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[Heading] Gibraltar Race 2018: long, hard and painful

[Intro] *This summer the 3rd edition of the Gibraltar Race took place. This 8.000 km off-road rally, right through the heart of Europe, is specially designed for non-professional riders on big all-roads. Ralph Edelstein – not a professional, nor very experienced – got on a brand new BMW F850GS and tried his luck.*

[Body] With a loud CRAAAACK! my front wheel dives into the 1.5 meter-deep ditch. My bike and I are tossed to the left; just as my helmet hits the wall, I see my mirror snap off. My left leg is stuck under the bike; my right is sticking far into the air, parallel to the rear wheel. The engine stalls and before I self-examine for anything broken or bruised, I assess situation - which is not good. It is 36 degrees, my water is finished, I've crashed way off route, and I can't possibly get my bike out of this ditch by myself. I screwed up. I screwed up big time...

Start

Five days earlier the Gibraltar Race started high up in the hills of Romania. The rally, in its third consecutive year, is an 8.000 km long off-road motorbike rally right through the heart of Europe. In fourteen long days, the caravan of riders, service teams, sponsors (?) and supporters crossed 9 countries, to finally finish in the most southern tip of Spain, on the rock of Gibraltar. The rally is specially designed for non-professional riders on big all-roads. Basically, it offers riders who find the Dakar rally too expensive, dangerous or impractical, a chance at the next best full-on, hard-core, long-distance rally experience. Distances are severe (450 to 600 kms per day), which means you spend 10 to 12 hours per day on your bike. Much like the Dakar, the daily stages consist of off-road 'specials' and on-road 'liaisons', connecting those specials. The liaisons are longer distances, but since off-road riding doesn't go as fast as on-road, the balance in time is about 50/50.

At the start, we find a whole score of GS's in different displacements, multiple generations of Africa Twins, a Multistrada, a number of KTMs, some Huskys and a few other brands. My bike is a BMW F850GS, the youngest scion in the GS family. It is brand new and has hardly been run. My response to doubtful remarks from people who wonder whether it's smart to take a brand new bike into a tough rally like this one, is that this combination of off-road and on-road is exactly what the bike is made for. GS stands for Gelände/Straße, meaning off-road/on-road. I'm giving my bike 8.000 harsh kilometres to earn its name...

Mist, cold, rain

Each day, the first rider starts at 7.00 am followed, at 1-minute intervals, by the others. I've been assigned the sacred number 46 (I feel pressure!), which means my adventure starts at 7.46.

When, after a restless night, I open the curtains the next morning, I'm startled by what I see. Rain is pouring down; it's densely foggy and icy cold. And this while the first two specials are 100 km in total, uphill, and very technical. I have *some* off-road experience, but not too much. Am I going to fall in action on the very first day?!

After the first 95 km liaison, we turn onto a gravel road. Despite my rain gear at this time I am already soaking wet. And freezing. The latter is soon forgotten, because the two 50 km specials instantly divide the boys from the men. It is working, slogging, trudging, pushing, drudging, hauling and heaving uphill. In the region it had rained for weeks, which meant the entire route consisted of knee-deep clay, soaking wet grass, slippery rock paths and more of this motorcycle misery. There was a 1,5 hour timeframe given for each special, but I need 3,5 for each of them. Luckily I have the reassuring knowledge that Werner Hollaender is right behind me. His company, BERRT, organizes the Dutch participation in the race. Werner is not only a very experienced rally rider, he's also a BMW off-road instructor. He's right on my tail and with tips and techniques ("Look forward! Butt back! Let her roll!") he guides me through this first heavy day.

Despite this, I crash four times. I consider giving up several times and I don't reach asphalt until late in the afternoon. This means I can never finish the remaining 350 kms and two specials in time for the mandatory briefing at 7.30. Finally, several hours behind, and completely run down, I reach the bivouac late in the evening. But still, I am euphoric because despite the sheer endless fiddling, I've made it in one piece! And despite four crashes, my BMW doesn't have a scratch! Bring on those remaining 7.500 kms!

Roller coaster

That first day proved to be a template of what the rest of the rally was going to be like: a continuous, high-speed roller coaster of emotions, surroundings, weather circumstances and road conditions. One moment I feel complete euphoria, the next I curse everyone and everything that has to do with this race, and I want to catch the first flight home. But of course, giving up is not an option. I need to keep going. I need to reach Gibraltar!

Memo Tours

Meanwhile my F850GS is proving to be an excellent travel companion. It is light and nimble enough to get me through the specials without any trouble. Thanks to the huge 21-inch front wheel, I can take on logs and rocks as if they are not there. On the liaisons, the machine is very comfortable and fast enough to get me to the next special without a sore behind. Every night, when I arrive in the bivouac, I leave my bike in the caring hands of Bennie and Rodrigo. Through his company, Memo Tours, Bennie provides technical assistance for Team BERRT. With the use of his impressive

black service truck he has successfully guided dozens of riders to the finish of the Dakar rally. He knows a thing or two about motorcycle rallies and in this Gibraltar he is, consistently, our cool, calm and collected anchor. I am an easy customer for Bennie and his young mechanic Rodrigo though, because despite the heavy circumstances and multiple crashes, my F850GS doesn't need the slightest bit of work.

Navigation

From Romania we move into Hungary, then Slovenia and Italy. The beauty of Europe is overwhelming. Every morning, you receive your GPS-device, updated with the liaisons and specials for that day. The liaisons are just tracks that you have to follow, nothing difficult. They stay clear of highways, so we see countless medieval villages and churches, farms and wineries, forts and castles. We cross forests and woods, vineyards and fields, hills and valleys. It's all absolutely stunning.

The challenges are the off-road specials. In these, you have to navigate intuitively. This means reading the landscape, searching for waypoints, zooming in and out on your GPS and checking whether you are still on the right track/~~road~~/path to the next waypoint. The specials are all on unpaved roads. Although they are public majority of the roads are ridden twice per year at the most, by a farmer on his tractor.

On one particularly beautiful special, through vineyards and truffle forests, I coast comfortably and confidently on my foot pegs. Things are running smoothly, when in my search for the next waypoint, the track suddenly ends. Strange, because I can clearly see that Waypoint 9 is straight ahead of me. But there is also a meadow, about a kilometre long, with man-high nettles, thistles and other weeds. And no track.

Seized by the intense heat, I decide – against better judgement – to go straight through the meadow. I stand on the foot pegs as the machine easily finds its way through the vegetation. I am already almost halfway, when suddenly my front wheel dives into a 1,5 meter deep ditch.... CRAAAAAACK!!! And so things go south within a matter of seconds. Between the high weeds of the field, smack in the middle of a nearly unreachable Italian mountain, I am invisible.

Solve it myself

After I've kindly told the lady of the BMW SOS-centre that she doesn't has to send an emergency service (if the F850GS tips over an emergency signal is automatically transmitted to this centre, after which a lady asks you – via your dashboard – whether you need medical or technical assistance), I assess my situation, which is not good. My first thought is to call Werner. He always has an answer. But then pride gets the better of me: I wanted this rally, right? Didn't I want adventure? Well, here is your adventure! Now solve it yourself!

In order to find my way back, I make a waypoint on my GPS-system. I put the Garmin in my pocket and start walking. Now that I don't have wind flowing through my three layers of motor gear, I feel just how hot 36 degrees is. And how stupid I didn't refill my Camelbak at the last stop! After walking for half an hour I see a farmer working his land on a tractor. My face is bright red and streaming with sweat as I use elaborate gestures to mime that my bike is upside down in a ditch. Luckily, he is

receptive to my appeal for mercy. He tells me to hop on his tractor and together we go searching for my bike. When we've found it, it turns out the solution is not as simple as I had hoped. My new best friend doesn't have a rope with him, so there's no other option then to drag and pull the bike up the side of the ditch -,an almost unbearable job in this heat. Physically, I'm completely breaking down. But finally, after twenty minutes of hard labour, we make it. The F850GS is back on its wheels. And what I've barely dared to hope for becomes true: I hit the starter button and without any hesitation the engine starts running! I see the surprise on the farmers face. Relieved that this releases him of additional hard labor, he sends me off in the right direction. At least ten times he tells me to ride "piano, piano" (slowly, slowly), before he climbs back on his tractor, soaking with sweat. Once I've found asphalt again, I decide to forget about the rest of the specials for the day and take the fastest road to the bivouac. Enough excitement – and sweat - for today...

In the following days, the caravan rides through France and into Spain, and even for a short stint into Portugal. And although I've visited all these countries multiple times, I am again completely flabbergasted by the incredible beauty and versatility of the landscapes. One moment, I'm ploughing through a lavish green river bed; an hour later, the surroundings look like I've landed on Mars; and again, not much later, I suddenly find myself in the Grand Canyon. The further I move each day, my confidence grows - in myself, my off-road skills, and my bike. Every day that lump of rock in southern Spain comes 500 kms closer. And finally, after two hard weeks of long days, short nights, endless miles and countless experiences, I reach the finish line in Gibraltar. Completely at the end of my rope, but with a heart that almost explodes with pride. I bloody made it! Without hesitation, I empty the motor boot with lukewarm prosecco that is presented to celebrate this euphoric moment. This is the life! And I know one thing for sure: I have a new hobby. Ehm... when is the Dakar?!

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