



Stages in the sun

For many British motor sport fans, the one downside of a foreign beach-side holiday is its lack of four-wheeled competitive action. However, white sand and white knuckles need not be mutually exclusive...

Over the past 10 years 150 British competitors, including 2009 Intercontinental Rally Challenge Champion Kris Meeke and former ANCRO National Champions Paul Bird and Steve Perez, have journeyed to the small Caribbean island of Barbados to experience its unique mix of sun, sea and special stages.

The event that draws them is Sol Rally Barbados, the Barbados Rally Club's blue riband event, which marked its 20th anniversary this year. From humble beginnings in 1990 as a one-day rally for locals it has grown to become the region's biggest annual international motor sport event, attracting as many as 90 crews, one-third of them from overseas.

The event is a two-day tarmac rally, typically with 24 special stages run under road closure orders granted by the Ministry of Transport & Works – thus providing a further demonstration of what might be possible should the MSA's closed-road motor sport campaign prove successful – plus a SuperSpecial to finish. The Saturday of the weekend prior to the rally is dedicated to Scrutineering –

thousands of fans mix with competitors in a convivial atmosphere – while Sunday is Shell V-Power King of the Hill 'shakedown', the results of which are used to seed the main event. It is also a chance for overseas competitors to experience the local tarmac at more than recce speed; many liken the Barbados roads to those in Ireland, with frequent surface changes and the potential to be very slippery – there is even a stage locally nicknamed 'Iceland'!

Meeke first visited the rally in 2007, fitting in-car cameras on behalf of his brother. He was struck by the event's atmosphere, with thousands of knowledgeable fans cheering on their chosen drivers, and also by what he saw as a surprisingly high standard of competition. In 2008, with co-driver Paul Nagle alongside, Meeke returned in an ex-Didier Auriol Toyota Corolla WRC and won, despite transmission damage rendering the car two-wheel-drive for the second day.

Describing the experience as "the best 10 days of my life" he vowed to return, and did so in 2009 aboard a Subaru Impreza WRC S9. Early leader and 10-time winner Roger Skeete retired his S12 midway

through day one – Meeke admitted he had "never had to drive as hard as I did to keep up with Roger Skeete" – leaving the Ulsterman to win again.

In doing so he matched the record of fellow-countryman Kenny McKinstry, winner in 1993 & '96. Beating the locals is not an easy task – Skeete claimed his 11th win in 2010 – with Jamaicans Jeff Panton (1998, Toyota Celica GT4) and Gary Gregg (2006, ex-Carlos Sainz Ford Focus WRC) the only others to have done so.

But the event's class structure gives everyone something to go for; one reason why so many Britons return is to deal with 'unfinished business'. Local classes Production 1 to 4 and Modified 5 to 8A/8-WRC in essence mirror the FIA's Group N, Group A and WRC regs, while SuperModified uses an engine capacity/weight formula to cater for highly-modified two-wheel-drive cars, of which there are many created by resourceful island engineers. Historics and Group B also have a place, although Group B cars are not eligible for overall position.

Many Britons have made the trip more than once; BMW ace Martin Stockdale tops

Rally Barbados



the list, claiming a trophy on nearly all of his 10 visits, while Dulux Trade MSA British Rally Championship regular Rob Swann won Group N in 2010, having learned the form on his two previous visits: "We had to win this rally, so that's what we set out to do." Scotland's Kenny Hall is another regular visitor, with three M5 class wins since 2004.

The Barbados Rally Club uses its own version of SuperRally rules; each day of Sol Rally Barbados is a qualifying round of the local Driver's and Class Championships. Although no longer eligible for overall position, competitors who drop out and return but still complete two-thirds of the stages qualify for class position and points.

Entries for next year's event – due to take place on 4-5 June 2011 – have been open since mid-October and close on 6 May 2011 (European entries will be confirmed earlier, as cars ship from Portsmouth around the end of April). The Overseas Competitor Information Document is available as a PDF download from the official website and provides further detail, which will be particularly helpful to first-timers. ■

For further details, please visit:
www.rallybarbados.bb