

Dakar final countdown continues

With just two weeks remaining until the beginning of the second consecutive Dakar rally on South American soil, three more BMW riders are making final preparations to join the two Frenchmen who will be riding rally-prepared BMW G 450 X machines in this 9,000 kilometre challenge through the mountains and the deserts of Argentina and Chile.



Joining the list of competitors that includes 184 bikes and quads, 138 cars and 50 trucks, will be Dutchman Frans Verhoeven and Portuguese riders Paulo Gonçalves and Pedro Bianchi Prata.

Frans Verhoeven finished eighth overall in the 2009 Dakar, as well as taking two stage wins and winning the Marathon Class. For 2010 he will be riding a BMW G 450 X prepared by BMW Motorrad off-road specialist dealer Bert Duursma in The Netherlands. Having done many rally conversions of BMW bikes such as the HP2 Enduro, G 650 Xchallenge and numerous GS models, this is Bert's first rally-spec BMW G 450 X. Having persuaded Frans to take on the Dakar challenge on a BMW, the Appeldoorn-based dealer is looking forward to seeing the results of this latest challenge.

“Frans and I became acquainted back in February, when he visited us. We lent him a G 450 X just to test and he fell in love with it straight away – in fact, he still has it now,” said Bert. “Once we managed to find some budget for the project, we started building the bike at the beginning of September and have been testing ever since. We’ve not had a chance to race it yet, but our focus has been on making sure it’s strong enough to cope with the tough conditions he’ll encounter – especially during the first couple of days, where the fast open stages will see all the bikes spend hours at high revs with their throttles wide open. Our objective is a top ten finish for Frans and we wish him the best of luck.”

Having confirmed his status as an elite level rider with his performances in 2009, Frans Verhoeven has been thinking of nothing else but the forthcoming Dakar. Creator of his own team, he has forsaken world cup races to concentrate 100 per cent on his preparation of the BMW rally bike that he hopes will allow him to take on the best in the business in Argentina and Chile in January.

“Since March, I’ve spent my time developing this 450cc, conducting tests, both near my home and in Romania,” said Frans. “Sure, I am lacking competition experience, but I know this bike like the back of my hand and I feel ready for the Dakar. I’ve given more attention to reliability than speed and I know I can ride it flat out for a long time, which is reassuring. Now, we still do not know how the 450cc bikes will stack up performance-wise compared the bridled 690s, but it will certainly be wide open. Coma and Despres are still the favourites, but anything could happen.”



In Portugal, the team of Paulo Gonçalves and Pedro Bianchi Prata has been preparing for this event for some time, including extensive physical exercise with a personal trainer, bike training, road book navigation and GPS navigation. They will be flying out to Buenos Aires on 27 December to make final preparations for the start of the rally on New Years Day and for Pedro Bianchi Prata – who was the best BMW finisher in the last Dakar – he can’t wait to return to South America.

“The South American Dakar is different to the old European version, but not easier,” he says. “There is still plenty of desert riding and lot of dunes, but you don’t feel the silence and the loneliness in the same way as you do in the Sahara because in the South American Dakar the public is always present. Paulo and I are pretty confident coming back for the second time. We know the route and the kind of stages of the rally. Beside that, we have already defined which set-ups we are going to use on each day. Paulo is a top Dakar rider, so victory in the 450cc class is a goal and perhaps even a place in the overall top three. As for me, I’m hoping to finish in the top 15, but my main goal is to help Paulo get to the first place.”

The Bianchi Prata team will be relying on a good level of support in South America, including two mechanics, one driver, a team manager, press officer and of course the two riders. Since January's Dakar, they have made several modifications to the rally bikes, including a 32-litres fuel capacity, changes to the front end and improved oil cooling. Although the rally itself is extremely competitive, there is a good sense of companionship between the various teams and Pedro is looking forwards to the challenge of racing against some of the best off-road riders in the world when he gets to South America.

"I'm looking forwards to this event because the bike is really good," said Pedro. "Of course we have to do some changes, but it's a very competitive bike which places the BMW G 450 X among the best in the world. The kind of stages that worry us most are the long specials with lots of sand, because they put most strain on the motors. Our team rules are clear: whoever is in the front in the qualifying has the priority. For now it's Paulo Gonçalves who is the speediest one, so he'll probably be in the front and I'll be following him. Our goals are victory for the team and I also want to prove that the BMW G 450 X is the best rally-prepared 450cc bike in the world."

The race itself runs from 1 to 17 January, and the competitors will fight it out over 14 stages. For all the latest updates, please visit the www.dakar.com website, available in French, Spanish and English languages.