

08/08/1998

Having fun all the way from KL to Chiangmai

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WHAT is now the second most enjoyable rally in the world after the megabuck Paris-Dakar?

Surprise!

It's the Silverstone Asian Rally, now in its third year.

This is the rating given by several Japanese motoring magazines, a claim made by Asian Rally promoter Steven Ng.

"The Japanese magazines have their own rating system," said Ng, the secretary-general of the Motoring Association of Malaysia who are the organisers of the Silverstone Asian Rally.

"To our surprise, their survey of drivers shows that the Asian Rally is the second most exciting after the Paris Dakar

"This is the only rally in the world where the teams can enjoy different types of driving challenges - high speed stages like the Paris-Dakar, and rough stages like the Camel Trophy.

"It's also affordable. This is an event where private teams can enter and be competitive.

"But unlike the Paris-Dakar, there is a more level playing field here because we don't have factory teams being supported by 10-wheel drive MAN trucks or Bell Super Ranger helicopters."

Ng said another attraction, other rallies, was that the Asian Rally offers drivers the wonderful food and cultural diversity of Malaysia and the fabled hospitality of Thailand.

"For most Asian rally enthusiasts, the Asian Rally beats the socks off desert events," said Thomas Foo, Asian Rally's event director.

"Desert events like the Baja 1000 just give you tulips to get from A to B in three days - a cannonball kind of event, fastest time wins.

"Three days of brown sand and rocks and cactus.

"It's the same thing with the Rally of the Phaeroes, the UAE Rally and the Tunisian Rally. Too much desert."

Foo is the man behind the success of the historic Trans-Africa expedition, a real story of Malaysia Boleh. Despite the lack of FIA support, or perhaps because of it (sanction for the Paris Dakar is said to cost the organisers millions of French francs in fees to FIA), the event is gaining the support of Japan and Taiwan who have entered 16 and 10 teams respectively.

The number of participants would have been more if not for the Asian financial crisis, said Ng.

Another 12 from Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand have been entered for the Rally which will be flagged off tonight from Dataran Merdeka by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The eight-day event which flags off at 8.0 from Dataran Merdeka and ends in Chiangmai, has 42 competitors.

Top contenders for the Prime Minister's Challenge Trophy are Malaysian Zainal Abidin Sabli, Rod Jones from Australia, Vivat Aieolek from Thailand, and Seichiro Kataoka from Japan. Also participating is Yoko Fukuzawa of Japan.

Yoko, who is deaf, will join ex-Camel Trophy participant, Toshio Urabe to promote an Anti-Aids campaign.

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