

# Forward to the Frozen North

**T**he AlCan 5000 Rally has been called the longest, toughest and coldest rally in the world. Beginning in Seattle, Washington, the AlCan goes north into Canada all the way to the Arctic Ocean and then backtracks part of the way to Anchorage, Alaska. In 10 days and nights, the rally covers 5,000 miles of everything from dry pavement to snow, ice, slush, gravel, dirt and mud, in temperatures that range from a high of 47°F to a low of 26° below.

It's as much a test of people as machines, but BMW nonetheless saw the AlCan as the perfect place to show off the new X3's all-weather prowess. BMW of North America sponsored three 2004 X3s in this year's event—one for *Bimmer*, another for *Automobile* magazine and a third for the BMW CCA's *Roundel*, whose editor had lobbied hard for BMW's participation.

I was the lead driver for Team *Bimmer*, which also consisted of co-driver Paul Duchene and navigator Katy Wood, both of

Seattle. Duchene, a veteran journalist, currently writes for *Sports Car Market*; Wood is an experienced navigator.

We'd barely gotten out of British Columbia when the *Roundel* X3 was stuffed in the first ice race and broke a control arm. About the same time, Wood appeared to suffer some sort of stress-related emotional issue. She essentially quit Team *Bimmer*, having declared that she would ride with Duchene and I only during timed sections. We didn't get a chance to try that out, but I doubt it would have worked.

At the time, Team *Bimmer* was in fifth out of 16 teams and Team *Roundel* was in second, just behind Team *Automobile* in the lead. To bolster the chances of a one-two finish for BMW, I gave our control arm to Team *Roundel*. We were not compelled to do so by BMW NA, but I suspect such orders would have been forthcoming had we not declared ourselves the Parts Team.

Our X3 was then flat-bedded to

Whitehorse, YT to meet a new control arm being Fed Ex'd in by BMW. While it was sitting in the parking lot of a tire store, someone moved it, probably by mistake. They tore the CV joint and axle shaft out of the front differential, and that was the end of our rally. From then on, the shattered *Bimmer* team became passengers in other vehicles; the navigator rode separately.

## A chilling beauty

After our exit from the rally proper, co-driver Duchene and I squeezed into the sweep truck, its colorful crew chiefed by a large, bearded man named Ohio Knox III. Knox referenced his family's heritage in the "Ohio territory" as he piloted his massive Hemi-powered, manual-shifted, Dodge AWD Crew Cab across the tundra, looking vigilantly for stranded rallyists.

Later, Duchene and I rode in the back of Rallymeister Jerry Hines' Ford Excursion, along with Hines, two other men and about 1,000 lbs. of luggage and rally gear. The massive SUV gulped fuel to the tune of 8 mpg from its twin tanks as its all-wheel





drive system carried us along at 80 mph through mile after mile of ice and snow. This marked the first and perhaps last time I have ever encountered a legitimate use for the Ford Excursion.

Even if you're traveling in the sweep truck, competing in an event like the AlCan 5000 makes it virtually certain that no road trip will ever faze you again. Drive 350 miles to Vermont because you're out of maple syrup? No problem—at least there are no buffalo in the road, and you won't have a navigator to quit on you.

Passing through Canada's Yukon Territory is perhaps the ultimate Northern road trip. "It's in the middle of nowhere," is one of our most weather-beaten clichés, and if I were Supreme World Editor it would be banned from the language. Travel north of Eagle Plains on the Dempster Highway into the Canadian Arctic and you will see the *real* Middle of Nowhere. Arctic trees, spindly Black Spruce that grow shorter and spindlier as you climb in altitude, dot the snowscape on either side of the Richardson Mountain Pass. When the Arctic trees reappear on the

other side of the pass, it's almost like seeing civilization again...but not quite.

As the Dempster Highway continues to the town of Inuvik, Northwest Territories, all vegetation finally gives way to tundra. Mountains combine with the low Arctic sun to create areas that never see sunshine and never defrost. These are often ten degrees colder than surrounding places—dips in the road where the vehicle's outside temperature gauge says you're in a place Stephen King might call a "thinny." Snow evaporates during the day and causes snow fog. When temperatures fall at night, the snow condenses and falls back to Earth as a sort of ice/snow combination. The Arctic doesn't get a great deal of new snow, but the old stuff blows around a lot and does its daily evaporation/condensation dance.

Once you reach Inuvik, you'll see children running around in sweatshirts on 10° days. No matter how PC you may fashion yourself, it doesn't take long in the Arctic before one knows that Inuits are different physiologically. Not only does cold not bother them, they consider it normal. Temperatures we crave would bother them.

The X3, in fact, did a heck of a lot better up here than we did. The cold didn't faze it at all, and neither did the snow. If it hadn't been for our voluntary retirement, chances are we'd have done pretty well on the AlCan Rally with our X3. It wasn't ideal, but none of its equipment shortcomings were in themselves serious hindrances, as evidenced by the fact that an X3 won the rally.

### The ice machine

That says a lot, in fact, because the vehicles came straight out of the press fleet and were not specifically ordered or optioned for TSD rallying. Most of the electronic driving aids intended to make the X3 appeal to drivers with limited skill worked against us on the rally. DSC, for instance, can be switched off, but it can also switch itself back on. And it's never really off: You can roll back its operational parameters, but the system can roll them the other way if it thinks you're going to crash—and it does.

Nor can ABS be turned off, because it is integral to the xDrive system. That made our stopping distances longer than they should

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have been. And at the last ice race, the Team Roundel X3 had a total xDrive electronic melt-down. The car's DSC stayed on regardless of what was done to the switch, and the thing reverted to RWD.

For reasons never made clear, BMW gave us automatic transmission vehicles. They're great for commuting, but in the rally, the transmissions fought us every step of the way. They shifted constantly when we needed to maintain a specific speed or make minute speed adjustments. Manual mode was of little use, as the transmission will still upshift and downshift by itself—it merely reduced the extent to which it did so. That was fine on the timed stages, when we needed to drive at or below the speed limit. But our ice racing laps were decidedly slow because we needed to stay in second gear and the transmission would not allow it. Then it started malfunctioning, refusing to shift into sixth gear, although sometimes it would.

BMW didn't give us Xenon headlights, although we did get a set of Hella driving lights. What we actually needed were spot or pencil beams, however, not driving lights. Also, they weren't wired as they needed to

be—hot with high beams on. On the road, we were constantly switching off the high beams and the driving lights when oncoming traffic appeared, which was surprisingly often. Had they been wired the right way, the lights would have gone out when the high beams were switched off.

Strangely, only one of the X3s had the cold weather package—which includes the headlight washers that are key on this sort of event. We had studded Hakkapeliitta tires in 255/55-17, which was really too wide. That said, the X3 was unflappable in normal driving on snow and ice, and xDrive is a very good system for its intended purpose. It's just not ideal on a rally car.

The far simpler mechanicals of the E30 325iX, on the other hand, make for a superior rally car. One, in fact, finished sixth with no mechanical or electronic failures despite having 244,000 miles on the clock. Among current vehicles, the Subaru WRX is without a doubt the greatest rally car—fully mechanical AWD, Brembo brakes, turbocharging, 240 hp, 5-speed manual gearbox, great handling and a \$24,000 sticker—you can't beat it for this sort of competition.

Well, apparently you can—because X3s finished 1-2, which I largely attribute to superior navigation and driving skills. Still, if I had reason to drive a truck, there is no doubt I would choose the X3 3.0-liter 6-speed manual, probably with Sport package.

### But is it a BMW?

Some of my colleagues think the X3 lacks true "BMW-ness"—the characteristic feel that the cars have shared since day one. Well, BMW-ness is entirely subjective, and it's even harder to gauge off-pavement than on.

Moreover, BMW-ness changes and evolves. The BMW-ness of a 1983 635CSi, for example, is distinctly different from that of a 2003 330Ci. Both are excellent cars and quite comparable in many respects. But there's no mistaking the "you'd better be ready for this" personality of the 635CSi—kind of like a loyal yet ferocious dog—compared to the soft, coddling nature of the 330Ci. Best not to trifle with a European-specification 1983 635CSi.

Trifle all you want with a 2003 330Ci; it won't hurt you, it's been de-fanged. Yet the BMW-ness of any 330Ci is still firmly intact. BMWs are becoming softer, for that is the

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nature of the luxury niche the company has orchestrated for itself in the U.S. market. The X3 speaks to that niche, as do all new BMWs.

The 3.0-liter six is among the best engines ever to come out of Munich. With 225 hp, it has ample thrust for the weight at hand, and even hampered by the automatic transmission it never seems labored. But there's a great deal more to engine performance than acceleration, and that's where automatics really lose out. They sacrifice driver control, which is crucial on Time-Speed-Distance rallies.

We outlined a few of the automatic's shortcomings above; in addition, the unit lacked the silky smooth quality found in other BMWs so besotted. Shifts occurred in a lackadaisical manner we associate with domestic marques. At speed, the transmission shifted constantly, back and forth between fifth and sixth, so much so that we almost wished it were a 5-speed automatic if it couldn't be a manual.

The xDrive system, on the other hand, is totally transparent, simply transferring more torque to the front wheels when the system senses need, which it does pretty accurately. DSC is different. While its limits are thank-

fully high, when DSC senses oversteer or understeer, there is no question which brake is actuated and for how long. It works quite well, but it's not the ticket for ice racing or winter rallying. Sometimes you have to slide.

Dynamically, the brakes and suspension are the X3's best features. The massive vented 325mm front/320mm rear brakes hauled the 4,023-lb. mass down from speed in admirable fashion. Pedal feel and modulation are also excellent, although the temperatures we encountered and nature of the trip prevented us from forming any real opinion on fade resistance. The X3 is lighter than the X5, but she relies a lot more on personality than petiteness to land you as a prom date.

In addition to its supposed lack of BMW-ness, the X3 has also been said to lack BMW's characteristic ride quality. Well, answering BMW technical questions has taught me many things, among them that ride quality is entirely subjective. One person's "too firm" is always another's "just right," and vice-versa.

I agree with my counterpart Mr. Edsall that X3 reviewers who harp on ride quality are dealing more with road conditions than shock

and spring rates. I thought the X3 shock damping and coil spring rates were perfect for normal driving, and in fact I did wish for the Sport package's firmer offerings on paved roads. On unpaved roads, I would not have changed shocks or springs at all, and I could not understand how anyone could think they were too firm in normal street driving. Subjective? Maybe. Test drive an X3 and see what *your* subjectivity tells you.

The X3's driving position is decidedly SUV-like, reminding one immediately of a smaller X5. It has a distinct feeling of lightness compared to the X5, with the attendant nimbleness one would expect. A BMW fan will find nothing unfamiliar about the interior layout or the controls, although I still long for the power window switches to return to their proper place on the center console, and I really can't stand having to look from the controls to the LCD screen for radio frequency information.

Interior illumination is superior, as in all current Bimmers. The cruise control (single setting, thank you) and other controls work conventionally and don't require thought or owner's manual consultation as will be the





## SEVEN ARCTIC TRUTHS

1. The shortest route is the route you know.
2. Never pass fuel.
3. Everything from a fire extinguisher to a candy bar to a pistol is better to have and not need than to need and not have.
4. Temperatures below zero will kill you much faster than you think. That pain in your face is the first sign of dying skin cells.
5. The human bladder empties at its own rate. It does not matter how cold it is outside, or how many people are yelling, "Hurry up!"
6. Snow tires are not enough; you need studs and skill, too.
7. The average 17-year-old Inuit knows a lot more about winter driving than you do.

case in the future when BMW applies the iDrive's "logic" to the rest of the lineup.

The standard seats do their job well, and are probably best suited to those large of buttock—although at a size 33 waist, I was not uncomfortable. The same is true for the rear seat.

Each of the three AICan 5000 X3s were finished in sedate Mystic Blue metallic with gray leather. The color charts contain my perennial

favorites—Alpine White, Jet Black and Titanium Silver metallic. The only uplifting interior color is Terracotta leather, which to my eyes would look great with a Jet Black exterior. The aluminum finish trim worked quite well in our X3, and two wood grains join slate gray in rounding our four trim choices.

The X3 interior offers plenty of space for stuff, and Dave Carp at BMW AG will be

happy to know we found adequate nooks for our gear. The cargo area was well-capable of swallowing our rally gear and our luggage, although we needed the roof rack for a genuine spare tire and wheel and two small plastic fuel tanks. We especially appreciated the split-fold rear seat, which allowed half the rear seating area for cargo and half for a sleeping rally team member. The only thing I wished for was the optional cargo net our X3 didn't have—I kept thinking about that snow shovel traveling at 85 mph toward my head.

Properly equipped, the X3 is well-designed to accommodate all the stuff you'll need on a rally like the AICan 5000, or on any other adventure you might have in mind. That's why BMW's X3 sales brochures are crammed with thirty-somethings hiking, biking, surfing, and climbing—although I suspect the vehicle will more often be called upon to transport soccer moms to and from their McMansions. Regardless, nowhere in the brochures will you find bearded, gnarly-eyed, down-clad, forty-something gearheads driving X3s on grated ice rivers through frozen Canuck strongholds called Inuvik, Aklavik, and Tuktoyaktuk.—Mike Miller

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