
A photograph of an Arctic landscape at sunset or sunrise. The sky is a mix of purple, blue, and orange. A large, bright sun is visible on the horizon. In the foreground, a blue truck is driving on a snowy road, leaving a trail of snow. The truck is facing away from the camera. The overall scene is cold and desolate.

THE Arctic Circle...

AND Beyond



Chilling out on the 6th Alcan 5000 Winter Road Rally

Written and photographed
by Lazelle Jones

If you call them “a little bit crazy,” you’re pretty close to being on the money. The surge of adrenaline that comes from operating on the edge in a harsh environment is no doubt part of the thrill these guys and gals seek. Once every four years the Rainier Sportscar Club of Seattle, Wash., hosts a 5,000-mile, nine-day road rally. The route begins in Seattle, and after going all the way to Prudhoe Bay on the Arctic Ocean, contestants cross the finish line in Anchorage, Alaska. Oh, yes. Did we say they do this during the month of February?

Picture blizzards, whiteouts and 1,500 miles on the Alcan Highway, then 1,000 miles up and back on the Dalton Highway. Take 250 miles between fuel stops and factor in temperatures that dip to 30-degrees below zero (F) with windchill factor temps that dip even lower. Put it together and you pretty much have what rally enthusiasts face when competing in the Alcan 5000.

You might ask what are the vehicles of choice for this kind of insanity. Must be snowcats or snowmobiles? Well, the 2000 Alcan drew 23 vehicle entries, including 4x4 SUVs and pickup trucks, all-wheel-drive sedans and even a few low-profile four-wheel-drive Class C motor homes.

Then there were the rally officials, emergency vehicles and “sweep” vehicles that brought up the rear to guarantee no one would be left stranded. The rally master, Jerry Hines, handpicks his lieutenants. For example, Peter Schnieder coordinates and administers the time/speed/distance (TSD) competitions. Peter’s driver, Gary Webb, owns and operates the Atlantic Driving School in Mechanic Falls, Maine. All three have a dozen Alcan 5,000-type road rallies to their credit. In fact, Jerry Hines organized the first Alcan 5000 Winter Road Rally back in 1984.

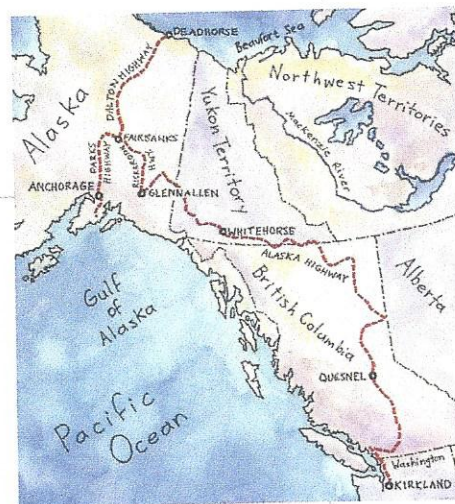
Flying in from New Jersey and Maine for the winter rally, Peter and Gary went to a Seattle auto-rental agency and picked up the 4x4 Chevy Blazer they had requested. Not only would they drive the Blazer the entire 5,000 miles of the rally, but they would then drive it back to Seattle — three weeks of some of the most demanding driving and performance conditions that can be expected of any vehicle. Keep in mind, the Blazer they used was an off-the-shelf vehicle, right out of a rental pool.

Did these guys encounter any problems during the 7,000 demanding miles? No. Absolutely none. At least not with the Blazer. The only real challenges the race coordinators faced were the strong, competitive personalities of those competing in the race. But that comes with the territory.

Rally Rules

So how is a winter road rally conducted? First, it's a contest of precision, not a race. Teams are given a route book and must follow painstakingly specific time/speed/distance directions. The idea is to reach a specific place at a specific time. The Alcan rally usually has two TSDs each day, one soon after the day begins, and one in late afternoon or evening. Each TSD has four or five segments to it, and each segment is timed by a rally official.

You must begin each TSD at your prescribed time (down to the second, based on the timekeeper's clock). Then you must arrive at the end of each segment of the TSD at the precise second. The timing officials try to remain unseen at the checkpoints so those competing won't know if they are on time or not. Unlike football or baseball, the rally team with the fewest points wins the TSD, and the team with the fewest cumulative points ultimately wins the road rally.



If you're into a little chilly adventure, consider joining the next Alcan Winter rally, which will be held in 2004.



► **Winter road rally timing officials** (above left in a Chevy Blazer) try to remain unseen at checkpoints so those competing won't know if they are on time or not. Along the way, participants soak up a little of the local color — from wildlife and snowy vistas to the art of ice sculpture.



TSDs on the same day can be hundreds of miles apart. For example, a TSD that was completed early one morning outside Ft. Nelson, B.C., was followed later that day (or should we say that night?) 500 miles up the Alcan Highway near Watson Lake.

The other type of competition that makes up the Alcan 5000 rally is slalom ice-racing. There were three such competitions held on race tracks plowed on the surfaces of frozen lakes or on surfaces repeatedly layered with snow and ice from winter storms; the competition boils down to the shortest time it takes to get around the course. In Quesnel, B.C., the track was a half-mile oval. At Whitehorse, the track was several miles long, with esses, U-turns and straightaways. At Long Lake, outside Anchorage, the track was a quarter-mile oval carved from the surface of the frozen lake.

The distances between the TSDs and the ice slaloms are called "transits." They aren't timed or counted. However, if you don't get to the next TSD at the exact second you are supposed to start, you earn points (which, of course, are not good).

Timing Is Everything

The different timing devices used by the 23 teams covered a broad spectrum. Those in it just for fun used nothing more than a digital wristwatch and an odometer. Others had highly sophisticated electronic systems, with transducers that measured the distance covered by each rotation of a front wheel and the speed of that rotation.

Only twice throughout all of the TSDs did any of the 23 teams make a perfect score (0,0,0,0,0) and one of those teams was the Chinook Baja Class C motor home, driven by Dan Lukehart. The new Trail Wagons/Chinook (800/552-8886 or www.trailwagons.com) low-profile Baja motor home has taken this type of vehicle to the next level. The Baja unit can be enjoyed on the 2001 Chevy Express RV Cutaway Van. Its 159" wheelbase chassis is augmented with a four-wheel-drive system. Coming equipped with a 12,000-pound electric winch, the Chinook Baja was used to pull other vehicles out of snow banks and ditches during the road rally.

If you're into chilly adventure, an Alcan winter rally is planned for 2004. Want to warm up, so to speak? A summer rally will be held in August 2002. For details, check out www.Alcan5000.com.

Lazelle D. Jones writes about the RV industry for *Motorhome Magazine*, *TrailerLife* and *Camping Life*.

a REAL northern exposure

During the nine days set aside for the competition, there was some time built into the schedule for “fun and games.” Well, kind of. Upon reaching Fairbanks, we set aside two days to travel the 1,000-mile roundtrip up the Dalton Highway to Prudhoe Bay, the oil field on the North Slope of Alaska.

Because of the tremendous oil reserves in the North Slope, this area is considered a strategic venue, and security is very tight. Had it not been for rally master Jerry Hines and the connections he has cultivated over the years from conducting these Alcan 5000 rallies, we probably would not have had this escorted tour through the oil fields to the edge of the Arctic Ocean.

The only indication we could see of the Arctic Ocean was a metal railing that warns not to venture out onto the ice regardless of how solid it looks. The Arctic Ocean has chunks of ice the size of Rhode Island that are continuously shifting. Cracks or crevasses develop, and are hidden by blowing snow. Over the years, people have fallen into these crevasses and disappeared.

During our tour, we learned several facts about the North Slope, the Alaska pipeline and the oil fields. Wells are drilled to depths of 15,000-plus feet. When an oil pocket is exhausted, a technique called lateral drilling is used. This allows the drillers to work at an angle deep within the earth from an existing hole to reach another oil pocket.

The Alaska Pipeline can pump up to 3.5 million barrels of oil per day at full capacity. There is so much pressure from inside the earth that when the oil comes up out of the ground it exits at about 180 degrees (F). It never gets below 130 degrees, even as it travels several hundred miles in the aboveground Alaska Pipeline south to Valdez, Alaska, where it's loaded aboard ships.

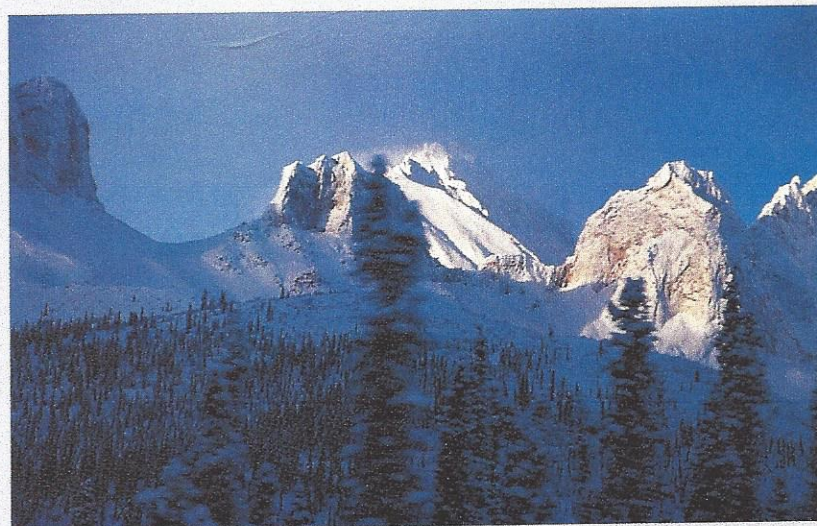
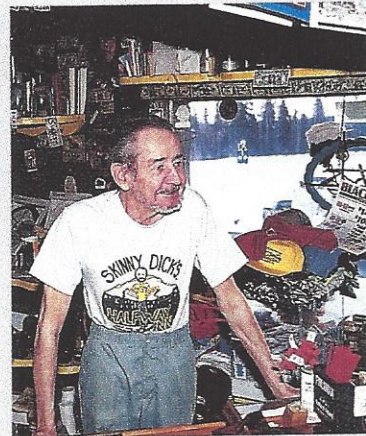
The Dalton Highway itself was constructed in less than a year to support building the Alaska Pipeline. Year-round it is gravel and potholes, but in February it's snow, ice and potholes. There is only one place to get fuel — at Coldfoot, which is located

above the Arctic Circle. Bring extra gas, for if a blizzard or whiteout occurs (and they often do almost instantly), you'll have to turn back.

You need to be prepared for the unexpected in North Country during February. Wear layered clothing and keep up your intake of fluids, because it's a dry cold, and dehydration can quickly become an unwanted companion. Always caravan with other vehicles across this vast tundra. If you see a vehicle stopped, pull over and see if they need help. Leave word with someone to come looking for you if you don't call to say you've arrived at your destination.

There are some real characters in the Alaskan backcountry. One stop called Skinny Dick's seemed right out of the TV show *Northern Exposure*. We met Skinny Dick himself and talked with Mickey Dalton, the widow of Jim Dalton, the man for whom the Dalton Highway was named. Almost 80 years old, she still travels the highway and was a key player in getting it opened to the public.

The everyday people who pump gas along the Alaska and Dalton Highways, or who sling hash at the roadside diners (actually, each time we sampled the food, it was excellent home cooking, prepared from scratch), are colorful, rugged, friendly people. Alaska may have been the next-to-last state to join the Union, but it takes first place when it comes to extending hospitality.



► **The Dalton Highway** leads through desolate backcountry (right) up to Prudhoe Bay on the edge of the Arctic Ocean (above left). Skinny Dick's place (above right) is one of the very few road stops along the way.