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SOCIAL DISTANCING

ADVENTURE

ALCAN 5000 ADVENTURE

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Photos by Andy & Mercedes Lilienthal unless otherwise noted

The competitor in front of us turns their flashers on. We barely see them because the snow is blowing so fiercely. We are in a blizzard on the border of the Yukon and Northwest Territories above the Arctic Circle. We're participating in the Alcan 5000 Winter Rally and we're at mile 2,413 of 5,120 and about to summit a pass on a lonely stretch of Canada's infamous Dempster Highway. For a moment I thought, What have we gotten ourselves into?

The 36th Alcan 5000 departed Kirkland, WA on February 26, 2020 and ran up to the Arctic Ocean, and finished in Anchorage, AK on March 6. Nearly 40 teams would have 10 days to cover over 5,000 miles in vehicles that ranged from SUVs, pickups, and Subaru, to MINI Coopers, Porsche CUVs, and even a classic rear-drive Ford Capri.

We prepared long and hard for this. From getting winter boots rated to -65 F, to cold-weather modifications to our rig, a turbodiesel-powered JDM '91 Mitsubishi Pajero. Our two-door was modified with cold-weather gear like dual Optima Red Top Batteries, a Webasto Thermo Top Evo coolant heater, an oil pan heater, studded 235/80R17 Nitto Exo Grapplers on FJ Cruiser wheels, and heated Scheel-Mann orthopedic seats. These were some of the upgrades we made, but they were all needed for our Arctic adventure.

The Alcan 5000 is more than an organized road trip. It has time-speed-distance (TSD) rally stages. TSD rally is all about accuracy; getting from point A to point B at the exact prescribed time. If you go past a checkpoint early, you're penalized. If you show up late? Penalty. It's a test of navigation and driver prowess. Plus you have to battle winter road conditions, sleep deprivation, and avoiding things like moose or caribou. My wife, Mercedes, a past Rebelle Rally participant, was our navigator, I was the driver.

Over the first four days, we passed through scenic British Columbia reaching the beginning of the Alaska Highway in Dawson Creek then headed up to the Yukon. We'd do one or two TSDs a day, then hit the road for hundreds of miles on the Alaska Highway. There were grueling days, long nights, but always a warm bed waiting at a hotel. Universally, the drives were spectacular; the wildlife—including bison, moose, mountain goat, and caribou—abundant.

Day Five is when things really got interesting. It was -8 F and dark in Dawson City, YT that morning. We were headed to tackle 456 miles of the infamous, and very snow-covered, Dempster Highway.

TACKLING A FROZEN DEMPSTER

The Dempster is an iconic, fierce road running from outside Dawson City, YT north to Tuktoyaktuk, NT. It's the only road and a lifeline for the communities north of the Arctic Circle. Next gas: 227 miles.

It was dawn and overcast. Our ultra-bright Lightforce lights helped illuminate the road; the mountains in the distance looked like massive ghosts on the horizon. The wind was blowing, visibility was low. The only traffic was the sporadic road grader attempting to keep the road passable.

Gusty winds encouraged snow to drift over the road. Rally sweeps team member, Tim Chovanak, slid his Ford Raptor off the road

recovering another rallier. Fortunately, everyone got out with a tug. However, the car he recovered and a few others opted not to continue the daunting snow-covered road, and instead met up with the rally a few days later. It wasn't just those two that got stuck 86 miles into the Dempster: Several other 4WDs got hung-up, including our buddy cars, #38, JR and Judy Russell in their Jeep Wrangler JK, and #40, Garret and Kristen Arendt in their Lexus GX470.

Not far up the road, car #30, a 100 Series Land Cruiser, ended up in the ditch needing to be pulled out. Strong winds, blowing snow, and below-zero temperatures did not help the matters. People left the warmth of their own rigs to dig out the Toyota. After several attempts with a snatch strap, Mel Wade of Offroad Evolution, pulled the Land Cruiser onto the road using his Jeep Gladiator. It was becoming very evident there's little room for error on the Dempster.

The rally stops at Eagle Plains for fuel and food. We're halfway to Inuvik but only 60 miles from the Arctic Circle, where another bucket list item could be crossed off. We don't lollygag; we have miles to make.

While we were moving north, the weather was definitely going south—as in getting bad. Visibility is dropping, the wind is howling making everything around us like an overactive snowglobe. People turn their hazards on to see each other. We're in a caravan of 6 to 8 rigs crawling through blizzard conditions. Rally organizer, Jerry Hines, is leading our pack in his Ford Excursion. Mercedes and I are crawling along trying to keep car #40 in our sights, wind slamming into the side of our boxy trucklet as we ascend the pass to enter Northwest Territories. As soon as we crest the hill, the road instantly gets better and the wind dies down; the drifts recede. It was like we'd been plucked out of a raging storm, and put on the path to enlightenment.

It was now a sprint to Inuvik accompanied by our first amazing Arctic sunset, which seemingly lasts forever.

It should be noted that during the rally, we were running as a tribute to the late, great racer, Rod Hall. Rod ran the 1986 Alcan 5000 Summer Rally in a then-new Mitsubishi-built Dodge Raider. He was one of only five teams to make it to Inuvik that year. So when we rolled in at 8pm that night, it was an amazing feeling—we completed the same route Rod ran in '86 in a vehicle similar to our Pajero.

INUVIK TO TUK, AND THE ICE ROAD

The next day we departed for Tuktoyaktuk and the Arctic Ocean. The 92 mile road to Tuk was finished a few years ago and is the only place in North America where you can drive to the shores of the Arctic Ocean. We arrived in Tuk mid-morning to a temperature around -30 F. But the temperature didn't matter: we'd made it to the top of the world, and seeing the iconic Arctic Ocean sign; yet another bucket item off our list.

Later that day we returned to Inuvik and drove another 146 miles on the ice road to Aklavik and back. Ever seen the show Ice Road Truckers? Yeah, it's like that: it's literally a frozen river that goes 73 miles each way.

The ice road is the width of a four-lane highway, complete with sweeping turns, traffic signs on snowbanks, and a 90 kmh (56 mph)



Our Alcan 5000 adventure rig was a JDM 1991 Mitsubishi Pajero with a turbodiesel engine and a host of modifications for Arctic conditions. Photo by Andrew Snucins.



While stunningly beautiful, the Dempster Highway, which runs from near Dawson City, YT to Inuvik, YT can be very difficult to drive to blowing and drifting snow.

speed limit. Graders with grooved blades carve lines in the ice, aiding in traction. Driving it is unlike anything I've done and is an experience I'll never forget—one you can only get when that far north.

THE DEMPSTER SOUTH

Remember how bad the Dempster was going north? Turns out authorities closed the road behind us. It was closed the entire day we were in Inuvik and Tuk! Thankfully it opened up just in time to head south to Whitehorse for the night, some 760 miles.

The freshly graded road was in wonderful shape. We experienced the most amazing sunrise we'd ever witnessed, which illuminated pristine snowy landscapes with bright pinks, light blues, and vibrant orange hues. It was Arctic perfection. However, the trip wasn't without incident.

I almost lost it in a drift that'd crept onto the road, luckily I made a harrowing recovery. Later, I got stuck in a drift at the Arctic Circle and had to use my winch (hooked to car #38) to pull myself out. The final "oh s**t" moment had four legs. We came around the corner at speed greeted by an enormous wolf right in the middle of the damn highway. I locked up the brakes and wolfy hopped over the snow bank. I righted the truck, and we carried on. My seat will never be the same.

We left the Dempster with immense respect for the road, those who maintain it, and the people who live along it. It was back onto the Klondike highway bound for Whitehorse, but not before I went full-send into a snowbank to avoid rear-ending a car that'd stopped to avoid another rally car in the ditch. Just another day on the Alcan.

THE DALTON HIGHWAY

We got to Fairbanks on Day Eight. The next morning we could either soak in luxury at Chena Hot Springs, or drive up to a freezing-ass fuel depot called Coldfoot. You can guess what we did.

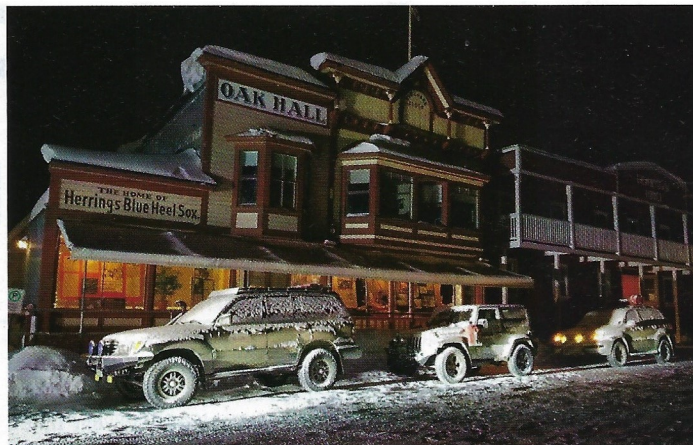
The Dalton Highway runs from Fairbanks, AK up to Deadhorse and Prudhoe Bay. It's best known for being the Pan-American Highway's start (or finish). I thought it would be like the Dempster. Hardly. The Dalton is wider, paved (though you wouldn't know it), but has much more traffic—like 10 times the traffic—most of which is huge semis pulling fuel tanks and oil drilling equipment. This meant a lot of slow going, then a lot of passing. The road is riddled with steep grades and blind corners.

This was going to be a difficult drive. We'd pick off semis one by one, using all 100hp our diesel could muster. We'd pass with an abundance of caution—when they'd let us. Sometimes they'd move to the middle of the road to avoid being passed. This was the haul road; this was their road.

After tense moments and a death-grip on the steering wheel, getting to Coldfoot was a relief. The workers at the fueling station knew immediately who we were, good or bad, due to chatter on the road's radio channel. There wasn't much to see in Coldfoot, sans a fuel pump. With daylight burning, we got back on the Dalton southbound. The drive was slow and clogged with semis. We were exhausted and ready for a burger and beer back in Fairbanks. The Dalton left an indelible mark on me as a driver. It's probably the most difficult drive I've ever had to do on or off pavement. Our beer and burgers tasted amazing that night.

The Alcan 5000 Winter Rally was a trip of a lifetime. We covered nearly 6,000 driving miles, ticked items off our bucket list, and made new friends along the way. You can't buy memories like this. Yes, we paid a bunch of money to motor around in horrible driving conditions through temps as low as -44, and occasionally missed meals due to late arrivals, but I'd do it all again in a heartbeat. Thankfully for us, the next Alcan 5000 Rally takes place in the summer, and we'll be there. **[T]**





Opposite, from top: The Alcan 5000 Winter Rally runs from Kirkland, WA all the way to the Arctic Ocean, and finishes in Anchorage, AK. // The event brought in 40 teams this year including several Ultra4 racers, such as Loren Healy in the #25 Ford Ranger. // There's a wide variety of vehicles on the Alcan 5000 from lifted Jeeps and 4WD pickups, to FWD and RWD cars, and a host of CUVs such as this Porsche Mecan. // Many of the teams ended up in the ditch while on the treacherous Dempster Highway including team #30 in their Land Cruiser.

This page, from top left: Rally organizer, Jerry Hines, said that in the 10 times he's run the infamous Dempster Highway, 2020 was the worst he's seen it. Visibility in parts was near zero. // Many mornings on the Alcan 5000 Rally were well below zero. In Dawson City, YT, it was nearly -10 F, but that pales in comparison to the -44 F we had north of the Arctic Circle. // We ticked off a lot of bucket list items on the trip, including getting to the frozen Arctic Ocean in Tuktoyaktuk, NT. This is the only place in North America you can drive to this body of water. // Car #38, Team Anyway of JR and Judy Russell, on the ice road that runs from Inuvik to Aklavik. It's over 140 miles round trip on solid river ice. // Semi trucks kick up an enormous amount of snow in this part of the world leading to tense moments and temporary whiteouts. // The large amount of semi trucks on the Dalton Highway not only kicked up snow, but proved to be a challenge to pass. // The Dalton Highway between Fairbanks and Coldfoot, AK is primarily a haul road for supplies on the way to Deadhorse and Prudhoe Bay.