

Classic Rally South Africa event director Surinder Thatthi talks about five days in the September sunshine.

What is Classic Rally South Africa?

ST: It's a completely new event I am organising with [SASOL Rally event director] Willie du Plessis. It's based in White River, 350 kilometres east of Johannesburg and close to the Kruger National Park. Working with Willie is great, not only because he knows so much about the sport in that part of the world, but because he has an organisational infrastructure on the SASOL Rally which we can tap into.

When did you decide to organise the event?

I've been thinking about this for a few years now. I competed a lot of times in South Africa and I know just how popular rallying is down there. The roads are fantastic and the organisation of the event is great.

Obviously you're famous for organising the East African Safari Rally. Is this a South African version of the Safari?

ST: No this is not a Safari-style event. It's quite different to the Safari – you are not allowed to run rallies on open roads in South Africa. This is a closed-road forest rally.

But it does have an endurance element?

ST: Absolutely! That side of the event is similar to the Safari. The five-day route will be around 2000 kilometres in total with 720 kilometres of special stages. And, while the stages are nothing like a rocky as those in Kenya, drivers will still have to use their heads. They won't be able to go flat-out from the start and expect their cars to last.

What are the stages like?

ST: We're running through private forest roads which will be graded before the event and in great condition. Willie and I spent a long time looking through a great many forests before we came up with the roads we have.

Could you compare the stages to anywhere else in the world?

ST: The terrain is really similar to Portugal. The roads don't go up to any great altitude, but they run among the hills. The roads are quite technical as well, with lots of corners over the top of crests – just like Portugal.

Is it fair to say historic rallying's not huge in South Africa?

ST: That would be fair, yes. But we aim to change that. I know there are a lot of classic cars in South Africa which would work very well on this event and, once the drivers have brought them out and competed on Classic Rally South Africa, they will really see just how much fun it can be. We're sure this thing is going to catch on.

This is a long-term venture then...

ST: Definitely. We want to run for two or three years in White River and then look to move to Cape Town. We want the rally to move around the country, so we can constantly find new roads to challenge our competitors with.

What's next for you?

ST: We have our second route survey coming up. After that we will be issuing the route pretty quickly.

How close are you to completing it?

ST: I'd say we are 80 per cent of the way there. We still have around 100 kilometres to find. We could have used more forest roads, but they were a little bit rough and not really in-keeping with what we wanted. So we're looking a little further south, back down towards the area when the Castrol Rally used to run.

Where will the service park be?

ST: We're trying to create a more traditional-style rally, so we're going to be using service areas which the crews can use if they need. We will be building 25 minutes to half-an-hour into the road sections after every stage to make sure there's time to make any running repairs.

And if a driver does retire, are they out completely?

ST: No. For every stage a driver doesn't complete they will have a time penalty of 90 minutes, so it will rule you out of the fight for the win, but allow you to continue in the event.