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Gutsy women in 4WD challenge

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RECENTLY, two young women from Japan had to cope with butterflies in their stomachs. Probably they weren't the only competitors in the Third Silverstone Asian Rally to feel nervous.

Says Akiko Okabe, 21: "I'm feeling nervous but I'm looking forward to the rally. I want to enjoy it."

Her co-driver/navigator, Mami Kurihara, 29, comments: "I'm very excited as my dream of taking part in the rally is being realised!"

Just over two months ago, Okabe, a beautician, and Kurihara, a high-school teacher, had answered an advertisement placed by Saitama Nissan, one of the largest distributors of Nissan vehicles in Japan, to represent the company at the Asian rally. Both had no previous experience in off-road 4WD rallying.

Okabe and Kurihara were selected from a total of 170 applicants that included mother-and-daughter teams, and sisters.

Saitama Nissan, which is sponsoring the team, figured that having a pair of amateur women drivers handle their vehicle would have more public appeal than choosing professional drivers. True to their assumption, it generated a lot of publicity in Japan.

The duo is one of only two all-female teams taking part in the gruelling, eight-day, 4,000km off-road rally that was flagged off from Kuala Lumpur on Aug 8. There are a total of six female participants among the 106 competitors from over six countries competing for the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Challenge Trophy.

Says their team manager, T. Wakabayashi: "As far as driving technique is concerned, there are others who may be better than Okabe and Kurihara. But in rallies, it is stamina that is important. Last year, we also had two women from Japan who took part in the rally but they didn't complete the event."

So how confident are Kurihara and Okabe about finishing the course which takes participants from KL to Cameron Highlands before journeying up north to Penang and onwards to the Malaysia-Thai border? (Among the cities and towns covered in Thailand are Surat Thani, Hua Hin, Ayuthaya, Sukhothai, Mae Hong Song and Chiangmai.)

"About 50 per cent chance," their team manager reckons, meaning that an estimated half of the 53 teams will get to complete the tough course that offers stiff challenges like rocks, slippery mud and cervices.

In fact, this year's rally made it compulsory for all vehicles to be fitted with a winch as there are numerous near-impassable obstacles present along the journey. This is in addition to the mandatory rally specs like full roll cage and four-point harness.

Strangers when they first met, Kurihara and Okabe work well together and have learnt how to handle a winch and other equipment should they need to haul their factory-specification Nissan Terrano out of a river or through some obstacle.

Besides learning how to handle a 4WD and read maps, the gutsy and adventurous pair went through three weeks of rigorous physical training to increase their fitness level. Both were active sportswomen while in school. Okabe used to represent her school in softball and Kurihara was a javelin thrower. Included in the rally programme is a special project. The Ribbon Project of Japan, a non-profit organisation dedicated to the anti-AIDS campaign, will be one of the main features in the event.

Norio Maruhashi of Ribbon Project will spearhead the campaign along with a very special participant, Yoko Fukuzawa, who could not speak or hear from birth.

Fukuzawa has teamed up with co-driver Toshiharu Urabe, a two-time Camel Trophy finalist. Driving a Suzuki Vitara, Fukuzawa is proving to the world that being physically-challenged does not deter her from leading an active lifestyle.

The Third Silverstone Asian Rally is organised by Persatuan Pemotoran Malaysia (Motoring Association of Malaysia) and is designed to be Asia's answer to the world-class Paris-Dakar and the Baja 3000 rallies.

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