

Toyota Gazoo Racing SA in top ten as Dakar 2016 reaches midpoint

Stage 7 of Dakar 2016 brought to an end not only the race's foray into Bolivia, but also a series of high-altitude stages that did not suit the naturally aspirated V8 petrol engines of the Toyota Hilux race vehicles. Even so, all three Toyota Gazoo Racing SA's crews are in the top ten, as Dakar 2016 reaches its midpoint.



Toyota South Africa Motors via [QuickPic](#)

SA crew performance

Dakar veterans Giniel de Villiers and navigator Dirk von Zitzewitz (#301) lead the Toyota charge after seven stages, and after another solid performance on Stage 7, find themselves in 6th place overall. For them, the return to the lower altitudes of Argentina, couldn't have come soon enough.

The stage from Uyuni in Bolivia to Salta in Argentina covered 336 km of racing between Bolivia and Argentina, with a border-crossing in-between. The second part of the stage, however, was shortened due to heavy flooding in the area. Despite this, all three the Toyota Gazoo Racing SA Hilux race vehicles reached the bivouac at Salta safely.

For Leeroy Poulter and Rob Howie (#319), currently in 7th place, Dakar 2016 has been an eventful affair. Poulter, especially, has matured into a driver able to pace himself, and to look at the race holistically. Where frustration may have gotten the better of him in the past, Dakar 2016 has seen the young man drive a measured race, but even so the race has thrown them some curve balls already.

"Most of our frustrations have come from the pace of the turbo-charged cars at high altitude, but we've also had to deal with slower traffic around us from time to time," explained Poulter after completing the first half of this year's race. "Still, we are happy to be in the top ten. And now that we've dropped down to lower altitudes again, we will be pushing to make up some time."

Poulter recorded the 9th-fastest time on Stage 7, just shy of seven minutes behind stage winner Carlos Sainz (Peugeot). He trailed their Toyota Gazoo Racing SA teammates Yazeed al Rajhi and navigator Timo Gottschalk (#305) by just 13 seconds. Al Rajhi was in 8th place overall, and keen to push during the last week of the race.

Calm before the storm

Sunday was the rest day in Salta, when the race crews get a day off, and the service crews go into overdrive.

"For us, there really is no such thing as a rest day," said team principal Glyn Hall after reaching the bivouac in Salta. "Despite a liaison of nearly 20 hours from Bolivia after Stage 7, the boys will have to complete a comprehensive inspection and precautionary parts replacements on the rest day. Luckily we are blessed with some of the hardest working guys in the industry, and I'm sure they'll take it all in their stride."

After the rest day, the crews will take on six more stages, with the race coming to an end in the Argentine city of Rosario on 16 January. But six stages on the Dakar can have a significant impact on the outcome, especially with the arrival of the first dunes of Dakar 2016. At 393 km, Stage 8 will already offer a stern test, but it is stage 10, from Belén to La Rioja, that many experts feel may be a turning-point in the race, thanks to its massive dunes and long off-piste sections.

For Toyota Gazoo Racing SA, the coming week holds a lot of promise, as the racing returns to more manageable altitudes. Navigation will also play a bigger roll going forward, and the team is looking forward to the new challenges of the coming stages.

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