



Sahara Challenge Day 1 – Malaga to Tangier – 281 km

23 Sep 2024

Credit to HERO's Syd Stelvio's daily summaries for this article, they provided amazing colour to one of the world's great experiences. I have tweaked the summaries to focus on Tony and my adventure through this most incredible event. Also, a massive thank you to Tony Sutton for having me along for the ride – and what a ride it was!

Sahara Challenge is one of those rallies that forms lifelong memories. What a setting Morocco provides. Other than a handful of modern cities the rest of the country remains lost in 1000 years of history where the donkey and walking are the main forms of transport. Where people use every drop of water for life. It is amazing. The 4500 kms are very unforgiving, you're going at pace even on the regularities. We crossed the high Atlas, the mid Atlas, deserts, dunes, from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean.

Getting on the road is one of the best feelings in the world, few other experiences bestow upon a person the sense of freedom that is felt during the first few miles of an adventure rally.

There was a day of rallying under the hazy Spanish sun to contend with first though, before any wheel tracks could be laid in North Africa. A day to get everyone into the swing of things before the bigger challenges of the Atlas Mountains and the Sahara itself loom into view. John Spiller set three straight forward regularities in the Montes de Malaga, on a mixture of gravel and tarmac, offering a taste of just what might be to come.

To come over the next 13 days one of the biggest and hottest desert in the world we're driving into, what could go wrong?



We enjoyed some of the fabulous roads in the south of Spain. Some were roughshod and potholed, and some were racetrack smooth with barely a breath of traffic on them, In the afternoon the descent towards the coast began, down through a cork forest, with

its half-naked trees – a road that is a well-known rally routes around these parts. It may have been hazy all day, but there were still spectacular views across valleys and up to the mountain peaks, and the weather remained sunny for the 1 hour crossing of the Strait of Gibraltar, for the maritime part of the day.

Sahara Challenge Day 2 – Tangier to Fes – 346 km

24 Sep 2024

Day one is done, Europe is behind us, and Africa awaits, this is where the fun continues.

The fun began with an introduction to the early morning traffic of Tangiers, having last been in Tangiers in the early 1990's the city has exploded. It wasn't all that long before the city was behind us, and we were climbing into the foothills of the mountains.

Two regularities were held the first 100 km of the day, ticking off two thirds of the day's competitive elements. The first of these was aptly named Corkscrew, and so it was, up and down the contours of the land, with the ascents matched by the descents and setting the pattern for the day ahead. Up above the sky was an ever-evolving spectacle, clouds rolling over the peaks and then being pierced by the sun that was doing its best to burn through the clouds. There wasn't much drama below, with most crews enjoying the day as they began to experience what Morocco had to offer, fabulous driving roads.

Regularity number two was even more twisty than the first, with thrilling ascents and descents through more cork forest, now with the heady scent of Cannabis plants in the air, as the heady herb grows thickly and freely on the slopes in this part of the country.



Traffic wise, the roads remained relatively quiet, although there had been plenty of sheep and livestock being herded in small groups along the roads, as well as heavily loaded Donkeys working the tracks with large loads strapped to their backs. The Baboons were also out on the roads to greet us. Occasionally the road was punctuated with small villages, including the town of Beni Ahmed where our visit coincided with market day. The streets were buzzing with people and life, as women in traditional dress purchased goods and went about their business with Donkeys and children in tow. It was an unexpected bit of excitement, for us and the locals.



The day's final regularity, that took place in the hills surrounding the Al Wahada Dam, on the Oued Ouragha watercourse. The dam is the largest in Morocco and the second largest in Africa.

Post regularity there was still a long run into the evenings halt at Fez, on a road that the roadbook had dubbed 'the worst road in North Africa'. It was certainly bumpy in places, with broken surfaces and unsealed sections offering a challenge to the drivers, but we were to enjoy many roads that could vie for the dubious title. The worst being old asphalt roads where there was 60 – 80% pavement missing and sharp edges to crunch up and down on.

We continue south tomorrow, heading towards Ifrane, on a 338 km day that will be the first Sporting Time Control section, as well as contesting a further three regularities.

Sahara Challenge Day 3 – Fes to Ifrane – 338 km

25 Sep 2024

Today was a driver's day, 338 kilometres of tarmac and dirt, that twisted and turned through the mountains and valleys between Fes and Ifrane.

Even the morning traffic in Fes was on its best behaviour, the often-fraught morning rush hour seemingly postponed for our run out past the ancient city walls. It wasn't long before the route would dive stage right off of the main highway and begin to climb. The Cannabaceae plants that had been so prevalent the previous day had been replaced by terraced Olive Groves and Citrus trees, a Vitamin C detox after all of the hemp yesterday. It would be a day of ever evolving scenery, but these plantations surrounded the day's first regularity, that occurred after a wonderful 70km drive out from Fes, passing the breath-taking Allal al Fassi Dam, the extensive reservoir on the Sebou River forming a giant mirror in the morning sun.



This first reg was relatively simple, with some climbing and descending to take care of, then on the first Sporting Time Control of the event, that was a further 20km down the road from the reg.

The STC itself saw a switch to forest, after a swift climb through the charred remains of trees that had fallen victim to the intense summer heat experienced in these mountains. It took place on an ascending ribbon of asphalt, a fantastic drive which happily Tony cleared the section.

As soon as the STC finished though, the scenery changed again as the trees ended and the desert began. Where there had been greenery, there was now bare rock, but the vistas were awe-inspiring nonetheless, as the road passed through a multitude of mountain settlements, with the Djellaba clad patrons standing and watching the motoring roadshow with interest, and somewhat disbelief. There were also crowds of enthusiastic children out to witness the commotion, shouting and cheering the cars on. These scenes were repeated throughout the rest of the day, as we witnessed the curious living conditions experienced by the people here – an opportunity to reflect on what daily life might be like.



There were still a pair of regularities to contend with as morning advanced into afternoon and at around 217 km into the leg, the first of the remaining competition sections began, with a steep climb, and even steeper descent, on a gravel strewn road of a quarry.

Throughout the rest of the afternoon there was plenty of evidence of the damage caused by the recent heavy rain that Morocco has endured. Tracks had been washed away, there was evidence of mud and rockslides and in some places, lakes had formed where six weeks previously the desert had been king. Thankfully nothing was impassable, and indeed it all added to the challenge and enjoyment of what has been a tremendous day on the road.

Sahara Challenge Day 4 – Ifrane to Erfoud – 508 km

26 Sep 2024

The longest day of the rally, and one that would see us arrive at the northernmost parts of the Sahara. It was a day of some intense driving at times, with plenty of offroad elements.



In fact, after the previous day's environmental evolution, today, almost as soon as we were clear of the oasis that surround Ifrane, the geography became instantly arid in appearance. It was sparse and stunning, with the geology of the landscape laid bare, from the gravel of the desert floor to the heights of the surrounding rock formations.

The first competitive section took place in just such an environment, after turning off of the main road after some 70 km's, the first regularity began in the bottom of a valley, tracing the path of a dried river. A quick inspection of the rocks underfoot revealed fossils of long expired sea creatures, bleached in the sun. These days the hills of the

valley were inhabited by villagers, carving out a life in this harsh environment, and staring in amazement as one by one the cars of the Sahara Challenge drove the road over the hills, that is the preserve of donkeys.

The nature of the regularity, with its slippery surface and constantly changing elevation meant that it was critical to focus on the turns irrespective of whether you thought there was a path to drive on if the roadbook said turn right at 3.75 km you needed to turn.

After a long drive through the desert, the asphalt suddenly ended, and the rocky desert track began. Unfortunately, the planned competitive section was cancelled on safety grounds, as the terrain had deteriorated since the final recce was completed. A few weeks prior, Morocco experienced serious torrential rain, and the worst flooding in a decade.

Thankfully, the next sporting section was a goer, and would be the days last bit of competitive action and took the form of a zig-zagging route on some desert scrub off the main road, in amongst the Palm Plantations that punctuated the sparse landscape. It was largely designed to get everyone up to speed with navigating using the GPS but provided ample opportunity to be as brave as you could be across the desert.

By the close of the day, there had been plenty of moving about in the leader board, with Jorge Perez Companc and Jose Volta leaping to the top of the table with a best on the day 19 seconds of penalty. Tony and I were getting the swing of things and moved up the table to sixth overall.

Sahara Challenge - Day 5 – Erfoud to Merzouga – 212km

27 Sep 2024

Day five of the Sahara Challenge was a later start, with a shortish desert loop for everyone to enjoy. There may not have been as many miles to complete, but the miles were challenging, with a desert regularity and two sporting sections in the shadow of the dunes at Erg Chebbi.



The day began innocently enough, with a simple regularity that took crews into the very crater where Spectre had their base in the James Bond flick of the same name.

Next it was onto the first sporting section, which had to be cut short due to a lake having appeared on the floor of the desert, thanks to the huge amount of rain Morocco experienced just a few weeks ago. It was certainly a novelty seeing the newly installed water feature, but as we drove through the flooding that still remained in Merzouga itself, it was sobering to think of just how much rain had fallen.



Next it was the Erg Chebbi sporting section. A 37 km run across the desert, through soft sand, wadis, buildings and whatever the desert could throw at the competitors.

There's no getting away from the excitement of quick desert driving though, it is addictive and sucks you in. There are plenty of challenges, including staying on track when there is a myriad of options at times, and you must of course retain visibility when approaching and overtaking slower cars – as even a modest speed results in great rooster tails of dust and sand being thrown into the atmosphere. Beware though, moving offline can prove interesting with one particular leap sending the car several feet in the air, Tony's new method to avoid the soft wadis floor, we seemed to find every one of the wadis, some of which were incredibly steep in and out.



The desert did of course exact her tariff, there must be a toll collected after all. The biggest casualty of this was one of the Ford's, third placed Sherif Hwaidak. His run across the desert came to an abrupt end when he suffered suspension damage and a bent axle, in one of the softer areas of sand. There was nothing to be done except to wait to be recovered, and by some cruel twist of fate the sister car of his Ford 48, driven by his brother Amin, also ended up beached at the same point in the desert.

Another high-profile casualty Tomas de Vargas Machuca, who cracked the chassis of his Bentley 3/4½. Not a small crack either, but one that was bordering on the chassis being severed, and apparently a problem suffered in period by Bentleys entered at Le Mans. A very slow tow back to the evenings camp, as well as a stint of pushing the stricken machine for a km across the desert, and a plan was hatched to repair the machine –

despite the situation being desperate. Welders were found and a late night of repairs ensued.

Car number 6, the Argentinian crew had compounded their lead at the top of the table, but with some luck we had cleaned the day entirely, incurring zero time penalties and moved up to second in the combined leader board. The two pre-war Fangio's were the only cars with under a minute penalties for the day.

Sahara Challenge - Day 6 – Merzouga to Midelt – 454km

29 Sep 2024

The route for day 6 moved us from the sand of Erg Chebbi and upwards towards the Atlas Mountains with a long transit stage to the first competition stage we retraced the route back to Erfoud, before heading towards the sprawling mass of Errachidea, a garrison city of some 100,000 people that it seemed to take forever to clear.



The road began to head up, plotting a path through the wall of mountains that consumed the horizon. The geology was incredible, with the layers of sediment that formed the rocks laid bare for all to see, each layer like a separate chronicle of history. In many places these layers were perpendicular to the sky, as if the rocks had been dropped into place, rather than forced up by huge tectonic activity millennia ago.



The second regularity was similar to the first, with a mix of tarmac and gravel as we continued along the Ziz Gorge Valley.

E arrived towing the number 2 Bentley that needed the crack in the chassis rewelded, a ginger couple of km's avoiding as many bumps as we could. The fix to the chassis completed in the early hours had failed, and the crack had returned, leaving Tomas and Camelia needing a plan B to fix the damage.

Elsewhere car number 19 had suffered a pair of punctures and was limping on a borrowed wheel, and car 15, the Norwegian crewed Morgan, had broken a half shaft, agonising for Trond and Bjorn, who had retired at the same stage of the competition in 2022. They are currently enacting a fix for the car and are intending to re-join from Marrakech. There was also Gearbox issues for the no 11 Bentley, and car 37, the 911 crewed by Danish pair Torben Tolstoj and Birgitte Tolstoj Jensen had split an oil cooler. Some plumbing from the Mechanics bypassed the cooler, but the pair then found that the oil had coated the brakes, prompting a lengthier fix.

For the rest of us the afternoon offered up more delights of the Atlas Mountains, with some wonderfully steep climbs and tremendous switchbacks. The transit sections were as entertaining as the competitive sections, as we passed through the remote villages that were scattered throughout the range. Here we encountered the locals, there were men returning from work in the fields, stacked up high on the back of flat-bed lorries, there were women guiding Donkeys who were carrying tremendous loads upon their

backs, often with infants cradled about their person somehow, and there were handfuls of patchwork kids, some smiling and some with fraught pleas for charity, delivered through desperate eyes.



Tony and I missed a hidden time point and lost a minute on the final timing point of the day. It is amazing how you need to concentrate for every minute and make every turn.

Sahara Challenge - Day 7 – Midelt to Ouarzazate – 495km

30 Sep 2024

Day seven of this year's Sahara Challenge was another 500km day.

The road out of town took the rally into the Aoli Gorge, which after spending the night in the Taddart, did nothing to kill the horror vibes. The gorge walls were steep and imposing, and the early morning sun still hadn't managed to penetrate the chasm, it didn't help that the run into the gorge was over a less than sturdy wooden bridge, with the odd strut missing. Within the gorge itself were the remains of mining operations that ceased long ago, now rusting hulks. There is a community that still calls this gorge home, and a few were out to watch the parade of cars pass, in a spectacle that must be about as far removed from their daily lives as is possible.

Back into the light and the climb from the valley floor could begin, a climb that would host the day's first regularity. It was the beginning of what was definitely a day for the drivers, and the temptation to bury the throttle and play on the slippery surface must have been incredibly hard to resist. Most must have managed to keep their right foot in check, as the times were reasonable, with people seemingly getting to grips with this business of regularities. One or two struggled on the second part of the reg, perhaps after scrambling trips by too heartily spinning wheels on the early climb, any mistakes that had been made could be debated thoroughly as a 160 km drive awaited everyone once the regularity was complete.



It was a long old stint, but the reward for the concentration run would be an STC section on what is possibly one of the finest rally roads in the entire world. It was a mesmerising climb up into the Atlas, followed by a technically challenging descent right in the heart of the Atlas National Park. The views from the top over the valley floor below were sensational, with the road hitting a height of 2350m. There was no time for sight-seeing though, concentration was needed by the crews, with 4 controls on the 25.43 km section.

The descent was a particular challenge, with clear evidence of the damage the recent rains have caused. Freshly cleared landslip littered the verges, and with the surface still loose in many places it was difficult to maintain momentum, not to mention the gravity defeating drops that were adjacent to the road.



Lunch was in a beautiful spot overlooking Lake Tislit, and the azure blue waters a bit of respite and debrief after what had been a spirited morning.

We were almost halfway through the day, with only one regularity remaining, but another long drive to meet it, a drive that would take in one of the trip highlights in the form of the Dades Gorge. The gorge road ran for many kilometres, and our descent into it began in the huge mountain pass beforehand, that saw the cars reach a dizzy 2990m. The road here was once a track, much more suited to our sport, but with Morocco's investment in infrastructure there is a huge project underway to build a highway through this particular pass. It will be a feat of engineering once complete, but that is a long way

off and instead the cars snaked through the roadworks and unsealed roads, at a snail's pace at times, as the business of building the road continued around us.



The apex of the gorge road itself was the switchback descent of the 'Serpent du Dades', non-comp of course with the trucks and busses that we shared the roads with. It almost goes without saying that the sun had been with us for the entire trip up until this point, but there was a rainstorm sweeping through above the gorge, which at its peak brought sideways rain and sent rivers streaming down the asphalt of the ascents and descents that plotted a course along the Dades itself.

With the 100km leading us into the evenings finish at Ouarzazate where the cars were given a warm welcome by traditional Moroccan singers and drummers, with a guard of honour into the hotel – great fun!



Sahara Challenge - Day 8 – Ouarzazate to Marrakech – 217km

1 Oct 2024

Day 8 had 217km of competitive route planned, with a finish sometime mid afternoon. Day 8 included 5 competitive sections split over three regularities sandwiched between two STC's it was going to be full. The event was certainly proving to be an amazing learning experience about the car, navigation equipment and the many ways in which the course delivered ways to hide controls that needed to be found.

Unfortunately, the first-time control section, that was planned for the desert just outside the movie city of Ouarzazate, had to be cancelled as the track was just too rough, with a re-route around the entire thing.

The first regularity was named Top Gun, a reflection on the scenery perhaps that could have been straight out of the film. There were no fast jets around, and we certainly were not fast up the steep climb up hill, sadly our accelerator cable had pulled through the firewall and we had no acceleration – not ideal seeing use lose 2 minutes on the stage. We then rigged up some temporary repairs with cable ties that kept us going but saw the car not idling below 2500 revs (an equally crap issue as for the remainder of the afternoon we had no engine braking. Happily, we had a spare cable that was used to replace the broken one with the help of the fantastic Hero mechanics. We also continued the brake adjustment and greasing rounds to ensure the car continued to power on.



This final regularity of the day was a bracing run along the plateau, that contained one difficult climb up the scree and also some slip-slide descents. We weren't the only car with issues on the day – for the Californians in car 20, sadly disaster struck the Porsche 912 finished their rally in precarious position on a very steep section, with a suspected broken piston. The Sahara Challenge remained unforgiving.



Sahara Challenge - Day 10 – Marrakech to Essaouira – 397km

2 Oct 2024

On September 8th, 2023, an earthquake of a magnitude of 6.8 struck in Western Morocco, near the town of Oukaimedene. 2,900 people were killed, and half a million are estimated to have been displaced. The route today took us up into the mountains south of Marrakech, where just over a year ago this terrible natural disaster occurred, and we could see first-hand the ongoing impact on the communities affected by the quake.

Five regularities in total, on a 397km route that took us through some more desert and then on that route over the mountains.



The regularities saw us go through many elevation changes, with a lot of climbing, particularly on the second of the day. The first, across the sands of a leisure area near to Marrakech, finished with a touch of navigational malice. Regularity number five too, that picked a path through the forests and dirt roads that crept along the Atlantic Coast offered up a few tests, the gloves were off from the route planner and we managed to lose another 2 minutes as in a cruel bit of timing we missed a right turn with a competition car driving back up the road added to the confusion. The last twist, a triangle to a timing point off of the main track in the middle of the regularity, caught out plenty including us, with our car sailing on by and then searching for a way to do a u turn (not an easy undertaking in the Fangio) another two minutes to add to our tally.



The rally has now reached the coast, and tomorrow will begin the journey back north. After seeming like there was so much ahead of us, there are now only two and a half days left. Time is never time enough.

Sahara Challenge - Day 11 – Essaouira to Casablanca – 428km

3 Oct 2024

Day 11 was the last full day of rallying in Morocco.

We continued to see plenty of desert and lots of small, remote communities, as the route never took us too far inland from the coast.

There was a lot of the route was on dirt, or broken tarmac, making for a technically challenging day. There were three regularities to contest, and they required some sharp concentration from the navigators, particularly on the third one.



Reg one took place in between a mixture of stepped farmland, woodland and desert. The scenery may be getting less dramatic, but John Spiller certainly knows how to keep

things interesting until the end, with the route traverse a track that ran along the bed of a wadi, a route that even the locals on donkeys think twice about using. It was narrow, steep sided and had devious ascents and descents at various points.



Regularity two soon followed regularity one, and then in the fashion of the final days there was a long concentration run to get to grips with. This would see the rally run through the town of Nagga, and on the approach to this small populous the road began to get more and more busy with horses and carts. The reason was apparent as soon as we began to drive through the town, it was market day, and the streets were chaos. Police attempted to keep things flowing, but the main street was awash with stalls, people and livestock and there's nothing to cause a stir amongst the gathered population of the surrounding settlements than a cavalcade of classic cars. Today was full of good moments, from the crowd in the market, to school children cheering us on from playgrounds and Police positioned along almost the entire route, waving us over junctions and even through red lights to help our progress.

Regularity number 3, a run across the desert and a reg in which we were tested, with a myriad of inviting tracks looking to catch out the unwary.

Once the competitive sections were done, it was onwards to Casablanca, and as we got into the outer limits of the city, our surroundings changed in a big way. After so long picking a route through the relative wilderness, through small villages and towns, all of a sudden, we seemed to go through a time warp, as the road turned into a modern multilane highway, lined with all the trappings of the western world.



Sahara Challenge - Day 12 – Casablanca to Tangier – 379km

4 Oct 2024

The last Casablanca Grand Prix took place in 1958 and was won by Stirling Moss. This morning, as the rally cars of the Sahara Challenge began their exodus from the famous city, it might have felt to some that the old race was being re-run, only every car in the metropolis had entered.

So far, we have largely escaped the anarchy of the morning rush hour in a Moroccan city, we even got out of Fes with few issues. This morning though, on our last day in the country Morocco delivered, and delivered in spades. The traffic was chaos, lane discipline was non-existent, and traffic signals were to be taken as mere serving suggestions.

Casablanca completed and everything calmed down, as for one final time we headed out to see what Morocco had to offer.

A couple of hours on the motorway to make sure we made the Tangier ferry did give us a chance to reflect though, to think of all that we have seen in the past nearly two weeks. The incredible and ever-changing countryside, the tremendous once in a lifetime road, of which we have our individual favourites. There were the days when everything flowed, all of the timing points were hit and you had a best ever result, as well as the days when things didn't quite go to plan.



The first was simple, the second, well, there was a tricky slot that caught us again with our second 2 minutes lost on a stage.

Sahara Challenge 2024 Concludes its Loop of Morocco

5 Oct 2024



After the dust settled, and the champagne had been sprayed, after 4500 kilometres, the 2024 Sahara Challenge reached its end and Badawi Trail Champions, Jorge Perez Companc + Jose Volta, were victorious in their 1938 Chevrolet Coupe. The Argentines finished ahead of Tony and I in second, in a 1939 Chevy Coupe, and Raj Judge and his navigator Monu Singh in third, in a Bentley Bobtail.

The rally itself followed a loop around Morocco, travelling east to Fez, south to the dunes of Merzouga and then back around the coast via Marrakech and Rabat, before finally ending in Estepona, Spain.