



White Sand...

... and white knuckles go together, when rally crews tackle the Caribbean's biggest annual motor sport international, Sol Rally Barbados, writes Mark Wheeler.

When asked what sort of sporting activity you would expect to find in the small Caribbean island of Barbados, it's a fair bet that most people would feel pretty confident going for diving, surfing, swimming, perhaps yachting...ah, and cricket, of course!

Very few would tick the box marked motor sport, and even those that did would be surprised to find it is comfortably the most popular spectator sport in the island, and does pretty well in the participation stakes too.

Last year, the island's governing body, the

Barbados Motoring Federation, issued around 350 competition licenses. Per head of the population, that represents almost double the 35,000 by the MSF!

There have been cars on the island since the early 1900s and the Barbados Rally Club (BRC), which celebrated its 50th Anniversary in 2007, is the longest-established club devoted to a sport that does not involve a ball. These days, its blue ribbon event is Sol Rally Barbados, which will take place on 4/5 June.

From small beginnings in 1990 as a one-day rally for 30 or so local crews, Rally

Barbados (as it was renamed in 2003) has grown into the Caribbean's biggest annual motor sport international. It is one of the region's strongest sporting brand names, particularly for European visitors, and is a major contributor to the island's foreign exchange earnings.

As 'conventional' tourism, a vital component of the island's economy, has been increasingly battered in the wake of the world-wide recession, niche-market tourism has grown, with sports tourism a key player. Sol Rally Barbados enjoys significant

support from the Barbados Tourism Authority, the Barbados Hotel & Tourism Association and the Tourism Development Corporation, as well as corporate Barbados, thanks to its annual injection of around \$1.2 million US dollars to the island's economy at a traditionally 'slow' time of year.

It also generates extensive television air time. In fact, since Sol RB2010, Motors TV has broadcast 24 hours of coverage in six languages to more than 18 million households subscribing by satellite, cable and ADSL in 59 countries across Europe and the African sub-continent!

It is a two-day tarmac rally, with 24 special stages run under road closure orders. The event follows the previous weekend's Saturday

scrutineering and Sunday Shell V-Power King of the Hill shakedown, which offers a chance for overseas visitors to acclimatise themselves to the quirky qualities of local tarmac...and it ain't half slippery!

There is even a rally stage in this tropical island (where nicknames are a part of everyday life) known as 'Island'!

The 2010 event marked the 20th Anniversary of the BRC's first International All-Stage Rally. It has hosted 237 overseas competitors from 19 countries over 20 years, and helped put Barbados on the map in motor sport communities worldwide, including Northern Ireland.

The only winners of the event from outside the Caribbean are Kenny McKinstry (1993

and 1996) and 2009 IRC Champion Kris Mooker (2008 and 2009).

With its intricate road network of around 1,400 miles, Barbados lends itself to tarmac rallying, while the local fans make overseas competitors more than welcome, helping to sustain the island's long-standing tradition of repeat visitors.

Of the 180 competitors from Europe who have rallied in Barbados in recent years, more than 20 have been at least four times...and one has competed for 10 consecutive years. That is testament to the quality of that welcome...or, perhaps, the quality of the local road!



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