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Shamsurrijal drives into Algeria and meets Dr M

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HIS Proton Satria GTi certainly stands out among the Renaults and Peugeot in Algiers, and it's no wonder that its driver Shamsurrijal A. Jamil gets lots of attention.

Algeria is his 28th stop, having left Johor Baru on Feb 15 on a quest for a world record.

Shamsurrijal, 38, drove into Algiers in his surprisingly well-kept Satria last Friday, hoping to meet Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who was here on an official visit.

On Tuesday, he got his chance. Dr Mahathir showed keen interest in the performance of the Malaysian-made car, its engine and tyres, and encouraged him to keep at his bid for a world record.

Shamsurrijal was in high spirits, having successfully crossed from Tunisia into Algiers with a night's stop at Annaba, just inside the Algerian border.

The journey was risky, given that 22 foreign tourists had disappeared from January to April while travelling in the Algerian countryside.

"I did my homework. Everyone advised me not to drive at night, and so I didn't," he said.

Shamsurrijal has loads of stories, many of them about the generosity of people so poor that they live in hovels but still insist on sharing their meal and home with a stranger.

He spends most nights in local homes but sleeps in his car if he has to.

He does have a knack of getting on with people, even in sign language.

"Maybe it's my smile!" he says, his trademark Cheshire Cat grin stretching his slim features. Or his naturally talkative nature.

The most beautiful country so far? Afghanistan. He was there for four days in April.

"The landscape is truly amazing. You can see three mountain ranges, and they are all in different colours," he said.

He's still boyishly enthusiastic about his quest despite the long, lonely hours on the road, tough terrain and fickle weather ranging from minus 10 degrees to 50 degrees Celsius.

What's really tedious, he said, was the bureaucracy at border crossings. Officialdom is the same the world over.

His blue Satria, plastered with Malaysian car stickers and painted with a flapping Jalur Gemilang, is still in good shape.

"It's a great car," Shamsurrijal said, adding that it's always a talking point as not many people know that Malaysia makes cars.

Naturally, he misses his wife and four children, aged five to 16, and hopes to see them during Hari Raya Aidilfitri if he can find the funds to fly them to wherever he is.

Neither he nor his car can go home, under the Guinness World Record rules.

This self-sponsored adventure has cost him RM40,000 so far.

From Algeria, Shamsurrijal will retrace his path to Tunisia to catch a ferry to the Italian island of Sicily enroute to Europe. In November, he will ship his car from England to Canada to continue his journey.

He has now driven 40,000km through 28 countries in six months. With 140,000km, 90 countries and a year to go, he hopes to get home by Merdeka Day next year.

By then, he would have covered 118 countries. The current world record

is 111 countries, held by Americans Jim Rogers and Paige Parker.