

FUN IN THE SUN

PHOTOS BY Graham Curry

Above: Paul Nagle and Kris Meeke took their second victory in Barbados last month. Pictured: Meeke in his S9 Impreza.

As Kris Meeke lined up for photos beside Phil Collins and spectators packed the banks to watch the action, it could have been Killarney – apart from the blistering heat, the palm trees and the rum on tap. This was the Barbados Rally Carnival.

Having won the event last year, event organisers were ecstatic to seal a deal with Kris and his co-driver Paul Nagle for them to return to defend their title in a Subaru Impreza S9.

But beside these two big names in the sport, were two more crews from Northern Ireland – Simon Michael and Jonathan Foster, and Glen Campbell and Anthony Concannon.

But the trip to Barbados is not an easy one. Preparation is key as the cars have to be shipped a month before the event, along with most of your equipment. So what makes drivers from Northern Ireland make Barbados their playground? Michael went to Barbados armed with a Ford Escort Mk2, while Campbell was armed with a Nissan Micra kit car.

"I've had the car for just over two

years, and it's worse than having a girlfriend to maintain," laughs Michael. "Sadly it was very much underpowered for Barbados, I was surprised at the calibre of machinery out there. The event lived up to my expectations and more though. The crowds that turn up at the event are unbelievable, there were more people at scrutiny than there normally is at a whole rally!"

Like many drivers, Michael and Campbell had been considering entering Sol Rally Barbados for a few years before they finally put in the entry. "With the economy the way it is I found myself reducing the number of events I could enter this year," said Michael. "And as I was planning my year I got an email saying entries for Barbados were open. If you take it as your summer holiday that covers the flights, accommodation, food and drink money, and the money you spend sending the car out and on the entry fee is easily covered by the money you would have spent on the events you miss back home."

Michael and Campbell spent from mid February in talks with the Barbados

Rally Club, before waving goodbye to their cars for a months so they could be shipped out. While drivers like Paul Bird flew their car out to Barbados in the same Virgin Airways plane most competitors arrived on, for Michael and Campbell, the only option was to put their cars onto a boat to Barbados well in advance of the rally – and Campbell cut it all a bit fine.

"When we spoke to the Barbados rally club in February my car was sitting as a shell," he explains. "I only got my engine on Good Friday and worked all over Easter to get it in and get the car built. On the Wednesday we went to get the engine mapped, got the car back on the Friday and finished putting seats in, tested for an hour that afternoon and had the car on the boat on the Monday!"

"The only downside of that was we didn't know how reliable car would be, but it has done 60 events in two years and finished every one so we were confident. In a way I was glad to get the car away to concentrate on my day job again. Not knowing exactly where it was as it travelled didn't bother me – we

took extra insurance out just in case, but otherwise just waited for the email to say it had arrived in Barbados."

Meanwhile, at the top end of the entry list, Barbados was a different experience again for Meeke, a slightly more relaxing situation amid his hectic IRC schedule.

"It's nice for us to come to Barbados to compete because everything's so laid back compared to our usual high pressure IRC events," said Meeke. "We still want to win, but the atmosphere of the two weeks on the island makes the rally into more of a carnival. We get there in plenty of time to do the recce, the organisers put on a few good parties for everyone, and I managed to get time between events to get out on an enduro bike and a yacht."

"The competition on the island is really good. It's a small island and lots of the locals have been rallying there for a long time, so they get to know the roads quite well and they are fast. Roger Skeete was hard to beat last year, so we knew he would be one to watch this year. It was quite an odd situation actually; we were driving Skeete's old S9 which had

been bought by someone else who let us borrow it, while he was driving a newer S12. He pushed us hard and was fantastic competition, but we did get ahead of him and we were leading the event when he crashed out. From that point we led the way to the end, and it was great to lead home a British one-two with Paul Bird finishing behind us."

One of the nice things about Meeke is his lack of ego. Throughout the rally he calmly chatted to competitors throughout the field, and was pleased to hear there were two other crews from Northern Ireland in the entry.

"It was great to see them there," said Meeke. "It's not easy for privateer crews to do the rally, you've got to be so well organised to happily send your car off so far in advance of a rally and that's not easy when you're preparing your own car and holding down a day job. It's fantastic that the two crews put the money and effort in to do the event, and it was nice for us to have some other competitors from home on the entry list."

"I was thankful this year that Peugeot allowed me to go and contest the rally in the Subaru. It took quite a long time out of my schedule with them and I appreciated that. Who knows what we will all be doing next year, but if I am unable to attend Barbados I will certainly be keeping an eye on the results online."

For Campbell, going back next year is practically a done deal. He says, "Barbados was everything we were told and more, the rally, the parties and the crowds. I did think the rally was quite hard though because I didn't really think about the temperature. I didn't look it up and just presumed it would be around 30 degrees then you walk off the plane and the heat is amazing, so I found that difficult."

"The Barbados Rally Club was instrumental in getting us there, they made it for us, really helped us with arrangements before and during the event. Everyone involved is great, and it doesn't matter if you're at the front of the field or the back, you're all treated the same. When we pulled into service for the hillclimb we were servicing between Kevin Proctor and Steve Perez. Look at the experience they have and we were probably in one of the smallest cars in the field. Kevin in particular was really helpful. They didn't care I was in a Micra, they were just glad I'd come along and offered us loads of help."

So while Meeke returns to his hectic IRC schedule, Michael and Campbell remain unsure what their next event will be – but they are making big plans for the future, obviously having been bitten by the foreign adventure bug.

"To enter Barbados again is definitely on our list," confirmed Michael. "But we're also hoping to enter the Arctic Rally in January 2010." Campbell confirmed, "That was our first taste of a foreign event, and if they're all like that I'll be addicted to them at this rate. Barbados and the Arctic next year would be perfect."

Watch this space.



Glen Campbell's Micra goes sunbathing!



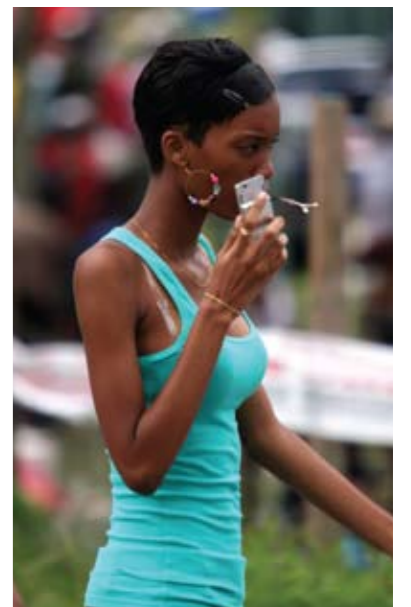
Glen Campbell couldn't believe how hot it was in the car.



Simon Michael hopes to return next year.



Englishman Paul Bird took second overall in his 2007 Ford Focus WRC.



Third overall Paul Bourne from Barbados.