

Taking on the Tuareg Rallye with the “Rebell” and General Tire LT265/75R16 119/116Q GRABBER X³

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The Tuareg Rallye rose to prominence primarily as an enduro event and has grown into the biggest German-organized rally in Africa. The number of off-road enthusiasts signing up is increasing all the time, creating a starting field rich in nationalities and varied in experience.

The entrants are split into several categories, meaning different routes and varying degrees of difficulty are all part of the plan. This allows ambitious professional teams and rally novices alike to enjoy a desert rally that’s right for them.

New routes were drawn up for 2018, but the competitors once again faced up to 500 kilometers of dunes and a never-less-than-challenging 2,400-kilometer test of concentration, navigation and adventure. The rally started and finished in Midelt, Morocco.

This was the fifth year I had lined up in my “Rebell” (aka a T3 Syncro, the best car VW has ever made imho). Plotting a course through the dunes and dirt roads of Morocco this time around was Harm Lolkema. Harm was already a veteran of two Tuareg Rallyes (one on a quad and the other in a Mercedes G-Class), so he knew what he was letting himself in for.

The T3 Syncro has considerable off-road ability and is largely an electronics-free zone. After many years (from 1995) of modifying 1.9-liter TDI engines and switchable all-wheel-drive systems, swapping tires and conducting technical repairs and maintenance, in January 2018 my company switched its focus to parts sales for the T3 Bus and T3 Syncro Bus and fabrication of out-of-production parts.

Effectively, though, the Rebell is a prototype rally car.

Its shell is made largely from carbon fiber, while a spaceframe imbues it with the necessary strength. The tech specs are:

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| Engine: | BMW M5, 400 hp, 500 Nm |
| Top speed: | 160 km/h |
| Transmission: | Sequential (Drenth MPG) 5-speed |
| Brakes: | 4-disc braking system |
| Suspension: | Dual dampers by K&S Suspension |
| Tires: | LT265/75R16 119/116Q GRABBER X ³ |

In keeping with tradition ahead of a major rally, the Rebell was rebuilt pretty much from scratch. A new clutch was brought in and the front axle taken apart. Many of the shock absorber mountings, the lower link and the steering had to be completely replaced.

Come the rally itself, we got off to a really good start. In terms of their overall performance, the new General Tire LT265/75R16 119/116Q GRABBER X³ tires struck us as a mixture of General Tire’s legendary and now out-of-production Red Letter race tires and the previous, tried-and-tested General Tire Grabber MT.

These new “professional off-road tires” from General Tire are exceptionally capable, both over the stoney stuff and in sand dunes. Their outstanding levels of grip meant we could push really hard over loose surfaces and they were also exceptionally resistant to sharp-edged rocks. Indeed, we didn’t suffer a single puncture.

The opening stage of the Tuareg Rallye 2018 got underway in Midelt and concluded almost 300 kilometers later at the Desert Camp. Alex Cole and Emma Osman (cars), Clemens Eicker (quads) and Janiko Naber (motorbikes) took the spoils in Stage 1. We were the third team home, having navigated soundly, and successfully maintained a high average speed.

Day 2 brought the first dunes into play. The tires were subjected to a thorough inspection once again before we set off to cross the walls of sand. The heat had pushed up the air pressure in the tires from 1.6 bar to 1.9 bar, so we reduced it to 1.0 bar (warm). Up the golden mounds we soared, the Rebell skipping effortlessly over the ridges of the dunes and then down the other side with equally sureness of foot.

But then, with Day 2 almost done and dusted, we had what’s known as a “moment”. It happened in a small dune field where navigation is notoriously tricky. There we were, dashing up one of the dunes with familiar fleetness – a little too quickly, it turned out. I lifted off the gas a tenth of a second too late, but that was all it took. The next thing I knew we were all-but flying over the ridge, and the Rebell duly ploughed nose-first into the sand on the other side.

A spot of first aid later, it was clear: There was no way we could press on. Happily, my navigator Harm was unhurt and it was only when I got home that I realized I’d cracked one of my thoracic vertebrae. So I reckon we got off lightly. The Tuareg Rallye is a glorious event and one that we’re determined to compete in again. In 2019 it’s due to take place in Algeria, which will be very exciting – a whole new adventure. In the meantime I’ve signed up for a few lessons in dune-driving!

Bernd Jäger