

07/08/1998

Asian Rally has something for everyone

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THE Asian Rally is a totally different format from the normal FIA format and it could be a winner because it caters for the enthusiast, not just the rich factory teams, and it has something for everybody.

While the rally is not affiliated with FIA, the organisers of the World Rally Championship, the Malaysian Association of Motoring (MAM) are not unduly perturbed.

"We don't depend on big works teams. We're catering more for the enthusiasts. The Asian Rally combines elements of speed like Paris-Dakar, adventure like the Camel Trophy, and tourism," said MAM secretary Steven Ng.

"In addition to the mandatory rally specs like full roll cage and four-point harness, the trucks must have winch, and full recovery gear including snatch straps, choker chain, and mud tyres," added event director Thomas Foo.

"We are also concerned about safety and on that point, we have more than 500 border police on duty on the special stage between Surat Thani and Hua Hin (in southern Thailand). This is a mountainous and jungle stretch which runs very close to the Myanmar border.

"These kinds of events are so expensive to run, but because it is an amateur event, enthusiasts are willing to enter, and the participating countries love the organisers because these areas have so much tourist potential."

The eight-day event which will be flagged off tomorrow night by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at Dataran Merdeka will finish in Chiangmai.

There are 42 competitors with the top contenders for the Prime Minister's Challenge Trophy being Zainal Abidin Sabli from Sabah, Rod Jones from Australia, Vivat Aieolek from Thailand and Seichiro Kataoka from Japan.

The Asian Rally was first held as a normal car rally from Singapore to Vientiane in 1962, the days when cars like the Volvo 122S were dominated.

The FIA (Federation Internationale Automobiles) 4x4 offroad format is a championship series of seven rallies starting with the Paris-Dakar. The Australian Safari which was run over 11 days and 4,000-5,000km was part of the championship series until it was discontinued in 1996.

The next in terms of challenge and significance are the Atlas Rally in North Africa and the UAE Desert Rally.

The rest of the FIA World Championship series are basically only weekend affairs with none of the challenge and thrills of the Paris-Dakar or the Atlas.

Of the non-championship FIA events, there are really none left worth talking about except in tones of nostalgia.

And now comes the Asian Rally.

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