

Photo: Volkswagen



# Beating the odds: South African Daredevil Champions

Ryan Sandes crossing the inhospitable Sahara desert

Photo by Chris Lusher, 2008



**The Dakar Rally and Racing the Planet are the world's top two endurance competitions, says *Time* magazine — and both were won by South Africans. CLAYTON TRUSCOTT found out how Giniel de Villiers and Ryan Sandes beat all odds to win in the world's toughest adventure competitions**

**T**ime magazine recently made a list of the Top 10 Endurance Competitions, a rather lofty, but interesting tally. Some events that made the cut include the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race (a 1 850.75km race across the Alaskan badlands), the Vendee Globe (a yacht race round the world), and the Tour de France (the famous 3 498.71km bicycle race).

## Giniel de Villiers

Number one on *Time* maga-

zine's list was the Dakar Rally, an event that started over 30 years ago, after profoundly optimistic Frenchman, Thierry Sabine, got lost in the Libyan Desert and turned the experience into a motor race from France to Senegal. Today it's the highlight of the international off-road endurance racing calendar and, according to *Time* magazine, the toughest endurance test on earth. The event has seen its share of high drama, including several deaths, disappearances and innumerable accidents along the way. The competition



Photo: Volkswagen

*Giniel de Villiers was clearly happy with winning the Dakar trophy.*

is about much more than just being able to stick out a 10 000km drive across 2 continents (with a ferry ride thrown in between). Navigation, mental strength and driving talent all make the world of difference during the Dakar Rally.

Giniel de Villiers, of Stellenbosch, became the first South African to win the Dakar Rally

this year, during its maiden run outside Europe and Africa. De Villiers' career so far has taken a very organic route, adapting to changes in the motor racing industry and stepping up when opportunities have arisen.

He started out in 1989, racing circuits in Cape Town. Over the years he achieved a substantial success in the local tour-



ing car championship series. In 2000 he became the South African Touring Car Driver Champion, representing Nissan at the time. The big switch for De Villiers came in 2003, when he turned his driving focus to off-road racing. "I grabbed the opportunity with both hands," says De Villiers, "I had always seen the Dakar Rally, but I didn't think I'd get the chance to race in it... when the touring car series was stopped, the chance to race off-road presented itself."

His ability and potential as a great off-road endurance driver developed quickly, but victory at the Dakar Rally hasn't come without years of hard work. In 2004 he placed 7th overall, still racing for Nissan at the time. He bettered that in '05, placing fourth.

In his first Dakar Rally with Volkswagen (VW), he placed second in 2006. That same year the rally started for the first time in Lisbon, Portugal. In 2007, after what has been described as an unbeatable start, mechanical problems halted the progress of De Villiers and his navigation partner, Dirk von Zitzewitz (from Germany) towards a first Dakar win. It would be two years before they took another crack at the rally.

During a year of firsts, De Villiers and Von Zitzewitz claimed victory in the South American 'Dakar Rally' — also VW's long awaited first Dakar victory. Al-



Photo: Volkswagen

Giniel de Villiers with partner Dirk von Zitzewitz after winning in Argentina

though the 2009 Dakar Rally took place in Argentina and Chile, the prestige and famously tough terrain and distances were kept well within the standards it has always maintained. "I'm happy with the course in South America... It's possibly tougher than Africa. It was a really good race and they'll be heading there again next year," said De Villiers on the change of course.

### Ryan Sandes

Coming in at number 2 on the *Time's* list is The 4 Deserts

Challenge. The 4 Deserts Challenge, or Racing the Planet, comprises of four 250km footraces, each one run over a seven day period. According to [www.4deserts.com](http://www.4deserts.com), the events are "located in the largest desert of each category [sub-tropical, cool coastal, cold winter and polar], which also represents the driest, hottest, coldest and windiest." The four gruelling, but beautiful locations are the Atacama Desert (Chile), the Sahara Desert (Egypt), the Gobi Desert (China) and Antarctica (called the Last Desert). Racers are expected to carry all

their own essentials, including food, water, bedding, medical supplies (to name a few) for the duration of the contest.

In 2008 a young Capetonian named Ryan Sandes left competitors and spectators double checking their protective eyewear, when he tore through two of the four 4 Deserts Challenges — The Gobi March and the Sahara Race. It wasn't just a question of Ryan sneaking a win past the big players; he absolutely blitzed the international field, winning all six stages at both events and finishing the Sahara Race more than 3 hours ahead of the next competitor.

The event itself draws a host of competitors. "Some are in it for hard competition, like the guys doing it professionally," says Sandes. This includes people like the international ultra-marathon runner, Dean Karnazes, who completed all four events last year. "Lots of people do it just to finish the event. The kind of people who do it are successful, determined people, like doctors and lawyers, and that determination shows during the event."

Besides the physical achievement of just finishing both events, Ryan's victories are that much more impressive when looking at his career so far — it's only just started. The Gobi March was his first multi-day event. At the time of entering the Gobi March, Sandes had



Photo: Volkswagen

only been running competitively for two and a half years.

For him to have achieved so much in such testing conditions, amongst the tough international field, you can't help noticing that he is doing this for more than competitive kicks. "I've always wanted to travel and I was looking for an event to take part in. I originally wanted to do the Atacama (Chile) race," comments Sandes, on the series of events that led to his entry in the Gobi March, "but had to pull out because of an injury. So I jumped my entry to the Gobi later in the year." After giving himself time to recover and train, Sandes took his act to China, where he ran across the Gobi Desert like there was a fire cracker in his polly shorts. "The events are held in beautiful locations. Certain places in China were restricted to civilians, some were military zones."

A resident of mountainous Hout Bay, Sandes has a veritable training ground in his back yard. Regular runs on the various trails in Cape Town are the norm for Sandes, but he also makes use of the Sports Science Institute, where he trains in an Environmental Terrain Chamber, a facility that allows him to get accustomed to some of the outrageous conditions characterizing the 4 Deserts Challenge. Temperatures during his more recent victory in the Sahara were stable in the mid-forty's.

2009 has more of the same thing on offer for Sandes. Besides holding down a job as a quantity surveyor, he will be taking part in Racing the Planet's roaming desert challenge, through Southern Namibia in May. Towards the end of the year he'll be in Brazil for the Jungle Marathon, another endurance race through the Brazilian jungle (as the name might suggest).

As far as the 4 Deserts Challenge goes, Sandes is looking to compete in the 2010 Atacama Crossing, which will allow him to compete in the Last Desert Challenge, in Antarctica, at the end of the year. While he humbly chooses not to plan too far into the future, he made mention of utilizing freezing plants to train for the Antarctica event. "It's all about the clothing in Antarctica," Sandes commented, "I've been speaking to people who've done it and they say you have to adapt... training in a freezing plant will be a good place to start."

So, there you have it. Two of the toughest international endurance races, won by two South African Daredevil Champions. To keep an eye on De Villiers' 2010 Dakar run, and for more information about the rally itself, log on to [www.dakaar.com](http://www.dakaar.com). For passed media releases, bio, contest links, or to check out Sandes's progress during these upcoming races, all the information is on [www.ryansandes.com](http://www.ryansandes.com). **YS**



Photo by Chris Lusher, 2008



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Above and top: Ryan Sandes participating in the Sahara Desert race, part of the 4 Deserts Challenges series. Photo's by Chris Lusher, 2008