



Fun at FULL THROTTLE

Two readers run wild in the Caribbean at the Barbados Sol Rally 2011 and *Matthew Carter* goes along for the ride

With the revs bouncing off the limiter, the green and white Escort rally car slews into view. With a left/right flick around a duck pond ahead, the car is completely sideways as it enters the first part of the bend. But at that precise moment a duck decides to make a bid for freedom. It leaves the safety of the water and starts to waddle into the path of the oncoming Ford. The huge crowd holds its collective breath and waits for the inevitable... but it never comes. Driver Andrew Jones spots the problem at the last moment, straightens the car up and just misses the errant bird. And then, just as calmly, he flings the car in the other direction to make the second part of the corner. The huge cheer that goes up frightens the duck more than the close shave.

Welcome to rallying, Barbados-style, a mix of top-notch motorsport, sun, rum and fun. Competitors from 14 nations are taking part in the Sol Rally Barbados – an annual event that takes over the beautiful Caribbean island for a week in early June. They are being watched by

thousands of enthusiastic and knowledgeable locals and a couple of lucky readers.

Earlier this year, Canary Wharf magazine ran a competition for readers with a remarkable prize: ten days in the sunshine as VIP guests of the Barbados Rally Club (BRC) to witness the 2011 running of the country's top motorsport event. It was such a valuable prize that when winner Tom Hall was contacted by the BRC – he was on the train, heading home from a day at work at Credit Suisse in Canary Wharf – he was initially convinced it was a wind-up.

“At first, I couldn't believe it... I never win anything,” said Tom. The fact that he says those words with a bottle of Banks, the local Barbadian brew, in one hand and is using the other to shelter his eyes from the blazing sun proves that the call was far from a joke. Tom and his best mate, fitness instructor Alex Wilmott, are here ready for an action-filled week packed with welcome parties, hog roasts, sun and sea, boat trips, site-seeing, late nights, early starts and plenty of top class motor sport. Some 90 teams are taking part in rally week, with local competitors taking on

top flight drivers from overseas, the latter attracted as much by the sun as anything else. Well, given the choice between a three-day rally in a wet Welsh forest and a week-long party in Barbados, which would you go for?

As well as the Sol Rally itself, held over two days and 24 special stages, there's a shakedown hill climb – the Shell V-Power King of the Hill – so that all the competitors can make sure their cars, especially those which have spent the preceding few weeks on the high seas making their way over from Europe, are fit and well.

And what a diversity of machinery. At the front are a clutch of turbo-charged four-wheel drive World Rally Cars, fast and fearsome Subarus and Fords that rip through the Barbados countryside at manic speeds. There are four-wheel drive Group N machines, slightly less powerful but just as exciting as the WRC cars, and a whole host of two-wheel drive cars ranging from the latest purpose-designed rally cars to crowd-pleasing classics, like the duck-missing Mk II Escort of Barbadian Andrew Jones.

Perhaps knowing that winning the event outright is out of the question, Jones and some of the other drivers of older machinery make it their responsibility to play to the crowds. During daylight hours, Jones drives everywhere sideways while for the night stages, he decks his car with flashing Christmas lights. Every time visiting Scotsman Allan Mackay powers his awesome Ford Anglia WRC (this time standing for Well Run Car, rather than World Rally Car) towards a road junction, instead of simply turning left or right as required, he slams the car into a series of wild doughnuts first. Just Google 'Sol Rally Anglia' for a YouTube example of what I mean.

At the front, though, things are deadly serious. Local hero Roger Skeete – impressively, an 11-time winner of the event – is mastering the tricky conditions in his Subaru Impreza WRC, ahead of Briton Paul Bird in his Ford Focus WRC and the rest of the field. It's late in the Barbados season and while the temperature stays resolutely at around 30 degrees, every day is punctuated by a short, sharp rainstorm, usually at 3.14pm and lasting all of 17 minutes.

Despite the predictability of the afternoon rain shower, the conditions still catch out a few competitors. Grip is at a premium on the island's pretty ratty roads at the best of times, but add a little water and the surface becomes treacherous, catching out more than one competitor.

Skeete, though, conquers all to notch up his 12th win to the delight of the spectators, for whom the entire event is one big excuse to party. Arriving early in the morning, they set up camp on the edges of the cane fields to line every inch of the stages. Armed with cooler boxes full of food and drink they settle in for a day of high-octane thrills. The

atmosphere is warm and friendly despite (or thanks to) the quantities of Banks beer and Mount Gay rum consumed.

Friendly just like the island, in fact. It's Tom's first visit to the Caribbean, but it won't be the last. It's not all motor sport for our winners; the pair managing to find some time to lie on the beach, to enjoy some of the best seafood anywhere in the world and to take their hire car (all part of the prize) to the further flung corners of the island. Barbados isn't just about golden beaches and the deep blue sea. The island might only be 21 miles from tip to toe, but it has a long and fascinating history and there's plenty to see and do. Under British Colonial rule from around 1600 until independence in 1966, many of the place names have a familiar ring: Hastings, Worthing, Christ Church. English is the national language and they drive on the left, though these days the Barbadian Dollar is linked to the American Dollar and worth two to one.

The country's two principle sources of income are tourism and sugarcane production – little wonder there's so much rum in the place. Indeed, Mount Gay is said to be the oldest rum producer in the world, and rum production has recently been re-introduced to St Nicholas Abbey, a Jacobean mansion in the north east of the island surrounded by sugarcane fields.

It's an island of contrasts, too. For example, the difference between the gentle West coast, where the rich and famous have their seaside homes, and the tough East coast, regularly battered by an angry Atlantic, is remarkable. “I've had a really great time,” says Tom. “Before I came here I was more of a Formula 1 fan, but the Sol Rally has made me think again - the speeds some of those cars reach on these tiny, bumpy roads is breathtaking.

“It's been a really full-on week, but we only scratched the surface of the island. I'm definitely coming back. Canary Wharf magazine, I can't thank you enough...” ■

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