

Dakar 2017 - Toyota Gazoo Racing SA Team is armed and dangerous!

 By [Ané Theron](#)

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The most grueling motor race in the world kicks off in January 2017, and the Toyota Gazoo Racing SA Team is armed and ready. Not only do they have the most formidable team in the sport, but also some of the most robust and capable vehicles: two South African-built Toyota Hilux 4x4's. The 4x2 Hilux Evo is still undergoing testing, and will not be taking part in the upcoming competition.

"We were all very excited about the arrival of the Toyota Hilux Evo, which we unveiled earlier this year," says Gazoo principal Glynn Hall. "However, despite the the promising performance of this car, we've found significantly more performance in the the four-wheel drive during parallel testing."

The new race regulations also allow for a bigger 38mm air restrictor, which is being used in the Hilux.



The Hiluxes as well as newly signed Dakar 2015 winners (and Red Bull athletes) Nasser al-Attiyah and Matthieu Baumel, have already shown their steel in this year's FIA Cross-Country World Cup, winning every round and taking the championship in the process. The team also features South African Dakar stalwart Giniel de Villiers, partnered by Dirk von Zitzewits. Together, they were victorious at the Dakar in 2009 and are fired up for a top podium finish once again. De Villiers has one the highest start-to-podium ratios in the history of the Dakar, and is currently sleeping in an altitude tent to get used to the lack of oxygen he will encounter in the highest parts of Bolivia.



Unfortunately, Leeroy Poulter and his navigator Rob Howie will not be competing this year, as Poulter had to undergo surgery. He has been given a clean bill of health, but is still on the mend.

This week, I travelled to a remote region an hour's drive north of Upington, to experience the intense focus and also madness that is part of the preparation for Dakar 2017. The Toyota Gazoo Racing SA Team chose Goerapan because it so closely resembles the sand dunes, rocks, and extreme temperatures found in the Dakar arena.

After being helmeted and strapped into the navigator's seat, Nasser Al-Attiyah took the wheel, giving me a 20-minute taste of what it's like to drive with the world's number one, in an incredible vehicle that can climb every mountain and cross every dune, at high speed, for distances over 420 km at a time. The newfound respect I have for these drivers, their navigators and their technicians is indescribable. Imagine doing what they do for eight hours at a time – it is surreal to think that their bodies (and minds) can withstand so much punishment.

After lunch I had the pleasure of repeating the experience, this time with Giniel de Villiers in the other Hilux, who decided to take a much rougher route. Was I petrified? Of course not – this is the most excitement and elation I've felt in years. These sportsmen are machine-like in their execution of the most extreme and high-speed manoeuvres, and I trusted them with my life. One is born with such skill, and also with fearlessness – it cannot be taught. I should also add that these drivers and their navigators are not just supremely talented, but also humble, friendly and gentlemanly, treating their technicians and the media as equals.



Next up for the team is the gargantuan task of packing for the Dakar, when thousands of spare parts have to be catalogued and stored meticulously before they will be shipped to South America.

The race kicks off in the Paraguayan capital of Asuncion on 2 January 2017. For more info, background, and to have a look at the route, go to www.dakar.com.

ABOUT ANÉ THERON

Ané Theron started her career in motoring journalism at Rapport, and moved over to City Press after a few years, before settling into a full time career at AutoTrader SA. She's at her happiest driving along twisty coastal roads, or crawling across rugged terrain in a beefy 4x4, or driving through the desolate Karoo. And taking photos along the way, of course.

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