

Preparing for Dakar 2017: Toyota Gazoo Racing Team tests new Hilux Evo

By Ané Theron

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The end of the year is in sight, and soon we will be seeing plenty of tinsel and hearing 'Little Drummer Boy' through the speakers from every major grocery store in the country. And while 2017 is drawing to a close, the Toyota Gazoo Racing Team are cracking their knuckles in anticipation for the 2017 Dakar Rally, taking place 2-14 January in South America.



Gazoo updates

Not only will they be competing in brand new vehicles by the name of the Hilux Evo, they are also welcoming two new members to the Gazoo team: Dakar 2015 (and 2011) winner Nasser Al-Attiyah (from Qatar) and his French navigator, Matthieu Bomel. The other Gazoo Racing Team members are Dakar veterans Giniel De Villiers and his long-standing German navigator Dirk von Zitzewits, as well as Leeroy Poulter with Rob Howie as his navigator.

So let's get back to the Hilux Evo. How is it different from last year's vehicle? For starters, it has been prepared specifically with Dakar conditions in mind. No longer four-wheel drive, the rear wheels are driven in the Evo. Race engineers have been able to use this new configuration to their advantage, while staying well within FIA regulations. Benefits include a lower kerb weight (615 kilograms less), larger wheels, a broader range of suspension travel, and an on-board tyre inflation/deflation system.

They were also able to mount the powertrain between the axles, resulting in ideal weight distribution and a lower centre of gravity. New regulation for 2017 allow the Hilux Evo's naturally aspirated V8-engine to run a wider 38 mm air restrictor, now the same diameter as a number of key competitors that benefited from a 1-2mm advantage last year. Another plus-point is improved power-to-weight ratio.

Real-world testing

To put the new Hilux Evo to its first real-world test, Giniel de Villiers and Dirk von Zitzewits travelled to a desolate location in the North West Province of South Africa, similar in conditions and topography as where the Dakar will be taking place.

"It is always exciting to put a completely new concept to the test," says Toyota Gazoo Racing SA Team principal, Glyn Hall.



“And the Toyota Hilux Evo is just such a concept. Now that we’ve had a chance to see it in action over terrain that matches certain parts of the Dakar, we are highly encouraged.”

De Villiers is duly impressed with the new Evo, despite the fact that its handling characteristics are quite different from the four-wheel-driven Hilux he is accustomed to. “The new vehicle is significantly faster over the rough stuff,” said De Villiers at the completion of the test session. “Granted, it takes some getting used to, and it certainly doesn’t feel the same as the four-wheel-drive. But man, it is quick!”

“Now that we’ve proven the concept, we’ll go back and refine the vehicle as much as possible,” says Hall. “We’ve got a lot of data on the dampers and settings from the four-wheel-drive, so we’re not starting from scratch. With that said, we’ll need a lot more testing before we ship the vehicles off to South America in December.”



The Dakar will start in Asuncion, Paraguay, leading to Bolivian capital of La Paz, the highest capital in the world. Situated at 3,600 metres above sea level, competitors will have to contend with a shortage of oxygen and possibly altitude sickness, before finishing the competition in the Argentinian capital of Buenos Aires.

For more information on the Dakar 2017 route, go to: <http://www.dakar.com/dakar/2017/us/route.html>

ABOUT ANÉ THERON

Ané Theron started her career in motoring journalism at Pappert, and moved over to City Press after a few years, before settling into a full time career at AutoTrader SA. She's at her happiest driving along twisty coastal roads, or crawling across rugged terrain in a beefy 4x4, or driving through the desolate Karoo. And taking photos along the way, of course.

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