



2008 FIRST ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL BMW GS TROPHY EVENT IN TUNISIA

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To refer to the first running of **BMW's GS Trophy** in Tunisia solely as a "competition" would be a disservice. While separate groups did come together in the sands of the Sahara to contend for a prize, this event offered up far more than a proverbial checkered flag at its conclusion on the shores of North Africa.

Event organizer Beppe Gualini drew from the format of his previous project, the Camel Trophy, to form the basis of the GS Trophy. Rather than being purely about speed, this event focused on the ability of the teams to work together to overcome challenges based on navigation, problem solving, riding agility, and of course, speed. A legendary enduro rider and Paris-Dakar competitor himself, Beppe has years of experience dealing with the desert terrain of North Africa on both two and four wheels. That experience, combined with the support of BMW, led to the creation of this event where all participants would be provided

a level playing field by competing on identical motorcycles in stock form, and using the same style of rally suit.

For my part, I was completely in the dark as to the format of the rally. Other than a date and location for the start, I knew nothing about what was going to be expected of me in the desert. As it turns out, I was not alone. By sheer happenstance, I was not only the first American team member to arrive at the starting point in Milan, Italy, but the first competitor from any country to arrive. After being greeted by race officials Volker Geisler and Lesleigh Klarmann, I was afforded the opportunity to witness the other teams come waltzing through the front door of the Rege Hotel, just as confused as I was about what they were doing there. This, as it turns out, was by design.

Later that evening at a welcome dinner, we were all informed that we would be told nothing about the event, at least not that evening. All five teams were given instructions to be ready for departure to the harbor city of Genoa in the morning, and that we would all learn more about the competition format during the 22-hour boat ride from Italy to Tunisia. This pattern would repeat itself throughout the next several days in North Africa. Each evening we would only be provided instructions for the next day, sometimes only for *part* of the next day. The nature of many challenges was unknown until our convoy arrived at the starting point of the challenge itself.

A typical day during the GS Challenge would begin with an early start for a light breakfast, either from the occasional hotel buffet, or more commonly from whatever was stashed in the back of the Unimog truck. It was each rider's responsibility to

1: The first turn of the final challenge in the Tembain Dunes was extremely soft, deep sand. Here the Spanish team negotiates the course. 2: The convoy on the pavement toward Matmata. 3: Some of the dunes were as soft as talcum powder. Here U.S. rider Brad Hendry begins the extraction process.

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get their gear packed and into the massive 6x6 Astra truck for transport, and then be ready to roll on their bike at the designated departure time. Fortunately, we were all only allowed to bring the single provided gear bag, so prepping for each day was a speedy affair and you were then free to explore the area with whatever time remained. Depending on a number of factors, the day would end early, or quite late. Some of the longer liaisons had the convoy arriving well after dark, while other sections had us arrive surprisingly early—or so we thought.

Rolling up the deep sandy road into the Ksar Ghilan Oasis with ample daylight remaining, most of the convoy wasted no time in changing out of the rally suits and into swim gear for a dip in the desert oasis. It was about an hour or so into our celebratory swim that Beppe, in typical “GS Trophy” fashion, rolled by in one of the race support vehicles and simply said, “Twenty minutes, be geared up and ready at the start!” By “the start” he was referring to what is essentially the gateway to the Sahara. Just beyond the Oasis where we swam lay endless acres of sand dunes. Our convoy was to line up on what could be considered the “first dune” and make its way through the desert to the fortress

at Ksar Ghilan for our orienteering challenge. We never made it.

The dunes were a challenge to be sure. The seemingly bottomless sand ranged from absurd to unreasonable in how soft it was. Literally moments after pointing the bikes towards the fortress and dumping the clutches, BMWs were sinking into the desert like so many wonderfully engineered German stones. As night began to fall, it was here in this maelstrom of sand and machines that the intended spirit of the GS Trophy began to shine through the glow of the headlights. Rather than a typical race where “every man for himself” would be an understandable mantra, the entire convoy rallied together regardless of nationality, and the riders less affected by the adverse conditions began assisting those who were struggling.

Less than two kilometers into the trek toward the fort, it became clear that continuing on was not in anyone’s best interest as the darkness grew thicker and many of the bikes dug themselves deeper into the Sahara. Through combined effort, the entire convoy was redirected and pushed back to the oasis where the new challenge for the evening became unclogging air filters and evaluating a route for the next day.

In much the same way one doesn’t sail the Pacific Ocean by going *around* the water, the Sahara is not traversed by going *around* the sand. The whole place is sand. There are “paths” through the desert, which are ostensibly flatter and slightly more organized versions of sand dunes. If you happen to be among the first one or two riders in a group to negotiate one of these paths, it is relatively smooth and manageable. Being the 30th rider in a group is another story entirely. A once-clear path weaving between the ever-

GS Trophy

final scores:

- 1st: USA: 2700 points
- 2nd: Germany: 1900 points
- 2nd: Spain: 1900 points
- 3rd: Italy: 1400 points
- 4th: Japan: 1000 points

Team USA:

- #501: James Stoddard
- #502: Brad Hendy
- #503: Jason Adams
- #504: Jimmy Lewis
- #505: Jonathan Beck
- #506: Ryan Dudek



changing mountains of sand becomes more and more a rutted mess as each bike grinds its way over the surface. This was an issue not only in these “liaison” stages of the event, but also in some of the challenges themselves.

Starting order was chosen by random drawing, meaning some of the challenges involving races through sandier portions of course were much tougher for those unfortunate enough to draw the later starting positions. Following the debacle of the previous evening, a different route through the desert was chosen toward the fortress. While still composed entirely of sand dunes, this new course consisted of dunes that tended to be smaller for the most part, and offered brief but massively helpful respites in the form of hard-packed spots at the base between certain dunes. Like the previous night, the entire convoy rallied together to help one another through this section towards the goal of the fortress, where an entirely different type of challenge awaited.

At the fortress, Beppe provided an unusual introduction to the next challenge—we would be allowed to use our riding gear, or not. We could wear boots, sandals, or go completely barefoot if desired. This challenge, as it turns out, would not involve the motorcycles at all. Each rider was provided a compass and list of headings, then tasked with finding

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several hidden orienteering markers scattered out over several kilometers of desert within a designated time limit. Listening to these instructions from inside the remains of an ancient Roman fort more recently occupied by French Foreign Legion troops, it was not hard to imagine the former residents of this spot navigating through the desert in much the same way. Standing atop the perimeter wall of the fortress and staring out into the sheer desolation that makes up the Northern Sahara, it was not hard to imagine why they left.

The historical significance of the GS Trophy route was not limited to evidence of a bygone nomadic world. After a particularly long stint over what was probably the most punishing washboard “road” of the trip, our convoy emerged from an area

of low-lying hardpack hills and entered a section of desert containing what is arguably one of the most famous pop-culture communities where no one lives—the “wretched hive of scum and villainy” known as Mos Eisley. Constructed for the 1977 Star Wars film *A New Hope*, the original structures of this make-believe spaceport still stand today, largely intact in the Tunisian desert.

Our convoy was given a few minutes to walk around the essentially unguarded remains of the set until the start of our final challenge, which would take place in

4: Many meals were followed by a sweet course in the form of a newton-like cookie made from dates. **5:** Entering the Ksar Ghilane oasis. **6:** The sand claimed many riders. **7:** Local berber, Hadi, and his horse, Alibaba.



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the dunes a short distance away. This final challenge was based purely on speed—a simple race around several flags placed in the sand. In an unusual twist, the finishing time was based on the entire team. Regardless of who was faster or slower, the entire team had to cross the finish line together to qualify for completion of the challenge. To this end, we on the U.S. team adopted a strategy that proved to be both unique and very effective. Instead of our entire team lining up and starting simultaneously, we left individually, each rider providing a safety gap of a few seconds before following. Simply riding smooth and methodically paid off as no one crashed or became stuck, particularly in the first turn which was claiming many bikes in its unusually deep sand. Following the completion of this last challenge, the teams assembled for an impromptu group photo. Scores from the last two challenges and the overall winner of the event was kept secret until the presentation that took place at the conclusion on

the shores of the Mediterranean.

Having completed all of the scored portions of the event, the final two days in Tunisia were simply an exercise in getting the convoy to the boat in Tunis that would carry us back to Italy. A lack of scoring did not eliminate the challenging nature of this ride, however, as the very next morning we awoke to threatening skies, which elected to open wide the moment we were preparing to start the long pavement ride towards Tunis. As desert storms can last minutes or hours, waiting for a break in the weather made little sense, and the entire group was in agreement that we should simply proceed and deal with it as best as possible. The rain liner in the BMW Rally 2 Pro suit is effective, except in the event that it is packed away in your gear bag. Most everyone had remembered to put on the jacket liner before leaving, but no one to my knowledge thought to use the waterproof pant liners.

Approximately 200 kilometers into this rain ride, the entire convoy pulled over and probably added a percentage point or two to the local economy in the form of about 70 espressos for all the riders and crew. As gloves were being dried on exhaust pipes and hands were being warmed on engine cases, the rain ceased

and we continued on to our destination for the evening.

Daybreak over the Mediterranean on the final day of the GS Trophy was greeted by the sound of 30 F800s making their way to the beach. Being perfectly legal, a significant portion of the day's ride would be along the water's edge. Several kilometers shy of the harbor, the rideable portion of beach ceases, and near this point is where our group assembled to hear the final scores announced. Before the cameras started rolling and Beppe and Volker began their respective presentations, the thought occurred that the scores were almost a secondary consideration in the success of a rally such as the GS Trophy.

With its extraordinary combination of ancient and modern historical significance, North Africa placed all the competitors in a situation where it was as if they could experience everyday things in life for the first time. In very few places can you walk outside and hear the seldom-spoken Berber form of Tunisian Arabic while you're buying a cup of tea. Most of us on the American team had never seen camels used as *commuter* vehicles. Add to that the experience of competing along a route once traveled by both Roman infantry and French Foreign Legion forces, and you come away with the perspective that the GS Trophy is far more than a competition—it's an odyssey.

8: Mechanic Clemens Matejka working on a bike during the night hours. **9:** U.S. rider Ryan Dudek with a local Berber, Hadi. **10:** The convoy's head mechanic, Clemens Matejka, here with a chain breaker tool after a repair.

