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Cotah Rally '22

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Shifting expectations...when you think of a rally raid you think dunes, sand and of course, speed. Enter a new dimension in rally raid...

Imagine, you and your bike alone in the backcountry of Colorado and Utah for a week. Now, add that everything you need for the week, spares, food, tent, sleeping bag, clothes, etc has to fit in a 38 gallon trunk (with no bulge), mix in the most scenic trails you have ever ridden on and some pretty technical riding (think rocks and enduro). To spice things up throw in some rain and mud (this year actually rain every day), bring a bunch of super cool rally riders together, put the entire route on roadbook, get Rally Comp in and then to make things really really interesting, make the entire event a speed zone and boom, you have the Cotah Rally.

For years rally organisers have tried to lower the average speeds during rally raids, to make the sport safer, so much so that Dakar has imposed the max 450cc rule and still not succeeding. Enter Mike Graeves, Scott Isgar and Brian Calliari, they are showing rally organisations all over the world how to lower the average speed, and they are doing it in style. They are doing this by 1) making the terrain more technical, 2) applying a speedzone to the entire event.

When I heard of this event for the first time I was not impressed or on board. A rally, with all speed zones? Wtf? I was not thrilled but nevertheless went to check it out.

What I found was an amazing event. The speed zones created a massive equalising effect, that mixed with the malle moto style no support ethos, resulted in all riders being fairly evenly matched.

It also meant that the only way you could get a competitive edge was to "ride on the buzzer" and to try and go as fast as possible on the technical sections.

Riding on the buzzer increases the risk of a spill in the rocks or getting a speed penalty, but riding on the line is the only way to get ahead in this race.

The rally comp has a speed zone warning feature, where it starts beeping when you are 3km/h below the speed limit and then a long solid beep when you hit the speed limit. Once you hear that solid beep, you



have like a second to get below the speedzone again, or else you get slapped with a heavy penalty.

This resulted in a lot of abrupt brake marks along the course. Losing your concentration for a millisecond when riding on the buzzer quickly results in a solid beep, or if you try (and fail) to show off for the camera. Scott Spears and I arrived a day early at the Montrose Fairgrounds with the Freedom Rally team (my official support partner for all US rallies).



Freedom supported the riders at the event by being there pre event to help riders with any issues or problems and to help with Rally Comp installation. They also provided "tool support" for

the duration of the race. This really changed the game for the race and the racers. Freedom is offering premier fly and ride, as well as bring your own bike support packages for all major rallies in North America, so make sure to get in touch with them if you need any assistance.

It was great seeing all the riders roll into Montrose. Some were old friends and some complete strangers. (By the end of the week there were no strangers among us and we were all friends, brothers bound through the shared experience of suffering through rocks, mud and rain). Myself and 2 other riders, John Suvanto, and David Pearson, was going to attempt, as John coined it, the "trifecta". We are going to try and race 3 North American rallies back to back, starting with Cotah, then Baja 6 Days and then Sonora, quite the challenge!

Tech checks and scrutineering took on a new level with Grand County imposing several restrictions on the event, such as noise levels and EPA approved exhausts.

Mike Johnson did not read the paperwork, so he ended up having to, among other things, install a horn in the heat of the moment. Not wanting to do any wiring he ended up attaching an old school bicycle horn to his bike in order to pass scrutineering, how is that for ingenuity and rally raid spirit.

This is a good point to mention that the Cotah rally is the only formal and sanctioned rally in the United States and is affiliated with the AMA.

Brian made us all feel like factory riders taking photos of each entrant and his bike, then after documentation we received our sat phones and rider numbers.

The prologue was a "free or open" one, meaning it was not timed, it was more like a shake down to test the bikes and get a taste of the navigation.

It was a small 20km loop just outside of Montrose with a good bit of nav to whet the appetite.



Stage 1

An early morning start and "stress packing", fitting everything into our trunks and loading it, ready to head off into the wilderness for a week. The day was rocky, with loads of atv trails, tight twisty forest trails, through Pine and Aspen forests, down gullies, up massive hills, all leading us to a magical camp site in the woods along the Buckeye reservoir on the state line of Colorado and Utah

There was the constant threat of rain, and sure enough, it started to sprinkle in the late afternoon. I was awoken several times through the night by the howling of coyotes and wolves, a first for me.



Stage 2 , started as a misty, moist early morning loop around camp through pine forest and along the side of a mountain, with several rocky sections, enough to get the blood flowing. We doubled back to the campground in the mist and then headed through more pine forest on fairly flowing, high speed (for Cotah) twisty roads. I particularly liked this section.

The day was marked by spectacular gorges, rock formations and cliff walls towering hundreds of feet above you.

The last section of the day had us going through a magical canyon that deposited us at a campsite along the Colorado river, the bivi for stage 2 by Dewey Bridge.

Here some Cotah veterans recalled the rain from the previous night, and we all quickly set up our tents under the various shelters (just a roof) that were scattered around the campsite. The space was limited, so with the small tents crammed under the roofs packed like sardines in a can, you could hear the breathing of the person in the tent next to you, as we practically lied shoulder to shoulder. The night was filled with so much snoring, farting, zippers opening and closing to go and pee, and whatever other sounds emanates from a bunch of dudes sleeping together, that no mountain lion or bear would have risked coming close to us.



Stage 3 headed into the famous area around Moab, the morning started on amazing sand tracks, very fast and flowing, having rained the night before, the sand was perfect. The sand transitioned into the rocks that Moab is so famous for, and we encountered the first navigation "twists" over the rocks, with some of us making wide turns trying to find the correct exit from a rocky section.

The afternoon was the navigation test of the rally in the foothills outside Grand Junction. After the refuel, the route turned into a fast, flowy, whoopy section with soft, powdery soil. We passed an abandoned KLR 650 stuck in dried mud, gear strewn all over the place, its owner clearly not getting very far on his/her "adventure" before calling it quits, and presumably walking to Grand Junction (or the nearest bar). The nav started out as super tight and twisty, with paths in every direction, you had to make decisions on the fly every 200 to 300 meters, sometimes less. This was my type of riding and I just loved it, passing several guys in this section.

The fast flowy riding transitioned into off piste with cap headings, crossing some massive, what I can only describe as, dunes made out of gravel. Finding the WPM's in this weird, almost moon scape, with loads of gullies, hills and ravines was great fun and proved a challenging navigational task. I noticed a rain storm forming, and managed to finish the nav section just as it started raining, getting drenched all the way back to the bivouac in Palisade.

The terrain we were on was definitely not suited to moisture. As soon as it rained, the soft powdery soil turned into cement type mud, and many riders became stuck in the navigation section. Luckily everybody eventually made their way back to the bivy, where we had hot showers. We camped along the Colorado river again. That night the rain came down in buckets, all night long. The next morning there was no point to even try and pack things up neatly, everything was soaked, so we just piled everything into our totes, gone were the days of meticulous planning, packing and organizing.



Due to the rain all night, stage 4 was amended and we were blessed with a later than sunrise start by the orga. I don't know if it was the rain, or the change in schedule with the amended stage, but I was just not feeling it on stage 4. The morning did not start great for me, it was cold, I was wet, my Go Pro dislodged from the bike at high speed and I had to go and look for it, you know the kind of day I am talking about.

Coming over a blind rise I was confronted with a massive downhill of blue, slippery mud. By sheer luck I did not have a tumble and just thought how lucky I was, when I rounded the next corner, to see more of the same dreaded mud...

Bentonite, this stuff turns into a slick paste when it gets wet, it packs on the wheels and is sloppier than snot on a brass door knob. Coming around the corner, the route turned in a sharp and steep uphill, and all I could see was absolute carnage, bikes strewn absolutely everywhere.

After some discussion we grouped up and started hauling the bikes up the hill by sheer force. It was an amazing group effort of sheer will, but also a strange bonding moment for those of us stuck on the side of this slippery mountain.

After a while, a group of 3 riders arrived at the bottleneck of the now infamous "Bentonite Hill", one of them being Mike Myers.

As it turns out, Mike grew up and learned how to ride dirt bikes in in England, arguably one of the more muddy places in the world to learn to ride.

Mike was not convinced that we should be pulling the bikes up by brute force, and demonstrated to us an uncanny ability to ride on slick mud. Thus with the arrival of Mike, our exertion levels dropped, as he rode the remaining bikes up the hill.

After all the bikes made their way onto the top of the hill, we all spread out pretty quickly and I rode alone for most of the day, over plains and through mountains.

Stage 4 was by far the longest day, and as the day carried on, the route wound through beautiful rock formations, deep mud puddles, over massive plains, and up huge valleys. There were several moments in the day where I felt truly alone, and where the surrounding area was just so vast, desolate and remote, that I could not help but be humbled by my surroundings. I was truly grateful for being able to experience such beauty.

The last section in the day I was back in the forest, and with darkness starting to fall, and mud puddles everywhere it was hard to see.

It looked like more rain was rolling in, the thought of my wet tent waiting for me in my tote did not excite me in the least.

The stage 4 bivi was high up in the mountains by Columbine with an elevation of just over 9000 feet. After the longest day, it was definitely the coldest night. After being spoiled with amenities and showers the previous night, at this campsite there was only a forest service long drop.

Tired, cold bodies fell asleep early, with the last day of the rally looming in the morrow.

We woke to somewhat clear skies and some weak sun. Some guys were frantically sorting out last minute bike issues, desperate to finish the race, and not fall out on the last stage. As we lined up on the start line, the heavens opened up, and the rain came down once more.

Stage 5 was extremely muddy. I had 3 offs in the stage, and after the 3rd one I dialed it right back, not wanting to injure myself. After descending the mountain, we entered the forest again, and parts of the route, I suspect, was what we did on the first day, only in reverse, as I recognised some parts.

Tight twisty atv trails between the trees made it so that it was impossible to pick up speed. Eventually the route opened up, and after some wide dirt roads, we emerged back at the Montrose fairgrounds, greeted by the smiling faces of the organizers.

We had an early finish which gave us enough time to pack up and wash the bikes. The sun was shining in Montrose, so I hung all my gear on a fence to dry.

We had a small prize giving in the afternoon, and then we all went to have dinner and drinks together for the last time at the HorseFly Brewing Company, where I made sure I closed the place down (with the help of some fellow riders, the orga, and some oversized tequila shots).

I managed to get 5th overall, and for my first race back after several years and a major injury, I was pretty happy with that.

Some of the highlights of the rally included

Uncompahgre National Forest, Manti La Sal National Forest, Dome Rock, Colorado & Utah Bookcliffs, Hanging Flume Unaweep Canyon, Pot Holes Escalante Dominguez Canyon, Fisher Towers, Onion Creek and the Rimrocker trail.

I had the pleasure and the privilege to be supported by Freedom Rally Racing. Their help and support was phenomenal, and it was pivotal to my success. The bike was great and well prepped.

Also a huge shout out to every single volunteer and helper, the Orga of the Cotah, and my fellow riders / competitors, this is truly a race I will cherish forever.

Thanks also goes to:

KTM Paarl, MIRA, My Medic and Wolfman Luggage for their help and support.

Check out the Namibia Roadbook Camp

NAMIBIA ROADBOOK CAMP	CRONO RALLY
When: 24-28 July 2023	When: 3-8 August 2023
Where: Walvis Bay, Namibia	Where: Start Upington, South Africa, finish Springbok South Africa
Cost: \$ 1450 (based on exchange rate 1 Nov 2022)	Cost: \$ 1800 (based on exchange rate 1 Nov 2022)
A camp site will be included in your entry. There will be an option to "upgrade" to a chalet should you not want to camp, at a cost.	Accommodation and meals are included in the entry fee.
It is a self catering event. We will have access to a restaurant at the camp site, and there are shops and restaurants in town.	Rental bikes available.
Rental bikes available.	

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