, same conditions, and a great run into Anchorage including a final TSD near Palmer, this year without school-bus traffic that made checkpoint times tough for rally computer cars and pure guesswork for the SOP folks.

Twenty-one of the 25 teams that left Seattle on Feb. 23 made it to Anchorage on March 2.

There have been many challenging Winter Alcan5000 Rally events. In 1996, a wrecked truck and a blizzard stopped the planned run to Deadhorse/Purdah, short of the necessary refuel point at Coldfoot. Sweeps have always been busy, often on the Tuktoyaktuk ice run. There is usually some nasty weather, mechanical problems, rollovers and DNFs. No serious injuries.

But the 2012 running will be noteworthy for the diversity of people and vehicles. And for a Toyota Yaris and three Minis entered, two finishing and one the overall winner.

By Jim Elder

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