OFF-ROAD PLUS

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ALCAN 5000

From Washington State to the Arctic Circle in just 10 days

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The ALCAN 5000

10 Days to the Arctic Ocean

Story by Spencer Whitney,
photos courtesy of Andy Lilienthal
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A few months ago, in the waning days of winter, thirty-eight adventure-seeking rally teams departed Kirkland, Washington for the high arctic. The diverse range of vehicles chosen by participants did not evoke imagery of internationally sanctioned competitive rallying, but rather that of rush-hour traffic.

After all, most of these vehicles can be found in driveways across North America – but nameplates like Volkswagen Passat, Porsche Cayenne and Toyota RAV-4 are not known for tackling rally championships. Despite the challenges one might think an average vehicle would experience on a long and difficult staged rally event in the dead of winter, these teams managed to pilot every single one* all the way to the far reaches of Canada and back to Anchorage, Alaska in just 10 days.

*The only DNF at the 2020 Alcan 5000 was a Subaru Impreza, which had mechanical issues that culminated in an engine seizure – and was towed just 100 miles to the finish line.

The Alcan Rally was first held in 1984. For that inaugural event, twenty-three vehicles competed on the longest rally ever held in North America. As the event evolved, it took on a more Olympiad-style schedule – with alternating winter and summer events held every two years. (2020 marked the 11th winter edition, and 2022 will be a Summer rally through the Canadian Rockies.)

The Alcan is a hybrid rally event: parts of the route include time-speed-distance sections, with the balance being hundreds of transit miles each day. Unlike professional rally races, flat-out speed and high-performance are eschewed in favour of keeping up a specified pace and distance between waypoints. There are also optional side events – such as a time trial on a closed ice racing track – and "extreme" control points which require attentive driving and a good navigator to reach in time.

While TSD rally events are extremely popular in Europe (and encompass everything from average cars to real race cars, to vintage and classic motors), North America is decidedly sparse. Maybe it's because we are already used to driving much further distances than our overseas counterparts and the average person doesn't see the challenge, or possibly because much of the continent is now easily accessible in a normal passenger vehicle.

Mercedes & Andy Lilienthal of Portland, Oregon have been on most of those accessible roads (and quite a few inaccessible ones.) But something was calling to them for 2020 – the Alcan was headed to the tiny oceanside village of Tuktoyaktuk, the furthest northern point accessible by road in Canada. Now that a year-round route has been completed, many adventure-seekers are adding the town to their list of must-visit places - but it's wintertime travel that truly makes the trip more challenging.

The Mitsubishi Pajero is legendary for being a Dakar-winning rally rig, so it's no surprise that the Lilienthals had confidence in the mechanical ability of their chosen 4x4. However, other participants brought very different vehicles. Among them were some surprisingly effective choices: front-wheel-drive Mini Coopers and Volkswagens; and some unsurprisingly effective vehicles – all-wheel-drive Porsche Macans and Cayennes, and a handful of Jeep Wranglers and 4x4 pickup trucks. However, it was a 1973 Ford Capri that took 1st overall, which gives a lot of value to the idea that driver experience and ability is possibly the most important thing you can bring to the Alcan 5000.

"We exhaustively prepared for the rally" says Mercedes. "Andy and I spent about six months solid building up the [1991 JDM] diesel Pajero for extremely cold conditions, prepping and buying gear to survive the event, and making tons of lists and checking them twice." Some of the essential modifications included orthopedic and heated Scheel-Mann seats, a Webasto diesel-powered coolant heater (for keeping the engine warm and ready to start after a long arctic night) and an auxiliary fuel tank supplied by Long Range America. "Our Pajero can easily hit 400 kilometres with its 60-litre tank, but installing the extra tank allowed us to double our range" says Mercedes. Given the distances involved, that extra fuel adds not just a competitive edge but a margin for error – and reduces the need to carry jerry cans.

After seeing so much of North America from behind the wheel of various 4x4s, the couple knew they were ready for a bigger challenge. "This is one of those events you can talk about, but until you experience it, you'll never fully understand" says Andy. Despite the field of entries being in competition with each other, it's the overall experience that really becomes the focus. "The camaraderie, the extreme cold, the long days, and the incredible sights. It's unlike anything else I'd done in my life. Everyone was accepted and all were friendly. The shared experiences really made this event one of a kind."

The sights and views of a 5,000-mile journey together were also part of the attraction, says Mercedes. "We've always dreamed of seeing Northern Canada, the Arctic Ocean, and Alaska. We also wanted to rally together in a major competition. Not only did we do that, but we experienced another bucket list item we didn't even know we'd accomplish: passing through the Arctic Circle four times, in two countries, in less than three days!"

Most participants agree that the toughest part of the rally is the Dempster Highway from Dawson City, Yukon to Inuvik, Northwest Territories – and the new road on to Tuktoyaktuk. This portion of the event is 875 km, and participants must traverse it twice in less than three days. With temperatures lower than -40-degrees Celsius and road conditions that can change in minutes, it's here that drivers must stay alert and very focused. "The challenge of man (or woman), machine, and extreme conditions – that's what drives people toward the Alcan. Being able to say you competed in and finished a 5,000 mile-long Arctic rally in the dead of winter isn't something most people can say" says Mercedes.

She also remembers the more challenging moments: "We almost spun out twice (even though we had brand new studded Nitto Exo Grappler tires), almost hit a wolf in the middle of the road, had to winch ourselves

out of the snow at the Arctic Circle sign (don't ask) and had to sail the Pajero into a snowbank to avoid rear-ending our buddy car, team #40 in their Lexus GX470." Needless to say, the arctic portions of the route really push the limits of winter driving. According to the organizers, the road conditions along the Dempster in 2020 were the worst the Alcan has ever seen in its history.

Despite the long driving days, extreme temperatures, grueling conditions, and risk of mechanical disaster, there is something irresistible about the Alcan 5000. Some drivers have logged multiple rallies, others are first-time participants. "Our goal was to finish strong, under our own power, and in one piece" says Mercedes. "We did that and much more. But, most importantly, we realized it was the people along the way that made this journey very special." Although they haven't hinted at trying another Alcan event, the Lilienthals agree that even doing it once has had a significant impact. "Running the Alcan 5000 Rally through Canada and into Alaska will be an experience we'll never forget."

ALCAN 5000 by the numbers:

41 entries
38 starts
37 finishers
5,000-mile / 8,048-km route
190,000 miles / 304,000 km traveled by all teams
4 Arctic circle crossings
-40° Celsius / -40° Fahrenheit low
Countless cracked windshields!