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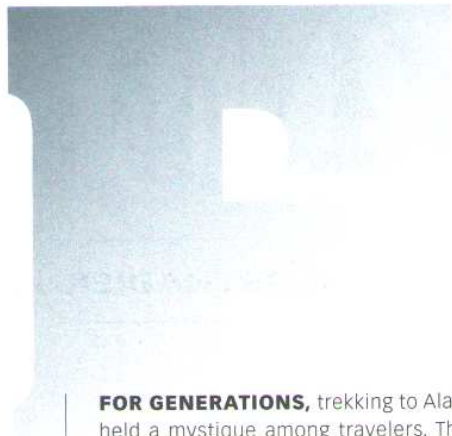


THE &ALCAN

AN EPIC 5,000-MILE RALLY IN A GRENADIER



ANDY LILIENTHAL



FOR GENERATIONS, trekking to Alaska from the Lower 48 has held a mystique among travelers. The 49th state's allure also draws adventurers to the Alcan 5000 Rally, one of North America's longest and most extreme road rallies. It's a test of human spirit, vehicular endurance and rally prowess.

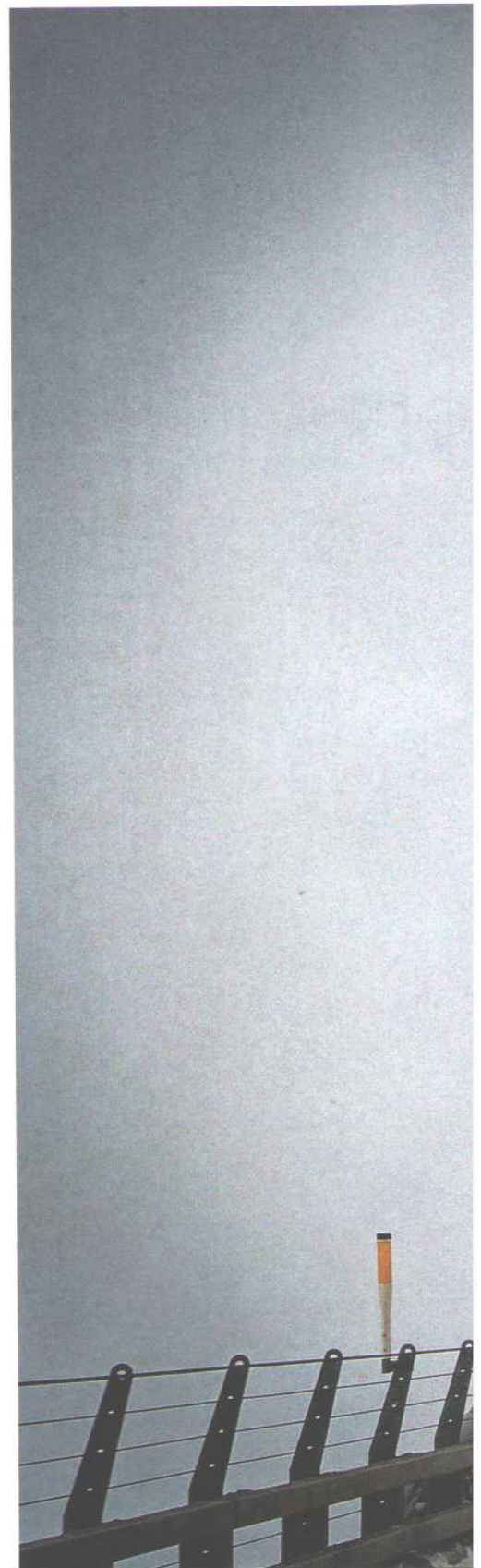
The Alcan 5000 alternates between summer and winter iterations every two years. The route starts near Seattle, Washington, and ventures through western Canada covering 5,000 miles in 10 days. Winter rallies finish in Anchorage, Alaska, in time for the famed Iditarod dogsled race.

The Alcan 5000 is based on the original concept of rallying as a grand tour: motoring and adventure rolled into a "gentleman's sport." Requiring expertise, good judgement, consistency and resourcefulness, the rally is the brainchild of Jerry Hines. He participated in the El Rally Internacional de las 24 Horas in Mexico in the late '70s. He liked the format so much he adapted it, forming the Alcan 5000 in 1984 with the Rainier Auto Sports Club (RASC).

This is a time-speed-distance (TSD) rally. Held on public roads at or below the speed limit, a TSD rally is about precision driving not about speed. Competitors aim to cross checkpoints at exact times. Arrive early or late, and they'll receive penalty points. Competitors get a route book with directions, mileage and average speeds, but must figure out when to arrive at checkpoints.

My wife and I entered the 2024 Alcan 5000 Rally, piloting a new Ineos Grenadier 4x4. While this rally is always challenging (this was our third Alcan 5000), running it in a brand-new vehicle from an equally new manufacturer added another level of adventure.

**Participants in the Alcan 5000
encounter a broad spectrum
of travel adversities.**





The Ineos Grenadier performed well across the 5,000-mile trek from Seattle to Anchorage.

OUR ALCAN INEOS

The Grenadier has power, comfort, ground clearance and an overbuilt chassis—a perfect Alcan entrant, at least on paper. The turbocharged B58 3.0-liter six-pot BMW engine is proven; the ladder frame and coil-sprung solid axle suspension are stout. Recaro seats provide comfort and support. But in practice, would this freshman rig have what it takes for an Alcan undertaking?

Our Eldoret Blue Grenadier Trialmaster was mostly stock. However, we changed the coolant to a 60:40 coolant-to-water mix and added an oil pan heater. We shod steel wheels with Michelin X-Ice Snow tires instead of the factory-supplied BFGoodrich KO2s. Dealer accessories included an LED light bar, winch, rock sliders and a Rhino-Rack Pioneer Platform roof rack. To the rack we added Rhino-Rack antenna mounts, which held Rugged Radios antennas to transmit with our R1 radios. We also added Rhino's double fuel can holder to carry 10 extra gallons of gas. In case we got stuck, we loaded Factor 55 recovery gear and four Maxtrax traction boards.

The Grenadier's interior is pure function, but is comfortable and versatile. The cargo area includes L-track, making cinching down our multitude of totes and gear easy. More manufacturers need to offer this as it's simply brilliant.

WINTER RALLY: READY, SET, GO

The terrain we'd travel would be as varied as the people and vehicles in the rally. A total of 39 teams came from 15 U.S. states and three Canadian provinces, as well as Argentina and Sweden, to participate. There was a plethora of Porsches (six Cayennes and a 911 Dakar), nine full-size trucks, numerous SUVs, several sedans and even one 1973 Mercury (Ford) Capri with a 302 V8 (which won the 2020 Rally).

Most mornings start with TSDs; some days have an afternoon event, too. There can be 650-mile transits between the day's two rallies. As veteran rally co-driver, Peter Schnieder, says—"don't dawdle." But with incredible sights to see, there's a great temptation to do just that.

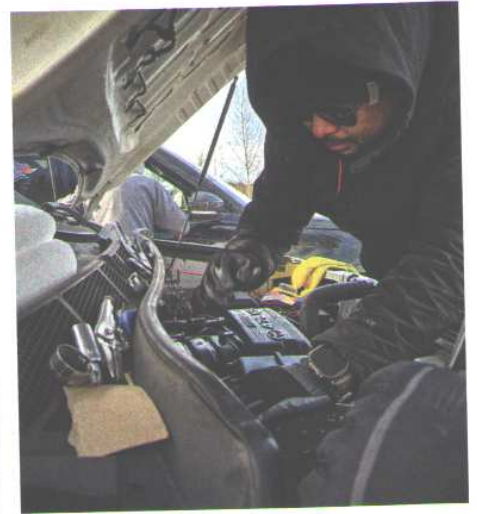
On February 21, the rally left Kirkland and headed north for our first TSD rally, then crossed into Canada. Scenic mountains and twisting highways delighted us until arriving in Quesnel, B.C. for an evening TSD rally, then dinner (if you're lucky) and the hotel for shuteye.

Wake up, TSD, transit, hopefully dinner, hotel, bed. Lather, rinse, repeat.

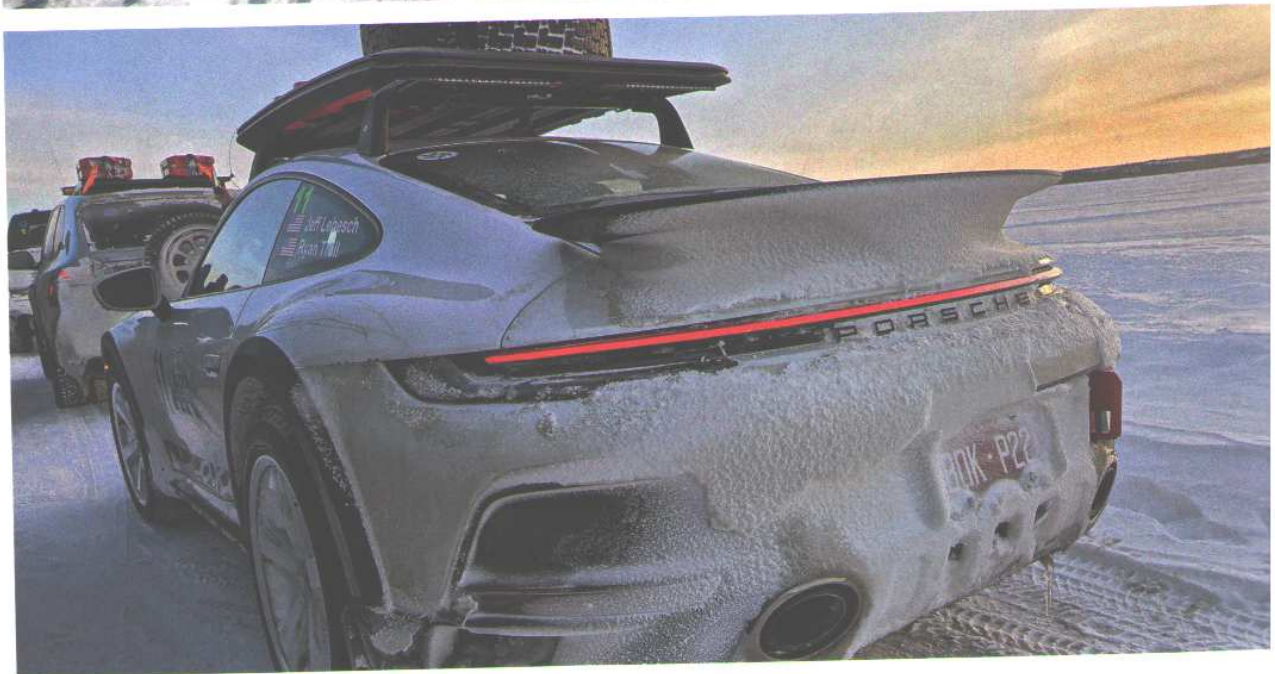
The plan is the same for 10 days, setting a hectic pace, but most fall into a rally rhythm. However, the event isn't for everyone. You might miss meals, you get up early, and drive into the night. Not everyone longs for this.

We continued north, stopping in Dawson Creek, the official start of the Alaska Highway. We then arrived in Peace River, Alberta, for the night. It was warmer than it should be, but no one expected that to last, and it didn't.





The Alcan 5000 draws participants from all over, competing with a wide range of vehicles.



IT'S 'SNOW' PROBLEM

On day three, the wind picked up and above-average temps rapidly plummeted from 35° F to 5° F, which was mirrored by the Grenadier's fuel economy. Rated at 15 mpg across the board, the boxy SUV dropped to 13 mpg as we faced fierce headwinds. We encountered our first snowstorm 275 miles outside of Yellowknife. Now this is a winter rally. This continued as we made our way along the Great Slave Lake's shores, strewn with frost heaves and ice, which presented poor visibility. We were grateful to arrive in time for dinner and a beer. Joyfully, we realized we were in first place in our 2S class, the largest field, composed of trucks and SUVs without rally computers. It was an unexpected morale boost.

The Grenadier was proving its worth. Despite the obligatory cracked windshield, the SUV was a steadfast companion. Solid and capable, and with a heater that felt like it was fueled by magma, it was a winter warrior, albeit a thirsty one. Unfortunately, fuel stops became spread out, and we resorted to gas from our cans. We experienced light snow and low visibility, on par for any Canadian winter. Our TSD performances continued to be the best we'd ever had. Could we actually make a podium appearance?

We'd pass locales with foreboding names like Destruction Bay and Snag Junction, some offering postcard-like winter scenery.

**The Grenadier was proving its worth.
Despite the obligatory cracked windshield,
The SUV was a steadfast companion.**

ICE RACING AND EXPLORING

Yellowknife was -21° F and it felt like it. The Grenadier started up without issue, but threw a check-engine light for low voltage. I cleared the code, and it never appeared again. Cars can do weird things when it gets cold. Then again, so can people.

It was ice-racing day on Great Slave Lake. I figured I had no chance against the Porsches or the V8-powered Capri on studded tires. To my surprise, I posted the third fastest time of the day. The track's deep, snowy ruts gave vehicles with ground clearance an advantage, including the second-place #30 GMC Sierra of Edward Heil and Sean O'Shea and first-place #35 Toyota FJ Cruiser of Aaron Pufal and Taylor Lawson.

Later we drove the Ingraham Trail haul road to the start of the ice roads made famous by TV's "Ice Road Truckers," and drove the four-mile path from the village of Dettah back to Yellowknife.

Over the next few days, we'd log thousands of miles across Canada, going from Fort Providence, N.T. to Fort Nelson, B.C., then to Whitehorse—the capital of the Yukon. The areas in between were stunning, especially northern B.C. around Toad River and Mucho Lake with snow-covered mountains, epic vistas and frequent bison.

LEFT:

Contestants battle bone-chilling temps, high winds and snow-packed roads for much of the race.

Teams hurtled toward the Alaska border, but not before stopping to help rally organizer, Jerry Hines, mend his Toyota Sequoia, which lost a heater hose fitting at -15° F. Thanks to Alcan 5000 Rally bushcraft, ralliers got him underway again. We all made it for the afternoon TSD near Tok, Alaska, and rolled into Fairbanks for the night. The standing in 2S were very close between us and 4 other teams. It was anyone's game.

DOING THE DALTON

We had an optional day in Fairbanks where we could soak in luxury at Chena Hot Springs or drive the Dalton Highway to see the Arctic Circle, fuel up in Coldfoot, and return back to the hotel 500 miles later. Unsurprisingly, we chose the latter.

Unlike 2020, the road to Prudhoe Bay was in good shape, there wasn't much traffic, and we had bluebird skies. It was a wonderful day filled with good company and great views. We were also likely the first Ineos Grenadier to cross the Arctic Circle in this hemisphere. The SUV's suspension shined on this treacherous haul road, easily soaking up hundreds of potholes without upsetting the chassis.

Back at the restaurant in Fairbanks, we met Randi Matheson, a 30-year trucking industry veteran and dispatcher. Knowing Alaska's roads like the back of her hand, she advised we might have problems getting to our next destination, Valdez, due to incoming weather. She said she'd text me in the morning with road conditions.

Sure enough, 15 minutes before we departed the next morning, Randi texted links: The road to Valdez was closed. Now what?

TACKLING THOMPSON PASS

The winter rally had never been to Valdez for one reason: Thompson Pass. It's the snowiest place in Alaska getting an average of 500 inches (42 feet) of snow per year, which regularly closes the only road in or out. We were told at the morning TSD in Fairbanks that we would go on (at a bone-chilling -37° F) and to meet at the fuel stop in Glenallen afterward for more info.

After an epic drive to Glenallen, we were informed Thompson Pass should open around 1:00 pm for a few hours and we could get to Valdez. Or, teams could skip Valdez and go to the final destination, Anchorage, be penalized for missing TSDs, and find their own accommodations. This was a sure-fire way to topple in the rankings, so most of the rally chanced it and headed to Valdez. Alaska Highway 4 became a sheet of ice as we approached the pass closure. We stopped and waited as the wind shook our rigs. A few of us got out to take photos, only to retreat to shelter moments later. After an hour wait, our pilot "car"—a snowplow—guided us through.

The 60 mph gusts created whiteout conditions like I'd never witnessed. Windchills reportedly reached -40°. We drove past 25-ft.

tall drifts in the oncoming lane; enormous machines with huge snow blowers attempted to clear the massive snowfall.

Eventually we descended the pass and into Valdez. We learned the final TSD in Palmer would be scrapped, and the next morning's rally would determine the winners. But would we get out of Valdez the next day?

THE FINAL COMPETITION

As dawn broke, the pass was closed again. But we had more important things to worry about—the final TSD rally.

The course was composed of tricky turns, traffic and speed changes. We got a less-than-desirable score. However, when the dust settled, it was good enough to come out on top and we won the 2S class in the brand-new Ineos. In fact, we ranked 10th overall out of 39 teams. To say we were elated is a gross understatement. Now can we get out of Valdez?

With gusts exceeding 60 mph and windchill temps near -40, the trek over Thompson Pass pushed contestants and their vehicles to their limits.





THE LAST PUSH

After the TSD, we all went back to the hotel and waited, sipping coffee, sharing stories. News came the pass would open for a few hours at noon.

Ralliers drove to the closure and waited, gale winds buffeting each vehicle. Around noon, a snowplow took us over Thompson Pass, which was worse than the day prior.

We pushed on to Anchorage. The day became sunny and clear with astonishing views of the Chugach Range and its impressive peaks. The winds were with us all the way to the finish, where even the locals remarked how windy it was.

As we crossed the finish line, the wind gusts served as a reminder of how harsh the Alcan 5000 winter rally can be. But no amount of wind can take away the first-class camaraderie we have with Alcan 5000 ralliers. You bond with fellow fringe lunatics who pay good money to drive through awful conditions in Arctic temperatures that push both man and machine to their breaking point. However, the rally rhythm can get into your soul, and beckons you to enter each year. We're already registered for the next one: Alaska is calling again. **W**



COVER IMAGE: INEOS GRENADIER pg. 62

