

# In the footsteps of gods

*What better place to follow the tracks of rally heroes than in Finland – home of seven world champs and the infamous 1000 Lakes Rally. Richard Asher buckles up in his weapon of necessity: a Fiat Punto*



PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD ASHER & WRC.COM

**NEVER THROW YOUR** old car books away. They may gather dust, and family members may threaten to stoke up the braai with them, but you should always fight their corner. My 1990 rally annual, for example, was a nasty, cheap, soft-cover production, and after twenty-odd years spent weighing down my bookshelf, even I had started to believe it might have to go. Recession had hit South Africa, after all: it was time for slimming down. But then, its destiny in the balance, that book found its calling. It helped plan the trip of a lifetime.

You see, my motorsport-loving mate and I enjoy the occasional lad's trip to places with roads on which we can sail far too close to the limit of some innocent rental car's adhesion. Adventures on which eating and sleeping are just things you do between driving stunts, and sightseeing means admiring the timing belt in action. But we'd done all the Alpine passes in both directions, so where to next? We needed a new driving challenge for 2009. How about the mighty rally stages of Finland?

It was an instant, unanimous yes.

Aside from being an appealingly out-of-the-way sort of place, Finland's motorsport mystique just keeps growing. That's thanks largely to the Häkkinens,

Räikkönens and Kovailainens who've gobstruck Formula 1 fans in recent times, but it's still rallying that drives this curious nation's sporting soul. Nowhere do you have a better chance of bumping into a world rally champion at the supermarket: Finland has seven! Champs, that is. Quite a strike rate when you consider the World Rally Championship for drivers has only been running since 1977.

The reason they're so good is quite simply their roads. Finns don't bother with asphalt much. Once you leave the highways, a vast network of stupendously fast gravel tracks (sprinkled with snow in winter, naturally) is the only way to get around the countryside. So an awful lot of people learn their driving skills on them. Hence not only that remarkable Finnish car-control gene, but also the fastest event on the WRC calendar – the 1000 Lakes Rally.

Yes, I know it's called Rally Finland now. Of course it is. The people running rallying no longer have souls, so they got rid of one of the coolest names in sport. A name that's been around since 1954, three years after the event was first run as the Jyväskylän Suurajot (or Jyväskylä Grand Prix).

But this was our holiday, so we could live in the past if we wanted to. Sure, we could have downloaded





stage lists from this year's rally off [www.wrc.com](http://www.wrc.com), but the idea of using my grotty 1990 annual appealed more – especially since that was the year Carlos Sainz famously broke the Scandinavian stranglehold on 1000 Lakes silverware.

The idiosyncratic old Nürburgring aside, you'd be horribly disappointed if you rented a car and tried to drive all of Europe's F1 tracks. You might just as well try playing cricket at Lords. But rallying takes place on public roads, which means following in the wheeltracks of heroes is as easy as reading a map. As long as it's not rally week...

We were set to visit in May, early in the northern summer. There might still be a chill around, but snow would not be an issue – rightly so. Rally Finland has always been a summer event; the WRC's snow rallies belong to Sweden and Norway.

What about machinery? Sainz's Toyota Celica GT-4 would have been perfect. Or how about a Subaru Impreza in 555 colours? A Group B monster from the 1980s, perhaps? Nice ideas, all. But we were hacks on holiday in a pricey corner of Euroland. There was no choice: we

had to rent from the 'economy' category.

We landed up with a Fiat Punto.

So no fire-breathing brute to do the stages justice, then. But it did mean we had a reasonable chance of not ending our trip upside down in a ditch. And it's not as though Fiat lacks 1000 Lakes pedigree: Markku Alen and his co-driver Ilkka Kivimäki used 131 Abarths and Mirafioris from Turin to win four times between 1976 and 1980.

So, after collecting our unpromising Punto at tiny Tampere Airport, we were ready to hit the stages. Time to check our maps: one a regular Finland road map, the other a shabby photocopy of some vague route artwork from my '90 yearbook.

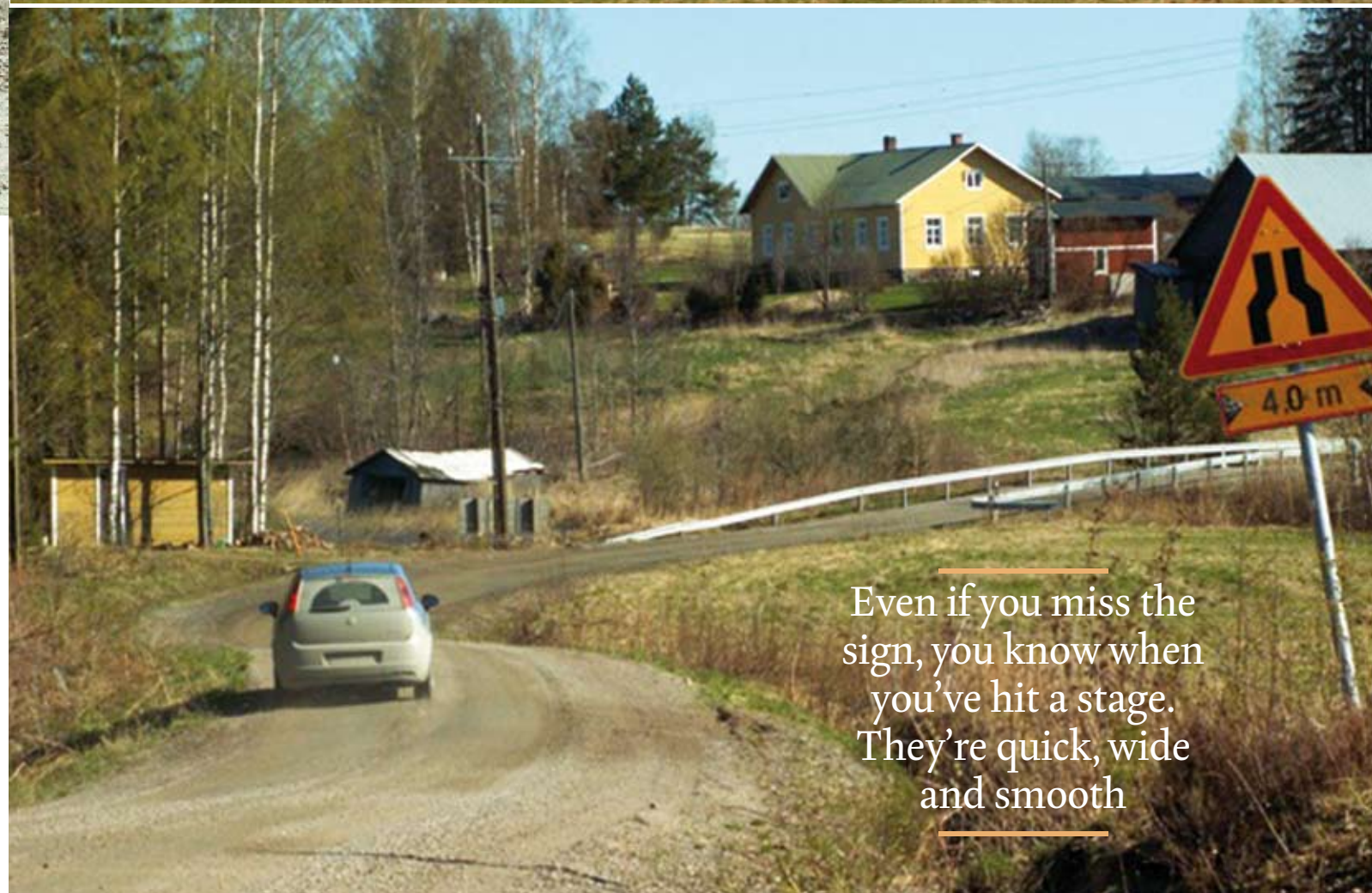
We'd had our doubts about actually finding any stages. We knew they weren't going to be as obvious as Kyalami or Zwartkops, and English isn't as useful in rural Finland as it is in Gauteng. All we had to go on were the actual stage names, which could have been named after Marcus Grönholm's scullery-maid for all we knew.

But we never needed anything more than a little common sense, our threadbare maps and

some fun detective work. Those gravel roads might look remote on TV, but in many cases they start and end just off the national highway. Even better, the stage names generally correspond to the name of the road. Yup, those forest tracks have names. Where in SA we'd call such roads something imaginative like 'R447', the Finns name them just like a suburban street. The only catch is that the road name itself is usually the popular stage name plus the suffix '-tie.' So if you're looking for the Ouninpohja stage, the road sign will read Ouninpohjantie.

Once you're in the right area, you'll stumble upon stages in no time – just look out for those white signs. And even if you miss the sign, you kind of know when you've hit a stage. They're quick, wide and smooth even by Finnish standards. And besides, there must be very few roads around Jyväskylä that haven't served as a stage a least once.

Just to be sure, though, try chatting to the locals. Like I did on our first stage, Siitama – one of many scattered along the Tampere-Jyväskylä highway – where I hailed a man tending a garden that overlooked both the



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road and the inevitable lake. Maybe we didn't share a language, but we both spoke rallying. When I animatedly pointed at the road, reeled off the names of various rally legends and shrugged my shoulders, he nodded appreciatively: 'Aaah, Kankkuset, Makiset, Vataset ... yee-es.' I wasn't sure why the '-nens' had all become '-sets', but it seemed he understood me. And though we could feel him watching us suspiciously as we drove away, we left in no doubt that we really were on Siitama.

Ouninpohja was the big one, of course. This is the terrifying 33km mammoth where Petter Solberg scared the wits out of the FIA by clocking an average 130kph on his 2004 stage win. It's also famous for its 'yumps' – in 2003 Markko Martin flew over 50 metres here at something like 170kph. We didn't try any of the above, tempting though it was, but still managed to spend the better part of a day running up and down that road.

We got a little confused at a junction halfway through, but another friendly local leapt to our aid. He lived in a yellow house, so close to a fast left-hander that it must have needed

an annual post-rally paint job. Scrawling us a map and talking of the rally brought a twinkle to his eye – something you don't see much in these parts. The sport's in their blood round here, no question.

We tried several other stages over the next two days, counting lakes as we went. Ehikki, Korpiaho, Juupajoki and Haukilahti all passed beneath the mighty Punto's wheels. We also drove Leustu, which featured in both the 1990 and 2009 events. Our times barely threatened those of stage winners Sainz and Mikko Hirvonen, only because of that pesky two-way traffic, of course.

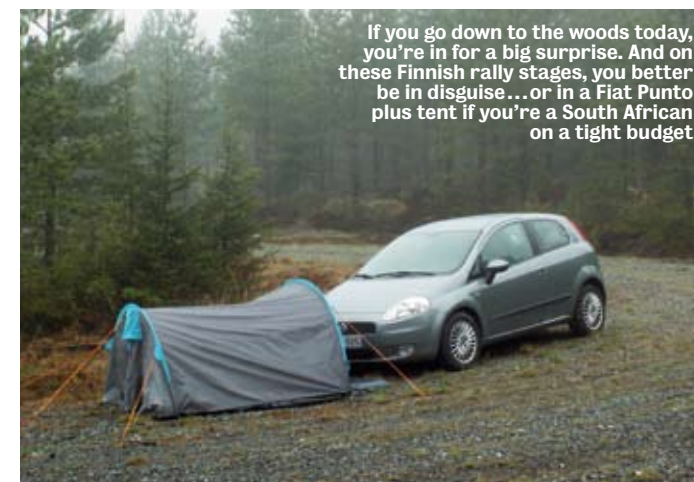
North of Jyväskylä lie more classics, with Kalliokoski standing out as an absolute beauty: a fine Finnish road weaving between lakes, meadows, barns and forests. It's just south of Konnevesi on Route 69. While you're up there, you can also try nearby Myhinpaa, where Conrad Rautenbach double-rolled his Citroën in 2009.

The Punto didn't outperform our meagre expectations, but didn't let us down either. The poor thing did get horribly smeared

with mud though. It's worth repeating that it's probably a good thing we didn't have more power: best to choose a car that matches your talent.

Hotels simply weren't an option on our budget. Even the youth hostel in Tampere wanted €25 for a night in a dorm – without breakfast. So our couple of nights on the stages were spent in a tent in the woods – perfectly legal in Scandinavia. Finding campsites can take a while, because you're never that far from a house in rural Finland. Most of the country's population have realised that their cities are depressing, uniform places crammed with alcoholics. They learnt long ago that the forests and lakes are where it's at.

No regrets about the camping out, then, especially when it's summertime and daylight hangs about till 11pm like an awkward visitor. As for the lakes, we only counted 24 on our handful of stages, making us wonder if that 1000 Lakes name was false advertising. But then again, we didn't count the dozens more on the linking roads. Either way, it was still the coolest name ever... **TC**



## KING CARLOS TAMES THE LAKES

THE 1990 1000 Lakes Rally heralded a new era for rally writers. No longer would they be able to trot out the dog-eared 'this event has never been won by a non-Scandinavian' line in previews for the Finnish classic. And that was all thanks to El Matador and his Toyota Celica.

The Spanish legend, who went on to win his first world title that year alongside Luis Moya, had no help against the Nordic hordes who filled the rest of the top ten. Local boy (and just ousted FIA presidential candidate) Ari Vatanen headed the chase, finishing less than 20 seconds down on the man from Madrid. This after nearly five hours of rallying, compared to just under three hours in 2009.

Sainz won or shared victory in 23 of the 42 stages, but had to work hard to keep Vatanen at bay towards the end, with the Mitsubishi Galant driver topping the times on eight of the last ten tests. But Ari could not quite do enough to stop history being made.



## HOW IT'S DONE

TRAVELLING FROM SOUTH Africa to Finland to drive rally stages is expensive, even if you sleep in the car and buy supper at supermarkets. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't go.

Direct flights from SA to Finland don't exist, so you'll have to stop over. With Ryanair and Easyjet flying from Finnish centres to various points in Europe (not just London), there are multiple possibilities beyond the obvious national carriers. It just depends how long you want to spend shopping around, and whether you'd like to explore your stopover point.

The important thing to know is that for rally stage purposes you want to end up in the city of Jyväskylä. Or Tampere, which is at the other end of the rally's heartland. As a guideline, if you can get to either of these and back for under R8 500 from Jo'burg, you're doing well. As ever, book early for the best prices. Flying into Helsinki is not a disaster, but be warned it's a couple of hours away from rallyland by road or rail, and train tickets cost €35-€50 (over R400) each way. Tallinn in Estonia is also an option: it's on the Easyjet trail and just a ferry hop from Helsinki.

Like Finland, Estonia is also part of the Schengen setup, so your Finland visa (R680 from the embassy in Pretoria) will cover you there. Incidentally, your SA driving licence is valid in Finland, so no paperwork needed there.

Our Punto cost us around R560 per day thanks to [www.easycar.com](http://www.easycar.com), and that was after a LOT of shopping around. Anything under R700/day for an economy car is reasonable. Look to pick up and drop off your car at the same place – for some reason rental prices tend to double if you try doing otherwise. We flew into Helsinki (the cheapest flight to Finland on the day), then took a bus, train and bus to Tampere Airport (our eventual flight departure point) just to pick up our Fiat. That roundabout mission still worked out way cheaper than hiring a car in Helsinki and dropping it in Tampere at the end. Go figure.

Food isn't too outrageous in price, but a cheap pizza might still set you back €10 (R110). So it's best to stick to bread, cheese and confectionary from the supermarkets, as you would on any budget trip. But if you're wondering why we didn't drive more stages, faster and more often, it's because petrol goes for about €1.36 (R15) per litre.