

The Loudon-clear guide to... **Rallye Monte-Carlo**

If you thought last year was good...

Watch this. The 2018 FIA World Rally Championship has all the makings of an absolute classic. I know everybody said that about last year, and it was. But this year looks like it's going to be even closer. The teams are all confident, they've got reliable cars and there's not one crew among the factory runners that doesn't have the pace and potential to win in the French Alps this week.

Looking further ahead, there's so much to be excited about in 2018 – there's already stacks of snow in Sweden, for example. Rally Mexico's going underground in Guanajuato again and the Tour de Corse will explore roads not used for 20 years. All that in the first four rounds.

But the focus now is on next week, round one of chapter two in world rallying's fantastic new generation.

Rallye Monte-Carlo in detail

FIA World Rally Championship round 1/13

WRC – WRC2 – WRC3

Date: Wednesday January 24 – Sunday January 28

Based: Gap/Monaco

Service: Gap

Stages: 17

Competitive distance: 388.59km (241.46 miles)

Liaison distance: 1253.81km (779.11 miles)

Total distance: 1642.40km (1020.58 miles)

Shortest stage: SS15/17 La Cabanette-Col de Braus 1 13.58km (8.43 miles)

Longest stage: SS1 Thoard-Sisteron 36.69km (22.79 miles)

Currency: Euro

Time difference: GMT+1

Sunrise: 0802

Sunset: 1735

Shakedown:

The 3.35km (2.08 miles) shakedown stage is located just to the west of Gap, 4.35km (2.70 miles) from the service park. The stage runs from 0800-1330 on Wednesday January 24.

Rallye Automobile Monte-Carlo itinerary

Thursday January 25

SS1 Thoard-Sisteron 36.69km (22.79 miles) 2143

SS2 Bayons-Breiziers 1 25.49km (15.83 miles) 2251

Service Gap 2346

Parc Fermé 0044

Friday January 26

SS3 Vitrolles-Oze 1 26.72km (16.60 miles) 0851

SS4 Roussieux-Eygalayes 1 30.54km (18.97 miles) 1004

SS5 Vaumeilh-Claret 1 15.18km (9.43 miles) 1137

Service Gap 1232

SS6 Vitrolles-Oze 2 26.72km (16.60 miles) 1358

SS7 Roussieux-Eygalayes 2 30.54km (18.97 miles) 1511

SS8 Vaumeilh-Claret 2 15.18km (9.43 miles) 1644

Service Gap 1739

Parc Fermé 1837

Saturday January 27

SS9 Agnieres en Devoluy-Corps 1 29.16km (18.12 miles) 0808

SS10 St Leger les Melezes-La Batie Neuve 1 16.87km (10.48 miles) 0916

Service Gap 1016

SS11 Agnieres en Devoluy-Corps 2 29.16km (18.12 miles) 1157

SS12 St Leger les Melezes-La Batie Neuve 2 16.87km (10.48 miles) 1308

Service Gap 1408

SS13 Bayons-Breiziers 2 25.49km (15.83 miles) 1609

Service Gap 1719

Parc Fermé 2217

Sunday January 28

SS14 La Bollene Vesubie-Peira Cava 1 18.41km (11.43 miles) 0832

SS15 La Cabanette-Col de Braus 1 13.58km (8.43 miles) 0908

SS16 La Bollene Vesubie-Peira Cava 2 18.41km (11.43 miles) 1055

SS17 La Cabanette-Col de Braus 2 13.58km (8.43 miles) 1218

Service Gap 1348

Parc Fermé 1358

2017 Rallye Automobile Monte-Carlo result:

WRC: 1 Sébastien Ogier/Julien Ingrassia (Ford Fiesta WRC) 4h00.03m.06s; 2 Jari-Matti Latvala/Miikka Anttila (Toyota Yaris WRC) +2m.15.0s 3 Ott Tänak.Martin Järveoja (Ford Fiesta WRC) +2m57.8s **WRC2:** Andreas Mikkelsen/Anders Jæger (Škoda Fabia R5) **WRC3:** Raphaël Astier/Frédéric Vaclare (Peugeot 208 R2)

Leading entries:

- 1 Sebastien Ogier (FRA)/Julien Ingrassia (FRA) Ford Fiesta WRC
- 2 Elfyn Evans (GBR)/Dan Barritt (GBR) Ford Fiesta WRC
- 3 Bryan Bouffier (FRA)/Jerome Degout (FRA) Ford Fiesta WRC
- 4 Andreas Mikkelsen (NOR)/Anders Jaeger Hyundai i20 Coupe WRC
- 5 Thierry Neuville (BEL)/Nicolas Gilsoul (BEL) Hyundai i20 Coupe WRC
- 6 Dani Sordo (ESP)/Carlos del Barrio (ESP) Hyundai i20 Coupe WRC
- 7 Jari-Matti Latvala (FIN)/Miikka Anttila (FIN) Toyota Yaris WRC
- 8 Ott Tanak (EST)/Martin Jarveoja (EST) Toyota Yaris WRC
- 9 Esapekka Lappi (FIN)/Janne Ferm (FIN) Toyota Yaris WRC
- 10 Kris Meeke (GBR)/Paul Nagle (IRL) Citroen C3 WRC
- 11 Craig Breen (IRL)/Scott Martin (GBR) Citroen C3 WRC
- 31 Eric Camilli (FRA)/Benjamin Veillas (FRA) Ford Fiesta R5
- 32 Jan Kopecky (CZE)/Pavel Dresler (CZE) Skoda Fabia R5
- 33 Teemu Suninen (FIN)/Mikko Markkula (FIN) Ford Fiesta R5
- 34 Kevin Abbring (NLD)/Pieter Tsjoen (NLD) Ford Fiesta R5
- 35 Guillaume de Mevius (BEL)/Louis Louka (BEL) Peugeot 208 T16
- 36 Eddie Sciorsere (ITA)/Flavio Zanella (ITA) DS 3 R5

Stuart Loudon's key stage: SS1 Thoard-Sisteron 36.69km (22.79 miles)

Everybody knows of the legend of Sisteron. Everybody's got a story about this stage. But this year there will be new stories to tell; for the first time ever in the World Rally Championship the cars will be running in the opposite direction, starting from Thoard. And, just to add to the excitement of this longest stage of the event, it's Sisteron that gets the 2018 season underway on Thursday night.

The whole world will be watching and waiting for 2143 when Séb and Julien will drop the clutch on the #1 Ford Fiesta WRC to start the defence of their World Rally Championship.

Regardless of the direction of SS1, there will still be plenty of snow and ice on the Col de Font-Belle at 1304 metres and the last 20 kilometres (12 miles) of the stage will be all downhill – the dash down the D3 towards the left-hander into the village of Authon will be particularly interesting!

Stuart will be watching... #Everybody

It's impossible to pick out one particular crew for this first round. Of course, there will be a close eye on Séb and Julien to see if they can repeat their flying start to last season. But there's interest up and down the order and in every team. It's great to see Elfyn Evans and Dan Barritt right up there in the second of those gorgeous-looking Ford Fiesta WRCs and then there's Ott Tänak's move to Toyota: how will he fare in the Yaris WRC? Can Thierry Neuville finish what he started last year for Hyundai? Or will his Monaco neighbour and team-mate Andreas Mikkelsen step up and cast him into shadow on round one?

Then there's Citroën where new team principal Pierre Budar will have had a week in the job when he arrives in the Alps, talk about a baptism of fire... But the C3 WRC looks a very different prospect to 12 months ago. The team has worked incredibly hard to iron out the creases this rally exposed in 2017 and Kris and Paul and Craig and Scott are all well capable of fighting at the front.

Further down the field there's Kalle Rovander's factory debut for Skoda Motorsport, but sadly this year no booming Porsche 911 GT3 for Romain Dumas.

Weather with you:

The heavy snow and cold temperatures of earlier this month look to have moved away and rally week is expected to offer some sunshine and temperatures around five degrees in Gap, with those values rising to the mid-teens for the weekend in Monaco.

Most successful driver on Rallye Automobile Monte-Carlo:

Sébastien Loeb (7 wins)

And finally... some facts about Monaco:

- Fish is Monaco's only natural resource
- Monaco has the highest life expectancy of anywhere in the world at 89.5 years
- Three Bond films (Never say never again; Goldeneye and Casino Royale) have been filmed in Monaco
- Almost 30 per cent of Monaco's population are millionaires
- Monaco's the world's second smallest country (behind the Vatican City) at 1.24 square miles – and 20 per cent of that has been reclaimed from the sea

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Stuart Loudon is a semi-professional co-driver who has started 96 rallies, 20 of which are rounds of the World Rally Championship and one of which was with an Ashes-winning English cricketer. He makes biscuits in the family business when he's not working towards his dream of becoming a factory co-driver in the WRC.