

Preston's Summer Holiday

(or Sol Rally Barbados 2011, Part Two)

from Preston Ayres

I will try to give you a flavour of rallying in Barbados. I could sum up the flavour in one word—rum. I am sure if someone could convert cars to run on it, they would. But the organisers did ban alcohol consumption in the 12 hours before each leg of the rally, and sensibly we complied.

As a reminder of the format, King of the Hill shakedown stage was run on Sunday 29 May and the rally proper took place on Sat/Sun, 4/5 June. Each day of the main rally consisted of a dozen special stages, typically 5-6 km in length, on closed public roads. We ran into darkness on Saturday and ended with a fantastic "Superspecial" stage on the Sunday. The surface was either very smooth, very slippery new tarmac (probably best described as similar to a number of B roads in the UK) or narrower very bumpy smaller roads. Many of these roads were a bit like the teeth of a patient with an over zealous dentist—more filling than teeth.

We could hire a few Bajans to work on our roads. On our first recce of one stage we noted a bad pothole on a bend. We came back an hour later to check the notes and the pothole had been filled and that note was redundant! The process is great..., and simple. Requirement: one lorry load of tarmac, one driver, three workmen with shovels. Operation: drive down the road, stop by bad holes, shovel tarmac into holes, tread it down, move on and let the traffic do the rest. Although some of the roads have more fillings than road, the system works and in a rally car you do not

notice it is a bit rough and strangely these roads have far more grip than the "shiny, new" ones.

The format of special stages linked by liaison sections and service after about three stages is familiar. The main difference from UK and European rallies is that the service halts are not timed separately but part of a liaison section.

Craig Salter and I (in Craig's immaculate Ford Escort RS1600) were seeded 56 out of 87 starters. Other British historic entries included Steve Perez in his Porsche 911 RSR and Andrew Siddall in his Mk1 Escort. There were half a dozen WRC cars including Paul Bird in his Focus and Roger Duckworth in his Subaru and a bigger assortment of rally cars than you see in the UK.

With Craig's attention to detail in his car preparation, it became clear that the crew needed more assistance at service than the car. Try working hard in a rally car in triple layer overalls from 9 am to 6.30 pm each day in temperatures exceeding 30 degrees C in the shade. Cold wet towels around the head and neck at each service and drinking litres of fluids were essential. But you did get used to the heat and it was still greatly enjoyable.

It wasn't just the heat that challenged us, it was also the occasional rain shower. When it rains, cats and dogs spring to mind—it doesn't know how to drizzle. But the real problem was how "local" the rain was and what tyres to wear. On one occasion we left service on dry tyres but after about 3 miles it was teeming with rain and there were streams across the road.

Bad tyre choice—well, actually, No. Two miles further we turned towards the stage start and the road was bone dry, as was the whole stage. At its most vicious, there was one long right bend which tightened seriously after about 60 yards. On entering the bend the road was dry, but by the time it sharpened, it was completely wet! Three consecutive cars went off the road on that same bend. Others were saved by a warning word on the start line. That's rallying in Barbados.

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To deal briefly with the stats—after the first day we were 39th overall and by the finish we had climbed to 25th overall and 2nd in class. There were five starters in our class (and two finishers!). Overall there were 37 finishers. We were also classified 15th two-wheel drive. Issuing results is not a strong point for the organisers. When we arrived on the Sunday morning, they had re-seeded us all and published provisional results for Saturday, but the Sunday results came out Monday afternoon, just before the prize-giving party.

The final stage was a great showpiece. Two cars started at a time, on a figure of eight mixed surface stage (there was a bridge!) at the local race track. There were thousands of spectators, Silverstone style traffic jams, and the cars ran in reverse order to build up to a climax of the two fastest cars on the last run. By now it was dark and every jump off the crossover bridge was applauded with massive cheers. What an atmosphere. We didn't realise it (because no results were available) but we went into the last stage just 5 seconds behind another Brit, Nigel Worswick in his Mk2 Escort, and beat him by seven seconds on that one stage, another position gained. Our total time on the stages was 1 hr 19 mins and 2.3 seconds.



I had been warned about bad organisation and lots of hanging about for stages to run. This was not the case. Occasionally a stage would be halted to allow the local bus to run on schedule and clearing up the odd accident was necessary (as in any event—I mean the latter, not the former problem!) but in general, I was pleasantly surprised.

Would I go back and was it good fun? The answer to both is "Yes". I might not go back next year because there are many other different events to experience but the local people and the friendly organisers made this an event I would recommend to any other competitor looking for something different.

