

# Spirit of Africa qualifier



Johan de Villiers didn't need too much convincing to join Patrick Cruywagen on the 2008 Spirit of Africa qualifier, an event which this year takes a surprising turn from its usual format.

Words by Johan de Villiers. Pictures by Phillip van Zyl.



I had a nostalgic moment a few days ago as I scrolled through the 4x4 folder on my PC; amongst others, it contained the images from my adventures with Patrick Cruywagen in the various 4x4 competitions in which we've competed over the last five years or so.

I'll always remember the Eco-Challenge qualifiers in the Kalahari for the tough sand driving conditions; we almost won top honours, but had to settle for second place. Then there was the Limpopo Challenge Finals (we took fourth here), indelibly engraved on my mind for its hair-raising water recoveries and navigational obstacles. There was also the G4 Land Rover Dealer Challenge which demanded much physical effort on both our parts... we were lucky enough to take first here.

So it was without a moment's hesitation that I agreed to be SA4x4's driver for the Spirit of Africa 2008 qualifier when the call came through a couple of weeks ago. The competition started out pretty much the same as the others had... frantic flight bookings from Cape Town to



Patrick (left) and Johan (right) listen carefully during a drivers' briefing, wondering what strategy will help them avoid embarrassment and win podium honours.

Johannesburg, then a connecting flight to Richard's Bay... picking up a stunning Pajero 3.2 DI-D at the airport and racing through to the co-ordinates provided by our trusty Garmin.

This year the competition moved to a vast track of tribal land, about 290 km north of Richards Bay in northern KwaZulu-Natal, close to Kosi Bay. The panoramic beauty of the rugged coastline, combined with

the subtropical climate and beautiful coastal forests, provided the perfect backdrop for a 4x4 competition of this nature. The main camp was erected in an environmentally pleasing setting, with natural materials used for construction wherever possible.

On arrival, it was clear that the organisational skills of Sarel van der Merwe and Mitsubishi personnel were finely honed. An array ►





of impeccably arranged tented accommodation (with hot running water) welcomed us to the middle of nowhere. Generators provided juice for lighting and recharging of all our electronic gadgets. A professional photographer was on hand, so Patrick and I didn't have to worry about trying to take the perfect shot while tackling the course.

Safari Centre went as far as having a fully-equipped demonstration trailer on hand, with every conceivable accessory on display; hats off to them for showing the initiative.

The first day saw all the competitors arriving for registration, a drink around the camp fire, a delicious hot meal prepared by Danielle (Sarel's wife) and her competent staff as well as familiarisation with the rest of the competitors. It was thus with great anticipation that we went to sleep that evening in preparation for the start of the event the next day.

Mitsubishi Triton 2.5-litre diesels were to be our chariots for the two-day competition. Outwardly it's a beautiful vehicle, refreshingly different from its obvious competitors like the Hilux and Navara. The 2.5-litre diesel mill doesn't have the power of its larger 3.2-litre DI-D sibling, so some careful driving was called for to get the best out of this nevertheless very willing powerplant.



With a limited run up, this sandy climb required careful throttle input.

Over the years, Patrick and I have ensured that our knowledge of Garmin and Magellan GPS systems, as well as route mapping, was up-to-date in case this was ever a large points component in a competition, as it turned out to be in the G4 and Limpopo Challenge.

This time round, we needn't have worried. None of the vehicles had GPS devices fitted, and none were required at any time. There was no navigational exercise involving map reading, compass work or utilising a GPS in any of the 16 challenges.

In fairness, one stage saw competitors handed a laminated A4 page filled with rally-type directions and pointers, which we were allowed to study for 20 seconds. Well, we got hopelessly lost on that stage – thanks

Pat! Our only defence is that we've never driven a rally before.

During one of the stages, a competitor managed to rip the tyre from the rim during a high-power, full-lock turn. The marshals raced to the rescue, inflated an air jack and, with their compressor, sorted out the problem in less than five minutes... if only it was this easy in everyday situations!

Interestingly, the latest iteration of Spirit of Africa provides little in the way of technical challenges. No mud driving segment (deleted from the original programme owing to drivers getting stuck), no rocks to climb, no deep-sand driving other than two dune climbs, no deep-water wading, no winching obstacles and absolutely zero vehicle recovery. ▶





So then, what was on offer? Well, the new Spirit of Africa turned out to be more of a rally event for bakkies than a conventional 4x4 as we know them. Out of the 16 exercises over two days, 12 obstacles were either high-speed timed stages consisting of driving as fast as possible between white plastic pole markers, or reversing the bakkies (once again, timed).

With clearly defined route markers, the driving stages were well-planned with sufficient marshals at most points. Although all vehicles had 2-way radio communication, surprisingly, none of the competitors' vehicles had the customary first aid kit.

From an organisational viewpoint and as a marketing exercise for Mitsubishi, it's hard to fault this event programme. Sponsor banners

all around the camp site, logos on custom clothing, VIP Pajeros for airport transfers as well as stunningly-branded Mitsubishi Triton vehicles against a semi-tropical backdrop provided for a great photographic shoot. But the new format of the competition is a departure from what we're used to and I'm not sure that it'll have sustained broad appeal. Time will tell. ■

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