

## The road to Dakar

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**This motorcycle diary will be filled with grueling stories of the 5,530-mile race from Spain through North Africa**

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SANTEE – When young dirt biker Kevin Heath set out for America from South Africa nearly two decades ago, he drew up a list of four great races he wanted to enter.

"My dream was the Baja 500 and Baja 1000, the World Six-Day Trials and Dakar," Heath said yesterday morning.

He rode the Baja 1000 shortly after landing on our shores. Two years later, in 1989, he competed in the Six-Day Trials when they were staged in Tulsa, Okla. And this past June he rode the Baja 500 solo – leaving him only one event on his personal "to-do" list.



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune  
Kevin Heath hopes to ride this KTM motorcycle more than 5,500 miles from Barcelona to Dakar.

- [Off-road champs announced](#)

Wednesday, the 45-year-old Heath sets out for Spain and his shot at arguably the toughest endurance challenge in all of motorsports.

Heath is one of 230 motorcyclists – plus another 200 four-wheel vehicles ranging from cars to 6,000-pound monster trucks capable of hitting 160 mph on the open road – entered in the 16-stage, 5,530-mile Dakar Rally.

This is the 27th edition of the classic once known as the Paris to Dakar Rally, an event that spans five nations and two continents, starting Dec. 31 in Barcelona and finishing Jan. 16 in Dakar, Senegal.

And it's just not the miles that set the Dakar Rally apart. There's the Sahara Desert, not to mention miles of uncharted paths through lands that could be considered hostile to Americans. Among the warnings issued entrants are for land mines and "localized warring."

"I'm in this to finish dead last," said Heath. "History says there is only a 30 percent chance of finishing. That is my goal."

It is quite a goal.

More than one of his friends has questioned Heath's sanity in recent months as he poured countless hours and some \$60,000 into the venture.

Those wanting to chart his progress will be able to track Heath on [www.KevinsMidLifeCrisis.com](http://www.KevinsMidLifeCrisis.com).

"This is just something I've always wanted to do .<p>.<p>. on ce," said Heath, whose Santee-based company Electra Motorsports is one of the world's leading makers of electric-powered go-karts.

Heath also builds one-design, gas-powered karts that he uses in his Arrive and Drive events around the country.

In addition to being rented out to teams in four-hour enduro races – such as the season finale to be run at Cajon Speedway starting at noon Sunday – the Arrive & Drive karts have become popular attractions at corporate functions and parties across the nation.

"Give me a parking lot that is 200 feet by 150 feet and I can build you a track for 16 karts," said Heath.

And give him a trek of more than 5,500 miles and he can fulfill a dream.

"I'm lucky that I can leave my business and know that it's in good hands," said Heath, who will be going it alone in Spain and North Africa.

In addition to being the rider, Heath is also the sole mechanic of his year-old KTM 660.

"The whole thing is about preparation, logistics and navigation," said Heath, whose motorcycle is a mixture of rugged off-road machine and high-tech gadgetry.

Every entry carries a GPS device, a satellite phone, a satellite-linked emergency locating device in case of an accident and a warning signal that lets every entry know when it is being overtaken by another starter.

Yet, each entrant is limited to the bare essentials when it comes to the luxuries of life. Everything that Heath needs – from shaving equipment to sleeping gear to clothes to food supplements to his tent – must be stored in a single, 20-gallon bin that race officials transport from stop to stop along the trail.

Riders are also allowed to carry a backpack, which is basically a collection of emergency supplies, including tools.

"Given the time of the year, the Dakar race requires a lot of cold-weather equipment," said Heath, while looking down at his storage bin.

"Most of it you wear because you don't have space to pack it all. But you need extra gloves, goggles, a lot of spares. But you just don't have room to take everything you

## 27th annual Dakar Rally

**Start:** Dec. 31, Barcelona

**Finish:** Jan. 16, Dakar, Senegal

**Total distance:** 5,530 miles. Racing Distance: 3,352 miles.

**Stages:** 16. Shortest: 11 miles (Dec. 31). Longest: 567 miles (Jan. 1). Longest full-race: 407 miles (Jan. 6).

**Countries traversed:** Spain, Morocco, Mauritania, Mali, Senegal.

**History:** Founded by Thierry Sabine after he got lost in the desert during a 1977 rally.

**Vehicles:** Motorcycles to three-ton trucks.

are going to need."

Every cavity of his motorcycle is also jammed solid with spares of one kind or another, from fuses to three flares to a spare compass and a bladder that carries three of the five liters of water each rider is required to carry. The other two liters is in a bottle attached to his body.

"The bike is designed to carry 12 gallons of fuel," said Heath.

While on the course, Heath's time will be divided between battling the elements of the course, navigating and taking care of his bike.

At night, Heath must make any necessary repairs before turning in.

"I could have purchased one-fourth interest in a mechanic for \$4,000, but I couldn't afford it," he said. Heath has purchased \$4,000 in spare parts from KTM.

"I've heard of the toughest parts of maintaining the bike and working on repairs at night is the wind and the cold," said Heath. "You have to wear goggles just to keep the sand out of your eyes much less protect the parts and the fluids. And the cold makes it all the harder to work."

Race officials do provide meals at each stop as part of the \$12,000 entry fee. But entrants are also fined for the smallest of violations at technical inspections along the route.

"The fines are a way of supplementing the fees," said Heath, who has a binder packed with the various rules and regulations.

"After you do your daily maintenance and sleep, you need about two hours to go over that day's leg before the start," said Heath of the course maps provided each time by Dakar organizers.

Only 3,352 of the total mileage is full-out racing. The other 2,178 miles is distance each entrant is required to cover just to get to and from the course.

The longest of the racing legs is 405 miles. The longest combined distance of a single-day leg is 570 miles. And over the course of the 17-day event, there is but one rest day.

"Some legs will finish at midnight with the next day's start around 6:30 in the morning," said Heath. "Given the time needed for repairs and preparation, it doesn't leave much time for sleep or anything else."

Heath is one of four privateer motorcycle riders from the United States. In addition, the KTM Red Bull team has a three-rider team of Scot Harden, Chris Blais and Kellon Walch drawn from off-road racing.

There is also one car entry from the U.S. featuring Ronn Bailey of Las Vegas and off-road veteran Steve Myers of Newport Beach.