



FIRE AND ICE

BLESS HER HEART, MY FIRST GIRLFRIEND not only had a fondness for snakes, purse-concealable firearms and journeys into Baja in her 1971 Land Cruiser, but a gift for distilling things down to their essence. I think it was shortly after she barrel-rolled her Toyota on a gravel road outside of San Felipe (actually cracking her pretty, bandana-wrapped skull and popping three of four tires off the rims in the process) that she told me, matter-of-factly, "Adventures suck when you're having them."

Now I like to think I pick my adventures more carefully than my girlfriends, but the Alcan Winter Rally, a 4600-mile, 9-day trek from Kirkland, Washington, to Anchorage, Alaska, had the potential for adversity and, thus, adventure. Senior Editor Andy Bornhop and I had

**"Do another Alcan Winter Rally?
When hell freezes over!"
Be careful what you wish for...**

BY DOUGLAS KOTT
PHOTOS BY JIM ELDER & THE AUTHOR

competed in the Alcan in 1996 with *Road & Track* friends Jim and Suzanne Elder, and so it was that the four of us teamed up again in 2004. In 1996, driving Oldsmobile Bravada sport-utes, our journey took us along the Dalton Highway that serves as a haul road for the Trans-Alaskan Pipeline. But this year, we were going to travel into the Northwest Territories, through the town of Inuvik and on to Tuktoyaktuk, an isolated deep-sea port where polar bears have been spotted and one can stroll out onto the frozen Arctic Ocean, if one wishes.

This time, Mitsubishi was kind enough to provide Lancer Evolutions—one purloined from our long-term fleet and the other lent from Mitsubishi's press pool. Aside from a set of Bridgestone Blizzak snow tires (generous-

■ Hallelujah! Our Lancer Evos survey the frozen Arctic Ocean from Tuktoyaktuk. But there are still many miles to go.





■ Clockwise from above: We're not exactly daisy-fresh before a TSD; the beautiful Dempster Highway, north of Dawson; rally accouterments on dash; and kids at Quesnel's Parkland School take turns behind the wheel.



ly donated by The Tire Rack) and block heaters (to prevent our engine oil from taking on bearing-grease consistency in sub-zero temperatures), our Evos were stock. Strong steeds indeed, with 271 bhp apiece and all-wheel drive.

But were Bornhop and I up to the challenge? A couple of native SoCal sun-lubbers, we had limited experience with water in its frozen state...emptying ice cube trays, toboggan runs in the local mountains, things of that sort. The Elders, on the other hand, are experienced cold-weather travelers—Jim, a wiry, mountain-man version of Garrison Keillor whose gruff voice and energetic delivery could make reading the back of a cereal box sound interesting; and his wife Suzanne, a sweet, insightful lady who Jim endearingly refers to as "my stunt driver." Together, they're an accomplished photo-journalist team, and were great companions throughout the Alcan.

The rally's format was the same as before...a competitive event based on scores from several TSD (Time-Speed-Distance) sections spread throughout the rally, and

three closed-course events on ice, where we could all indulge in our best Tommi Mäkinen impersonations, slithering sideways at crazy slip angles. In between were transit sections...500 miles is considered a short day, and Day 3 would see us cover 830.

What had changed was the level of competition, as this year we were joined by two other factory-supported teams: a trio of BMW X3s, fronted by the always-elocutious Satch Carlson, who writes for BMW's club magazine, *Roundel*; and a three-car Subaru effort spearheaded by R. Dale Kraushaar. Of course, there was a smattering of privateers in a variety of vehicles including a Mazda 323 GTX, sundry Subarus, a BMW 325iX, a Mitsubishi Montero and an Audi S4, this last driven by Baron Rene Von Richthofen and his son Lionel. If Rene's last name sounds familiar, it's because he's the great-grandson of the Red Baron, and yes, his S4 is red.

So, at one-minute intervals, we were flagged off from Kirkland's Silver Cloud Inn by rallymaster Jerry Hines (see *People, Places & Things*, p. 23). North to Alaska, to quote Johnny Horton, but not before taking part in the first of many diabolical TSDs.

Designed to make you swear a lot and stick pins into a Jerry Hines voodoo doll, a TSD requires that you maintain a given average speed on a stretch of road, look for some obscure landmark, and then change your speed according to the instructions in

the rally book. All the while, you're eyeing a stopwatch and the car's odometer, because the previous night you've worked out all the time splits and theoretically know, to the second, when you should arrive at each landmark. Which never happens. It's the automotive equivalent of rubbing your stomach and patting your head, while keeping about 10 plates spinning on the ends of dowels.

You can then find out just how poorly you've done, because the rally's crew is stationed along the TSD, noting when your car passes and how far off it is from what's called the "perfect time." Results are posted every couple of nights. Fortunately, beer is nearby.

Even the transits can be eventful. On an especially rugged mountain pass in British Columbia, we rounded a sharp bend only to find a considerable rockslide in our lane, and an oncoming semi in the other. The largest boulders were suitcase-size, which I avoided, choosing to straddle some of the smaller carry-ons. The old Toyota Cressida immediately behind wasn't so lucky. *Bam!* I caught a glimpse in the rearview mirror just at the point of impact, as its right front suspension collapsed neatly into the wheel well. Listing heavily starboard, she limped slowly off the road. We'd find out weeks later that our Evo had been wounded (see *Long-Term Test*, this issue), but it showed no ill effects throughout the rest of the rally.

As we drove farther north, clear roads turned to slush, mixed with a nasty amalgam of gravel and fine dirt put down in wintertime to improve traction. Well, traction wasn't a problem, but after a while the bodywork, undercarriage and wheels were all coated with a thick, cement-like paste—a slurry that branded our jeans with calf-



■ Clockwise from from left: Bornhop throttle-steers at Goldpan Speedway in Quesnel; inspiring scenery in British Columbia; start of the Dempster; the Mackenzie River ice road, complete with tire-devouring cracks; and Andy works the duct tape for a small bodywork repair near Whitehorse.



height splashes from the rocker panels each time we got out of the car. A trip to the pressure-wash cleaned things up (on the cars, at least), but we should have done a better job with the wheels. As we accelerated up to speed, our Evos turned into mobile paint-shakers, blurring our vision and threatening to pop our Velcro-mounted radios off the dash. Yep, those half-removed mud deposits were to blame, so we spent 20 minutes roadside, scraping off what we missed with sticks and ice scrapers.

As we neared Yukon Territory, the roads mercifully turned to ice layered with a thin crust of snow, conditions that suited the Blizzaks perfectly. Of course, every time we pulled out of a gas station, we had to spool up the turbo and spin the wheels, just for the fun of it. Once underway, whenever the road appeared especially slick, we'd lay into the brakes to test traction, to be met with the quick *thumpthumpthump* that signals the onset of ABS. We feasted on

handfuls of GORP (Good Ol' Raisins and Peanuts) from Trader Joe's and listened to Country tunes on our XM satellite radio (whose reception became increasingly intermittent the farther north we traveled). And looked for wildlife.

It should be noted here that Andy is an Olympic-class wildlife spotter, silver medalist in Barcelona. By way of background, he has a clock in his office that squawks a different bird call every hour, and he is a student of the hawks, herons, coyotes and other varmints that sometimes appear in the field adjacent to our building. "Moose!" Andy points. "Ptarmigan!" he shouts. About a quarter-mile later, I finally see the quarry. Competitive fire lit, I vow to spot an animal before Andy does, but it never happens.

We had another chance to compete on the outskirts of Whitehorse, in one of the rally's three ice races. This event was originally to be held on the frozen Yukon River, but thin ice dictated a change of venue. Through blind luck, Porsche just happened to be having a press introduction in town for its Cayenne V-6, and had set up a

course at Fish Lake, complete with pelt-lined hospitality tent guarded by stuffed white wolves. Porsche graciously allowed us to use them both.

Here, we developed a bad case of Nokian Hakkapeliitta envy. While most of the field were on these metal-studded Finnish snow tires, our non-studded Blizzaks were out of their element on the course's skating-rink surface. With entry speeds into the corners already comically slow, we'd lose front traction and slide helplessly into the snow banks—think "air hockey puck" in terms of directional control. And those snow banks were not the light, powdery kind that kids make snow angels in, but hard, crusty ones that could tear the lip spoiler right off a Lancer Evo. Which they did. A couple of times. Luckily, duct-tape silver is not too far off our car's color.

Probably better to have the high ground clearance of a sport ute here, as some of the more experienced rally drivers were intentionally slamming the drifts as the fast way around, seemingly without doing any damage.

"Seemingly" is the operative word. Just before we started north on the Dempster Highway toward the Arctic Circle, Satch's

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- Winners' List:** For names of the winners, send a self-addressed stamped 10x10-size envelope to be received before July 31, 2004, to: "Michelin Pilot Exacto P23 Sweepstakes Winner's List," P.O. Box 483, Glendale Heights, IL 60139-0483.
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- Governing Law:** The Official Rules shall be governed by and construed in accordance with the internal laws of the State of South Carolina without giving effect to any choice of law or conflict of law rules or provisions that would cause the application of any other state's laws.

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BMW X3 was maneuvering around a gas station when Andy heard a small, metallic *tink*. "That didn't sound good," Andy remarked to the attendant. It wasn't; a tie-rod had snapped like...well, like a tie-rod that had smacked a snow bank too many times. In the finest spirit of team sacrifice, the part was cannibalized from the X3 that was faring worst at that point, with that vehicle flatbed-towed back to Whitehorse. All of its drivers managed to find rides in other vehicles, continuing the rally as spectators.

There was plenty to see as we embarked on the remote Dempster, "a road paved with arrowheads" as Jim so descriptively put it. Rugged mountains beneath a cobalt sky, blanketed in snow so pristinely white that it appeared to have a blue tinge. Huge orange industrial-strength snow-blowers. Stunted pines that grew even smaller and sickly-looking as we passed through Eagle Plains and on to Inuvik, the largest Canadian town (population 3500) above the Arctic Circle.

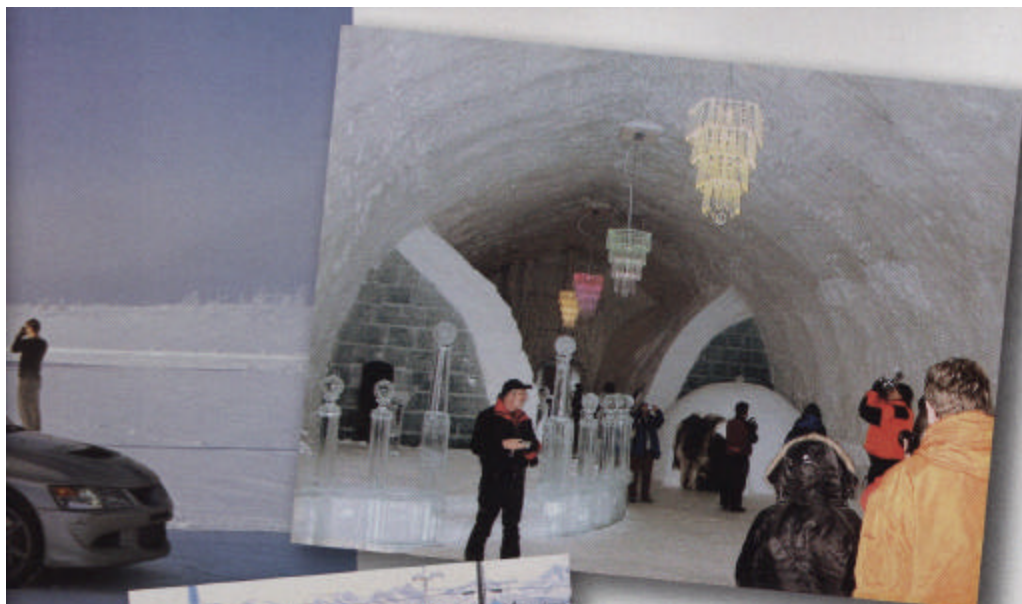
Have you ever driven 220 miles on top of a river? Neither had we, but that's the way you get to Tuktoyaktuk and back in the winter, following the path of the

frozen Mackenzie. It's a smooth, slippery ride for the most part, except for the section with 6-in. gaps in the ice. A couple of enthusiastic rallyists blew out a couple of tires apiece here, and the guys in the 323 GTX were kind enough to warn us of the impending danger (thanks, Rob and Nick). About two-thirds of the way to Tuk, the bare ice turned from slate gray to a dark turquoise. "That's when you know you're over sea water," explained the good rallymaster.

Temperatures were at their lowest in Tuk, -30 F, and that's warm for February. We popped out of the cars just long enough to refuel and pose for photos with the ice-bound Beaufort Sea stretching toward the top of the world. Back in the Evo, I noticed some ice on my moustache and felt a certain Hillary/Everest sense of accomplishment, only without oxygen debt and yaks.

The invincibility didn't last, however. As we retraced our steps past Inuvik, Jim misjudged a turn near the airport and stuffed their Evo firmly into a drift. What happened next could have been much worse. Blinded by Jim's snow plume, Kevin Barrows, following behind in his full-size Dodge sweep truck, went off in nearly the same spot. Yet he heroically avoided hitting Jim, instead clipping a light pole and plunging down a 15-foot embankment. Damage was mostly limited to egos, and both vehicles were plucked out without too much drama. Kevin did have to pay for that pole, though.

The rest of our journey was fairly uneventful, but there was a side trip in Alaska



■ The Aurora Ice Hotel (above) near Fairbanks, Alaska, amazed and delighted. Opposite top, Bornhop and I discuss hot chocolate at a Dempster pull-out near Eagle Plains, Yukon, while near the Inuvik airport (opposite left) we're no doubt calling for a tow truck, though a passing garbage hauler plucked Evo No. 5 out with a tow strap. At rally's end in Anchorage (left), our weary smiles speak of sleep deprivation and adventure.

to the Chena Hot Springs Resort in Fairbanks, where they've built a fantastic ice hotel that adjoins the conventional lodges. Inside its ice-block walls, there's a fully functional bar where the bar itself, the stools and the glasses are all fashioned from ice. There are ice sculptures inside, the most prominent being a life-size medieval knight on horseback; and rooms where guests can spend the night. The most whimsical room has a bed (yes, carved from ice) that looks like a bear in the "dead possum" position, with four skyward paws as bedposts and the bear's head as, quite literally, a headboard. The hotel is open all year, with glycol pumped through 14,000 feet of tubing in the summer to keep things cool.

The rally's finish in Anchorage was amid

minor pomp and circumstance, rolling into the local Subaru dealership at one-minute intervals, greeted by reporters from the local paper. Sipping champagne and swapping stories with fellow competitors in a nearby tent, we were informed of our final positions: 2nd out of six cars in the Seat-of-the-Pants class, and 7th overall out of 15 entrants. The Elders eked out a 13th-place finish. But the big winners were the remaining BMW X3s, taking 1st and 2nd overall, without another tie-rod failure for the entire 4600 miles.

We all felt like winners, though, just for having finished this grand odyssey—an adventure that sucked when we were having it. On reflection, it was a ripping good time.

For more information on the Alcan Winter Rally, go to www.alcan5000.com.

Jim of all trades



PHOTO BY SUZANNE ELDER

► The photos for our Alcan Winter Rally feature were taken by **Jim Elder**, a longtime friend of the magazine who fell in love with Alaska when he first visited the state in 1964. Elder, a writer/photographer who sings a mean rendition of Johnny Horton's "North to Alaska," was based in Jackson, Wyoming, for 50 years, until he says, "the billionaires finally drove us out." He and wife Suzanne are a vibrant couple,

traveling the West in "Rufus," a red Ford F-350 pickup outfitted with an Alaskan camper whose interior and plumbing were custom-built by Elder himself. If it's outdoors and in the West, and if it has to do with RVs or cars or long-distance travel and camping, Jim has probably done it, with camera and pen at the ready. Jim cites R&T's Tony Hogg and Henry N. Manney III as his mentors and literary inspirations.—AB

ONLY THE BEST RUN WITH BORLA

Brandon Bernstein

BMW Top Fast Rookie of the Year

John Muhovetz

Mod Motor King

Donna Sydor

MIRA's First Lady of Renegade Racing

John Maffucci

World Speed Record Holder at Bonneville

