



Arctic Rally

Jan 2014

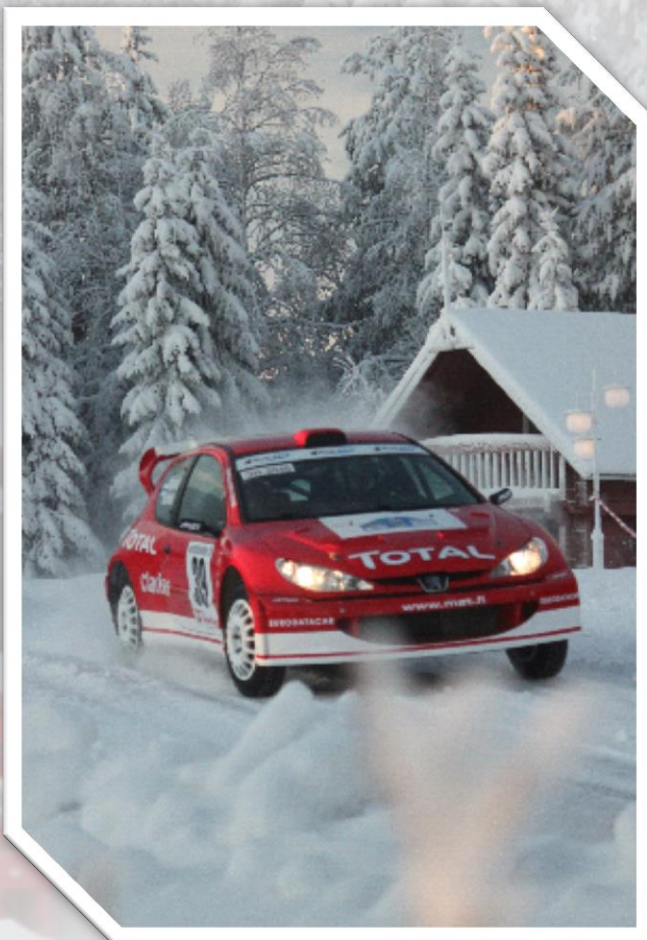
Tracey Dewhurst

My Trip to Finland required a little more research this time. Two years prior I had visited the Lapland area of Finland, and stumbled across The Arctic Lapland Rally that was in full swing in the Lapland Capital, Rovaniemi. Unfortunately, I was due to leave prior to the event start and ever since I have wanted to return to witness this event.

Eleven months to go and I was keeping a close eye on their website and their Facebook page waiting for confirmation of dates.... then finally they were set - 23-25th January 2014. I was now ready to build my itinerary to head back to this part of the world to spectate, and see how the Finnish run their event.

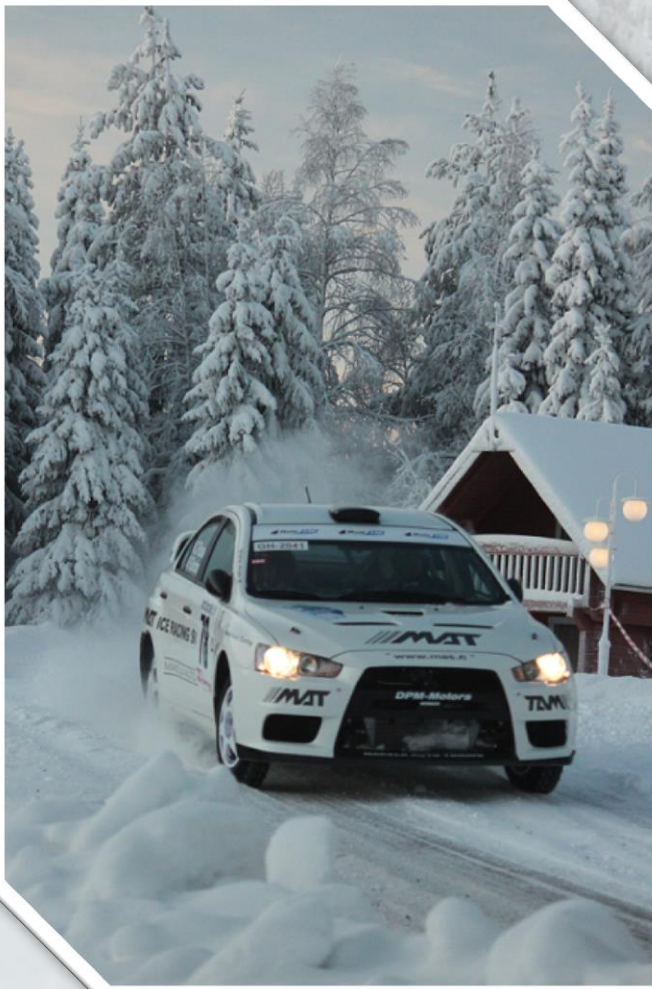
Arriving in plenty of time before the rally, I had also booked to stay at the rally Headquarters hotel so I would be as close to the action as possible. 124 entries, a fantastic mix of cars, Evo's, Subaru's, Citroën, Skoda's, Escorts old & new Mk1 & 2's, Celica's, Peugeot's, Saab's the list goes on and on.

On my very first night, I met two drivers who were competing in the rally.



Kari Makela, A historic car specialist in Finland, who also runs driver training amongst his rally preparation and engineering business south of Oulo in Finland. This event would see him debuting his newly acquired Peugeot 206 WRC. Last year he had driven a historic Ferrari in the same event.

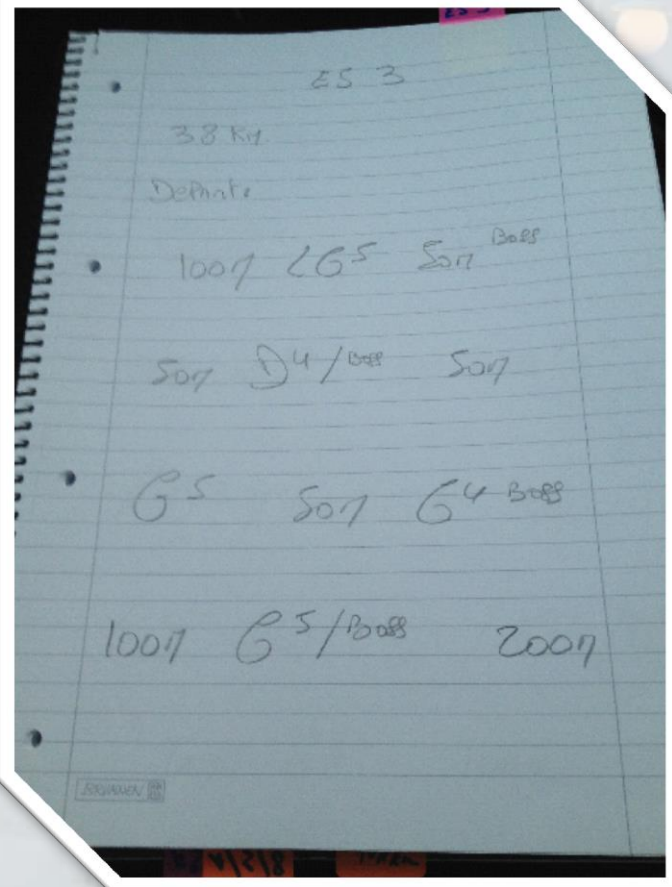
The second driver, Claude Picasso, was the first to start the conversation after he noticed my Rally Australia jacket. I had no idea who Claude was at this point, but after all three of us chatting and they had learned I had travelled from Australia to watch the event, it was offered for me to join them at recce the next day. Of course, I jumped at the chance of getting a closer look at the stages and the crew writing their notes.



After taking a look at the notes, I decided it would be a good idea to make a reference on my hand so I could quickly look up if I experienced mind-blank during the stage. So G= Left and D= Right.

At breakfast the next morning, Kari approached me and asked again if I was still interested in coming out for recce. It was settled and I was really looking forward to it - but little did I know that his next statement would make it even more of an experience; Kari (who was basically also managing Claude's rally, had explained that Claude's CoPilot was ill and they were hoping I could step in to read and write notes for Claude. It didn't take long for me to say I'd give it a go! I then joined them for breakfast to meet the rest of the team.

We had a few things to discuss prior to me jumping in, the first being that his notes (prepared the year prior) were in French! Sure, no problem, I'll give it a go....



The rest I decided I'd wing it....
Kari thought it would be a good warm up if I directed us to the start of stage three from the hotel - just to give me some bearings.

Having never driven here, I was skeptical that I would send us off in the right direction so out came the road book, and after about two minutes of looking at maps etc., I directed Claude off in the direction of stage three.

This was the first round of the Finnish Rally Championship, and their longest event, being two days. Because it is a two day rally, crews are able to conduct recce over four days prior!!!! A little different to our two day maximum recce's.

Successfully arriving at the start of stage three, I was quietly jumping up and down - I didn't get us lost! YAY.

We headed into the stage and it was hard to take this all in - how did I go from just coming to spectate to helping out on recce. I knew what I had to do... I needed to get this on film! Whilst reading his French pace notes to him, I managed to use my iPhone to also record some of the stages; quite bumpy but it was good enough footage for me to look back on and study the roads a little more.

The French notes didn't appear to cause too many issues. The lefts and rights were spot on and using a 1-6 system, they seemed pretty good. My calls were fine, with the occasional French word popping up that I couldn't figure out its context. By the end of this stage I had worked them all out as well as Fabrice's (CoPilot's) symbols and their meanings.

It is quite relaxed with four days of recce, or maybe it was just with these crews, I'm not sure. After this stage we headed off to rendezvous with Kari at a central cafe near us.

Kari was happy to hear that Claude and I went fine through our first stage. After a kuksa (Coffee), we headed off to stage four, being a 36km stage.

Again, the notes worked well and very few changes needed to be made. As mentioned, they were all pretty relaxed. Kari decided after stage four that I needed to be taken to Rally Snow Rings - a rally training and testing facility about fifteen minutes away from our current location. As if they didn't have anything better to do than show the Aussie the sights!!



Once we arrived, Kari took me to meet the owner and arranged for me to head out to have a look at what the facility had to offer. I was pretty restrained but WOW what a place. The stages range from soft rally tracks for the initial beginners, and so many to choose from, to the forest stages with boom gates etc. for the more experienced. There were a lot of teams here that were testing their cars in preparation for the weekend.

Some more serious teams testing have use of the garage. I was allowed to go in there where a Russian team were making some changes to their cars away from the prying eyes of the others.

There are many of these testing stations for rally cars in Finland, But Snow Rally Rings is undoubtedly one of the best suited for all.

We decided to call it a day and head back to Rovaniemi to check in with the service crews and the prep of the cars. The next morning, It was beginning to look like a bit of an issue was arising with Claude's CoPilot - he was still ill. It was decided that I should also do today's recce with them, as there was the possibility I may need to step in for him.

The director was informed of the situation and had asked only to see my Australian CAMS Licence, if the need arose, they would provide me with a temporary Finnish licence so I could compete.

Okay so it's turning out to be a little more again than what I expected - so off I went to email the appropriate people to get a hold of my licence so I was ready in case I needed to step in; still wondering how had I managed to be in this situation I was currently in - but I was going for it! The best way to learn is be thrown in the deep end!

After recce, Fabrice had decided he will continue with the event, so my short lived experience of rallying in Finland was over... so I thought!

It appears the course cars in Finland believe they may be timed or something. After determining that I was now back to spectating, with the bonus of having done recce, I managed to find a non-spectator point to head out to. I sat down in the hotel with all the maps, all the schedules etc. and worked out that I could be dropped out at this point, and picked up by sweep... now to get the director to say yes! And of course he did.

It was settled- I would meet in the morning and head out with time keeping - 1 hour & 50 minutes before the first car and then Sweep would collect me. I had worked it all out perfectly. The service was straight after this stage so I would be taken there in time for their next run through the special stage. Winning!!!!

My trip out to the farmhouse position I requested was an experience. I sent John Douth a text message, mentioning that I believe this driver thinks he's actually competing. We were doing 140km down the stage. I tried to get footage but in a ROADCAR doing this speed, we were bouncing all over the place. I got out at the farmhouse and felt fulfilled that I've now done one stage at speed at least - but next time, a rally car please. Much much safer!!

So after doing a little math, I would be out in the forest in -23 degree temps for approx. four and a half hours. All I can say, I am so thankful I chose the farm house spot over the jump, I don't know how I would of lasted otherwise!

The family that live here arrange for all of their family to come prior to their road being closed and they sit in their house and watch the rally run through their property from the comfort of their couch.

I approached immediately and was ushered inside the farmhouse to be greeted by what seemed like about 50 people. For the next hour, I chatted to them all as best we could. I really got used to broken English or talking to someone, turning to have someone else who spoke English translate.

I met some very lovely people that day at the farmhouse. I had the opportunity to go out, watch the action until my feet froze again, then head in and watch a couple through the window so my feet could thaw out. Aside from the rally I took a few moments to look around me and take in this amazing landscape and light against it. It is a truly magical place.

Heading out after all of the cars had made their way through with minimal moments, I was promptly collected by sweep and driven to the service park, this time heading out of the stage at 150km.

Servicing requires some added items, for both cars and service crew. All crew are wearing overalls specifically for the conditions, they would only leave the trucks at the time crews are due. Full heating is in their Pantecs for them to keep warm, and for the wandering Aussies who also get to hang out as well. Crews also must carry full snow gear in the cars with them including a knife in case they come into contact with the wildlife - Reindeer. It is law that if you hit one, you must kill it so it does not suffer - these items are part of scrutiny.



The Super Special Stage is also at the same location and is impressive. They use part of the horse racetrack, but the stage actually starts in a forest close by which we are able to watch from the comfort of the VIP enclosed grandstand.

I didn't stay in here of course, you can't hear the cars in there, so I would stay and watch until the last car before catching Kari & Claude as they headed into Parc Ferme.

The Next day's event started early, unfortunately Claude had a small issue and was forced to retire before the start of the first stage - so headed back and came out spectating with Kari's wife, work friend, and I for the day. We would again make it back to Kari's service and watch him and the remaining competitors finish the event in the centre of Rovaneimi.

And what else is there left to do other than to head to the after party?

I have so many more stories to tell from this rally - the cars, the other rallies that competitors compete in, the rally girl contest, the weather implications and requirements for cars, the people I met, the event organization. *(Ed - Perhaps for a Club Night presentation Trace?)*



I am so thankful to Heikki (Clerk of Course) and his team for the amount of help they gave to me during such a busy week. He should be very proud of such a professional event, to Kari & Claude and their teams. Claude & Kari especially, without doubt they showed me as much as they could to give me all I need to know if us Aussies ever want to come rallying here.

Besides, from the temperature difference, the changes that are required to run in temperature this low and the added extras to make the event comfortable for crews, the rallies are run exactly the same, just a different surface. whilst tyres aren't controlled, most use Michelin or Pirelli and you do have tyre limits and they must be scanned in.

I will leave it there and continue all the stories in person, there was just so much to experience at this rally & I for one will return, hopefully to compete.

Next year is the 50th Anniversary of the Arctic Lapland rally. Insiders say that most winners past and present will attend if not, compete..... Let's just say, I'm starting my research again ☺

Kiitos

Tracey Dewhurst

Foreign Correspondent :-)

