

RALLY CHAMPION Krzysztof Holowczyc

Words | Jerzy Wierzbicki

In the 'Venture' section of Y, I have often featured interesting places; some of these are located deep in the Omani desert and I am aware that many of them are not easy to reach owing to the difficult terrain, as well as the requirement of a 4x4. In contrast to those ventures, I am today introducing one of the most talented rally drivers in the World - Krzysztof Holowczyc from Poland. He is a very experienced driver and participant of many WRC (World Rally Championship) rallies behind the wheel in Subaru. He was the European Champion in 1997; in 2005, he debuted in the legendary Dakar Rally. Two years ago, he joined the BMW X-raid Team. He can drive on every type of terrain, even extremely difficult sandy deserts...

Krzysztof, you were the WRC (World Rally Car) driver for many years, but you later switched to off-road vehicles. Can you explain what is the difference in preparation for driving, say, for example, in the Greece Rally and the Marathon-type Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge?

These are two completely different worlds. On the one hand is the world of the WRC, where one drives super strong, small cars on the gravel and asphalt, during the two or three days of fighting for lead, which is calculated in hundredths of a second. On the other hand is the exhausting struggle, extending for weeks and many hours, on very long distances - off-road deserts, where one fights, primarily, with one's own weakness and the sand and the dunes, with the incredible heat on top of it. The difference is the time between the crews at the finish count, which is in tens of hours.

It's two different stories. In the WRC rallies it is mainly the young people who start and win. The rallies such as Dakar are rather dominated by 'the old wolves', drivers with great experience and great skills. Here, the experience gained is for years. This is a big boys' league.

You have participated in several editions of the Dakar Rally, in both Africa and now in South America, could you tell us about the differences between these raids?

While there are no significant differences in climate and the desert itself, there is a big disparity when it comes to the inhabitants of these two continents. In retrospect, I can say that in Africa we were intruders and did not feel completely comfortable. In South America, people are very open and friendly to the raid as well as the people participating in it. Here, we can always count on their selfless help in case of accidents or breakdown and not worry about how to ensure that we 'do not get eaten'. But from the point of view of the driver, both races were just as extensive, and



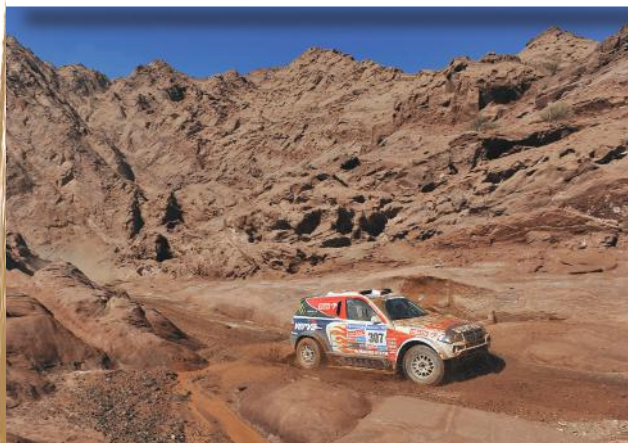
required vast experience and skill for rapid, efficient driving on different surfaces the desert has to offer.

How do you prepare for raids in the hot desert climate, in terms of fitness?

First of all, I exercise all year long. Everyday I try to do my seven-kilometer run, and in summer, I do a lot of riding on the water-scooter and water-ski and even ride motocross bike through the woods. As you can see, everything is associated with motorsports, but it is always fun and more exhausting than vigorous exercise in the gym. This allows me to be always ready with superhuman effort for events such as the start of the Dakar and other off-road rallies.

In previous years, during the Dakar and other raids, you drove Nissan Navarra, and later, for a short time, you drove the BMW X3, prepared for off-road rally. Could you say something about the differences between Japanese off-road cars and those produced by the European manufacturers?

When comparing these two cars, I have to say that Overdrive, which built the Nissan, and BMW built by X-Raid, did a great job. In fact, the two cars, which I drove in Dakar rallies, were



so strong that it gave me the possibility to be at the forefront of the rally. Yes, some technical parameters favoured the BMW rather than Nissan, but this was due to greater technical capabilities in the very construction design of the BMW X3 CC. Besides, the main difference was the engine. The Navarra has had a gasoline engine and BMW a powerful diesel engine, which generates more torque at lower revs. And it's very important in case of steep gradients of several hundred meters on a dune. This often determines the prevalence and, in consequence, even a victory.

In the last Dakar you drove the Mini. I had a chance to test the Mini 4WD during Mini festival in Dubai. How far-reaching are changes in the Dakar Mini compared to a serial mode?

In fact, you cannot even talk about racing Mini modifications, compared to the standard car. Mini, which competed in the Dakar Rally, is a completely different construction, and the only thing it has in common with the serial model is the badge on the hood and maybe a little shape. As a matter of fact, every element, from the plating to the engine, gearbox, interior, etc are quite different. It's like an SUV compared to a modern combat vehicle. The first would not survive the first few minutes in conditions where the latter survives for almost three weeks. Comparing objectively, town Mini is suitable only for recreational driving on asphalt and maybe light country road but not suitable for stony deserts. Dakar Mini is a monster, which will cross an extremely difficult terrain without any harm.

How was it to drive such a small car on a desert?

This is the best. Dakar Mini is not so mini; it is almost as large as the BMW X3. However, the slightly smaller construction has helped to build a car with a very good weight distribution, excellent maneuverability and low center of gravity. This is a very successful design. Last Dakar showed that it is a machine to win the World's largest off-road rallies.

I know that in Dakar high sand dunes create a lot of problems, not only for car drivers. Here in Oman we have beautiful deserts such as the Wahiba sands, or Empty Quarter and I often drive there myself in my off-road Toyota. Could you give any advice on how to navigate the difficult terrain in 4x4 car?

No one is able to teach others from a distance. It takes practice, practice and practice again. Sometimes I participate in the training of drivers, but the transfer of experience makes sense only when I sit on the right seat and watch the actions of the driver. Every situation in the desert is different and requires individual assessment. So, I recommend training, which professional driving schools offer on their websites. There, under the supervision of experienced drivers and trainers, you can safely get the off-road driver stripes.

What was your most difficult off-road rally: the most difficult place to drive?

The most difficult rally was the Pharaohs Rally in 2007, when an attempt to overcome the dunes finished with a compression fracture of the spine. It shows how the bodies of crew members are extremely tested and how challenging are the off-road rallies like Dakar.

What does one need to avoid when driving on the desert?

I have some principles, which I try to follow. First, you always need to have communication with each other, preferably satellite

and GPS vehicle tracking system. These are two things that can save the lives of the crew in the event of an accident or a major breakdown. It's impossible to go on the road without a connection. In addition, you must have water supply that will allow you to survive in the wilderness, as long as possible and avoid dehydration. And, of course, all the time you have to have maximum concentration and commonsense. Winning the race is only possible for those who actually get to the finish line. We must always remember about it.

What do you drive everyday?

Cars are my life. Therefore, they are not only my profession, but also passion and love, of course, right after my wife and three daughters. So, I always try to have the car that gives me a feeling of comfort, security and power, which contributes to the joy of driving. The car must go and have a restless soul like me. Currently I'm driving a Nissan GTR, and I can honestly say that we both have very similar personalities.

What is your passion outside of motor racing?

In fact, most things I do after work growl and run on wheels or float on the water. That's how I am. I have gasoline in my blood and I'm happy with it.

Feel welcome to Oman Krzysztof. There are so many fantastic places where you can train off-road driving on a desert. I hope one day we'll have a chance to see you in 'action', such as the Wahiba Sands.

If there is a chance... or to start in a rally, I'll be very pleased to visit Oman. One of my weaknesses in life is also traveling around the world, so I enjoy visiting places I've never been to.

Krzysztof Horowitz

