

# A taste of rally riding, without the expense

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WATERLOO, ONT. -- Dakar, Senegal and Southern Ontario are a lot closer than you might gather from a map.

I was in West Africa, just outside Dakar in January to watch the finish of the Paris-Dakar Rally, the Super Bowl of off-road motorcycle racing. Four months later, I was in Waterloo, Ont., on a Saturday to ride KTM/Rally Connex Adventure Rides' Blue Mountains Tour.

If you were to chart the two events, the Paris-Dakar is the summit, while the Adventure Ride could be the first point plotted.

The Paris-Dakar Rally is an annual endurance race that usually starts in France travels over vast dunes, mountains, and rocks to end, typically in Dakar, about 2½ weeks later. It is made up of timed sections, known as Specials, and Liaisons in which rider's must scramble to get from the finish line of one Special to the start of another. In between, there's little time for repairs or rest.



Riders find their own routes using compass, GPS and a road book. It costs about \$100,000 for an amateur to attempt the rally and only 65 of the highly specialized motorcycles crossed the finish line this year out of the 199 that started.

As I watched the competitors in the final Special plow their bikes through the deep sand and launch themselves off the dunes along Senegal's Atlantic coast, I imagined riding in the Dakar myself one day. Then I remembered my attempt from the day before, when I took my motorcycle into those same dunes.

Not more than 10 metres into the sand, the Kawasaki KLR650 I was to travel with around West Africa got hopelessly stuck and I needed the help of three young Senegalese to get it out.

The KTM/Rally Connex Adventure Rides, however, offer a taste of rally riding without the expense or exertion. Although much tamer than the Dakar, the Adventure Rides offer their share of challenging terrain, scenic routes, and thrilling moments.

The one, two and four-day non-competitive rides use the Global Positioning System to guide you through Southern Ontario and Western Quebec on gravel, road allowances, right-of-ways, forest access roads, logging routes, abandoned railway beds and any other

passable trails the organizers can get permission to ride, with short paved stretches between more adventurous sections.

With the GPS, you never quite know where you are, but you're never lost as the display screen always points in the direction you should be travelling and gives the distance to the next turn. If you don't have a receiver, you can rent one for \$40 or follow the rear wheel of a rider who does. If you get stuck, lost or break down, Rally Connex has a chase truck and sweep riders to help you out.

And you don't have to be an expert rider or have a specialized machine. Saturday's ride included everyone from novices to experienced amateur enduro racers. Although the Adventure Rides are designed for 650cc single-cylinder dual-sport bikes, machines on Saturday ranged from a circa 1970s 250cc two-stroke to a hulking 2004 BMW 1200GS.

Austrian motorcycle manufacturer KTM sponsored the ride and loaned me a 640 LC4 Adventure, the production version of the factory race bike that since 2000 has dominated the Paris-Dakar rally. I took that as a cue to turn the ride into my own mini rally.

Like rally riders, who often compete on a few hours' sleep, I was on the road at before 6:30 a.m. on just a few winks to make it from my downtown Toronto home to the 8 a.m. riders' meeting. Dozens were gathered in the parking lot of Cycle Improvements, a KTM dealership to Waterloo, to pay the \$40 entry fee and upload the route into their GPS receivers.

I always try to join riders a little faster than I am, so they push me to stretch my abilities. I also needed to stop frequently to take pictures, so I hooked up with Richard Seck and Pascal Anctil, photographer and test rider respectively for cmgonline.com, an Internet motorcycle magazine. They were comparing two new entries to the big twin-cylinder dual-sport market, the KTM 950 LC8 Adventure and the newly redesigned 1200GS.

The ride took us in a wide loop, heading northeast from Waterloo over Ontario's last usable covered bridge in West Montrose, up to Creemore for lunch and fuel and nearly as far north as Collingwood before swinging back south through Arthur and Elora back to Waterloo, a total of about 350 km.

In Mennonite country we passed century-old farm houses and the occasional horse-drawn carriages. Usually, however, we were using horsepower of a more combustible nature.

Like the Liaisons between Specials in the Paris-Dakar Rally, there were long stretches of straight gravel between the more twisty, muddy, technical tracks. When there weren't intersecting roads and driveways, we opened the bikes up.

I kept up with the big twins until my 640 tapped out at about 150 km/h, 30 or so after I was ready to tap out myself. The more powerful 950 and 1200 pulled away, getting up to 175 km/h before becoming unstable on the loose pebbles.

The Adventure Rides, however, are more about sliding into loose corners on twisty forest trails than straightaway drag racing. The best tracks were usually marked with signs that read "Drive at your own risk," "No winter maintenance beyond this point" or "No exit."

A hard rainfall the night before had left much of the route wet and Seck proved you can't judge the depth of a puddle from its surface.

He rode ahead to get a shot of us splashing through. He got the shot, but not the one he wanted after he abandoned the 950 submerged to the top of its 21-inch front rim. We wisely rode around, but after snapping a few frames Seck got back on and rode out without much trouble.

In our riding trio, he provided the comic relief. He was new to using GPS, which displays the section between two points as a straight line, although the road may have turns. He was watching the straight-line on the GPS screen and not the twist in the road when he low-sided the 950 in the mud.

The only injury, luckily, was to his ego and to our bellies from enjoying a good laugh.

Anctil provided the technical expertise when the 950 suffered a flat. Lacking a centre stand, we improvised a jack with a log found in the ditch and with a rock for a hammer he quickly removed the wheel. Although the support truck was picking up the rear with spares, another rider happened along with a tube, tire irons and pitched in to get us moving again quickly.

When the 950 had a second flat late in the day, I took my cue to leave the guys from cmgonline and finish the ride alone.

As I made my way back to Waterloo and then to Toronto, my thoughts turned back to Dakar. The grey chilly Saturday in Southern Ontario didn't seem that far away from the sub-Saharan heat of Senegal and Rally Connex can help bridge the gap in between.

When they're not plotting summer rides in Ontario and Quebec, they help amateur and professional racers alike turn their rally fantasies into reality, providing support services for the Paris-Dakar rally.

Visit <http://www.rallyconnex.com> for details.