

Audi's classic Ur-Quattro still has what it takes for Arctic rally

Supplied by Keith Barke

A frozen world, cast in snow and ice. Ahead is Alaska, behind is the [Yukon](#), both gripped in the deep freeze of an Arctic winter. The sky is slate-grey, no comfort coming from the distant sun, and as the road dips and weaves between mountain and valley, you can hear a characteristic five-cylinder growl. The landscape seems brutally inhospitable, but this is the natural habitat of the Quattro.

And here it comes, an Ur-Quattro decked out for battle with quad rally lights up front to light the way and a set of studded Nokian Hakkipeliittas providing traction. Ur: original, primordial, first of its kind. Despite being a 34-year-old classic, this boxy 1980s warrior is going for it, flashing through the ice and snow with the turbo spooled up and boosting.



Keith Barke's Audi Ur-Quattro undergoing maintenance.

It's not alone either. Following close behind in an expedition-prepped [Jeep Wrangler](#)

is Edmonton-born racing and stunt driver Andrew Comrie-Picard, and he's grinning like a maniac. "As a professional rally driver for the last fifteen years," he says, "seeing an original Audi Quattro hammering through the Arctic is just the coolest."

At the wheel of Audri the Audi, for so the ol' girl is nicknamed, is owner Keith Barke. By his side is navigator Tim Burgess. The pair took the RallyBC championship in the Historic class last year, and this is their first time driving the Alcan 5000 together, though certainly not the first time for either of them.

The Alcan 5000 is an annual nine-day distance rally that runs from late February and ends early in March, starting just across the border in Kirkland, Washington, and reaching deep up into the North. Like the Audi, it has roots stretching back into the 1980s, and has consistently been one of the longest rallying events in North America.



Competitors will cover some 7,500kms over the course of more than a week, facing treacherous conditions, vast and empty frozen wastelands and the unsympathetic tick of the clock. It's not a stage rally, where you drive flat out, but an event that tests the accuracy of both driver and navigator; one has to keep the average speed right on the money without stuffing the car into a snowbank, the other has to make sure they don't get lost.

"One day we were driving into Yellowknife, after covering 630 miles or so," says UK-born navigator Burgess, who now lives in Toronto. "The sun was behind us, lighting up the town as darkness was falling. It was just breathtaking – the North is something every Canadian has to experience."

Both Burgess and Barke, who splits his time between Saanich, B.C., and Edmonton, have a couple of years experience with rallying: they met on a summer running of the Alcan 5000 in 2014. There, Burgess competed in his lovely classic [Triumph](#) TR4, while Audi-fan Barke brought one of his Quattros (he currently has six of them). When the chance came to run the 2016 version of the Alcan, they wisely decided to take the all-wheel-drive German rather than the 1960s convertible Brit.

Built from 1980 until 1991, the Ur-Quattro has a lot of fans, but remains considerably more affordable than contemporaries like the E30-chassis BMW M3. Curious, that, as it's no less of an icon than the Bimmer, and has started many a rallying career.





A stop at the Sign Post Forest in Watson Lake, Yukon.

“I actually learned to drive in my dad’s Quattro,” says Comrie-Picard. It would be the spark that led to a lifetime behind the wheel of everything from Baja racers to X-Games rally cars. He’s even currently planning a pole-to-pole expedition, using the Alcan 5000 as a chance to plot a course to plant a Canadian flag at the North pole.

For the most part, Audri is a factory-spec machine. Barke has added a lighter carbon-fibre hood and trunk, fitted skid-plating to protect the oilpan and rear differential, and swapped out the rear springs for front springs. This last change raises the car slightly, and also makes carrying fewer spares possible. For the most part, however, the reason the Quattro is so capable is because that’s how it came from the factory.

“It changed rallying when it came out,” Burgess says. “It takes you back to Ari Vattenin and Michele Mouton.”

When the Audi Quattro came on the scene, stage rallying was indeed a different beast. The champions were rear-drive cars, tricky to handle, and requiring a steady hand at the tiller. It was the time of the likes of the Lancia Stratos, beautiful Italian machines with delicacy and fragility.

When the Quattro showed up, it set a box-flared cat among the pigeons. Audi’s secret weapon? A clever all-wheel-drive system that conquered slippery conditions with relentless competence. It made the company’s name, and both the four joined rings of

Audi and the Quattro trademark are symbols of excellent winter performance today.

Which is not to say that Audri isn't without her foibles.



"They say cars are inanimate," Barke chuckles. "But she's never liked to start. We've been through it before to rectify the fault – it's just a quirk of the car."

Getting her started might be tricky, but once she's running, Audri is nearly unstoppable. Consistently sitting at the top of the pack over thousands and thousands of kilometres, the team of Burgess and Barke would come away first in their class and fifth overall out of a field of twenty-seven entrants in this Alcan – only twenty-three finished.

Keith and Burgess are already planning their next adventures, kicking off with the Trail of the Gnu rally in early April in Alberta. They hope to defend their Historic class overall championship over four or five events through the year, and maybe even post better results than much newer machinery.

"It's great to show that these cars can still be competitive," says Barke. "I have a couple of garage queens too, but this is how the Quattro was really meant to be used."