



ANSWERING THE ALLURE OF BAJA

Rally Raid Offers Adventure, Thrills, International Flavor

By Lawrence Hacking • Photos by Mark Kariya

The 2015 Baja Rally 3.0 is done and dusted. Looking back, it had all the ingredients to make this one of the most memorable events on the calendar, and it delivered in spades. The Baja Rally offered everything attractive about riding in Baja with a true international rally raid flavor.

The Baja Rally is the brainchild of Scott Bloom (a.k.a., Scotty Breauxman) a self-confessed Dakar fan who wanted to bring a rally raid style event to North America. For its third year running, the Baja Rally captured the imagination of 30-odd competitors, but it's unique enough, and accessible enough, that it could deliver the type of exotic two-wheeled experience that many American riders yearn for.

The term "rally raid" may not be well known to U.S. riders familiar with enduros and hare scrambles, but it refers to a multi-day off-road competition that pits competitors against the clock. Road book navigation is the art and beauty of rally raid. While outright speed and skill help, a capable navigator can compensate by making fewer wrong decisions.

The best-known rally raid event is the granddaddy of all rallies, Dakar. There are many more rallies around the world, but none is as easily accessible to North Americans of all skill levels (or as affordable) as the Baja Rally.

The Baja Rally offers the average rider an opportunity to try his or her hand at rally raid without the cost or logistics needed to travel far afield to compete. New for this year was the introduction

of the organizer-supplied Rally Comp device—a godsend for the first-time rally rider. For the unfamiliar, road book navigation can be intimidating, but once understood, it is supremely satisfying to get it right (but it remains the pinnacle of frustration when you get it wrong). The Baja Rally duplicates the conditions found at bigger, internationally sanctioned rallies with all the right touches (just like in Dakar, all distances are measured in kilometers).

The Rally Comp device offers a number of features that make the navigation part of the challenge easier, plus it transmits each rider's results to the organizer's laptop at the finish of each special stage. Instant and infallible results lighten the scorekeeper's workload considerably.

For 2015, the Baja Rally covered four days of the best terrain in northern Baja. Starting in Ensenada, we rode to the start of the first timed stage 70 kilometers south to Erendira on the Pacific coast. The stage route took us to a fuel stop on Highway 1, then on to Rancho El Coyote, a working ranch high up in the hills.

Some trails were previous Baja 1000 two-track roads. Other times, we were on fresh farm roads and sometimes traveled cross country to find hidden waypoints designed to make the challenge a little more difficult. At El Coyote, we camped out bivouac-style, just like in the original Paris to Dakar. The feeling among the competitors was friendly and relaxed, even though the competition up front was fierce, to say the least.



Riders prepare at the start of Day 1.



Open desert means navigation must take place at high speeds.

Washington-based rider Trent Burgess, through astute navigational decisions, stayed ahead of multi-time Baja 1000 victor Steve Hengeveld, Cameron Steele and U.K.-based Lyndon Poskitt, to post the quickest time on Day 1.

Rally raid is a thinking rider's game, and exercising strategy is important. For example, Burgess says he was careful not to spin his tire when turning off the main roads when he was in the physical lead in an attempt to throw off following riders.

There's no doubt Hengeveld's Honda was the fastest bike on the course. However, speed can sometimes be a negative factor when trying to navigate.

In rally raid, the route is kept secret until the riders are handed the roll-chart road books at the end of each day. There is no pre-running, and the use of GPS is merely to provide back up in case proof

is needed due to missed waypoints.

I entered the Baja Rally to enjoy the ride, finish the event, socialize and come back in one piece with a good story. In trying to understand the Rally Comp the first day, I narrowly missed three waypoints and was hit with an hour of penalties. I was shuffled to the back of the starting order for Day 2, and as a result my aspirations became even simpler: To ride across the finish line with no drama and take home a coveted finisher's medal.

All was going quite well on Day 2 until I came across downed rider Kevin Heath. He had crashed and landed on a pointed rock. I found him lying on the dusty red earth moaning.

Other riders had stopped as well, and once we assessed the situation, I sent them on their way and pulled out the satellite phone to call in medical support. A helicopter soon arrived and took Kevin to Ensenada.

Down about two hours, I made it to the gas stop with Kurt Burroughs, an Englishman who also waited while another rider was picked up. Time management is crucial in rally raid, and in Baja in general. It was 2 o'clock when we set out on the second half of the day. When we reached the go/no-go point on the route, we bailed out, and wisely so, as the organizers mandated that if you have not reached that point by a certain time, they send you around via the highway to El Rosario—the location of the second overnight stop.

What was most fun was the social side of the rally. I met a number of people I had communicated with prior



to the rally, but had never met in person before. The international aspect added to the enjoyment of the rally. There were riders from the United Kingdom, Japan, a number from Canada and, of course, riders from the United States and Mexico.

The days start early in rally raid. Everyone gets up well before dawn, and Day 3 was no exception. The organizers sent us farther south to the remote settlement of Catavina on some spectacular routes, including a rocky section that included Devil's Hill, a rock face that belonged in an extreme enduro.

In Baja, the variety of the terrain makes life on the bike interesting. If you don't like what you are riding, just wait half an hour because it will change. We rode on beaches, smooth rolling two-track roads, paved highways, wide-open dirt and gravel roads and past incredible scenery.

By the midway point of Day 3, I came to better understand the Rally Comp device and the philosophy behind Scotty's road book and rolled into Catavina in 14th place. After a hearty barbecue dinner and the rider's meeting, we hit the hay early, only to be awakened by our crew at 5 a.m. in a panic. We had overslept. My traveling companion Jeremy Le Breton and I stumbled around the room trying to put on each other's boots. We saddled up quickly and rode a 121-kilometer (70-mile) transit stage back to El Rosario along the

highway in the dark. We dodged cows, passed trucks and carved some beautiful corners through the crisp morning air and then hurried to wait for our start time.

The final special stage was 175 kilometers, and I focused on making good decisions and obeyed every indication in the road book. It worked. I was satisfied with my ninth place on the day and encouraged to make another run at the Baja Rally in the future.

We rode the final transit stage to the San Nicolas hotel in Ensenada, being greeted by the usual accolades befitting a Baja Rally finisher. We jumped into the pool, riding gear and all.

Like every race in Baja, hundreds of local people pitch in and help out. The local volunteers and land owners made the third Baja Rally happen, and they should bask in the satisfying feeling of a job well done.

Ultimately, Steve Hengeveld prevailed over Lyndon Poskitt, who held Cameron Steele at bay in the Rally Pro class. Trent Burgess won the Rally 1 class and finished fourth overall. (The Rally 1 class is for first-time rally riders.) Second place in Rally 1 went to Canadian Marc Edrup. Seattle-based Jeremy Le Breton was third.

If you want to see what rally raid is all about, give Baja Rally 4.0 a try before one of racing's best-kept secrets gets out and hordes of riders descend on Baja.

Rally raid bikes are outfitted for long days navigating through the desert.

