

The Loudon-clear guide to... Rally Mexico

Surrounded by chocolate from five o'clock every morning, you might think you can have enough of a good thing. Wrong. This is the time of the year when everybody involved in the World Rally Championship starts talking about Chocolate.

But there's not a wafer in sight and the snowballs were dispatched in Sweden. I'm not talking Tunnock's, I'm talking El Chocolate, the fourth and seventh stage of Rally Mexico... a stage which passes through a village called El Chocolate. Some say, this place has been using cocoa beans to make chocolate for almost 4000 years. That's pretty impressive, but don't forget Uddingston still ships more than five million Caramel Wafers a week.

Like I said, loving the chocolate chat.

But this year, Chocolate's not on the tip of everybody's tongue in Leon. This time it's the monster stage called Guanajuato, Sunday's penultimate stage of the WRC's North American visit.

At 80 kilometres (49.71 miles) on the nose, this one's going to take just short of an hour to complete. In fact, I'll put my money on the scratch time being 53m01.1s.

This stage is the same distance as going south from the point where the M74 becomes the M6 to Tebay (you know, the place with the fancy motorway services and nice sausage rolls). Or London to Milton Keynes.

It's massive.

We all know the drivers will have their work cut out on this longest of long stages, but let's spare a thought for the co-drivers as well. I can't imagine how many pages of notes the boys are going to be reading, but it can't be far short of a complete pacenote book. It's going to be hugely intense, the only saving grace is that the stage is starting around eight in the morning, so it won't be too hot.

What's also possible – and could be another first for a long time – is a crew stopping and changing two punctures in one stage; we're getting into Dakar territory here. This endurance aspect of the sport's fantastic, though. It's given this week's Rally Mexico a really fascinating talking point.

Another talking point will be Sébastien Ogier's efforts to win his 100th World Rally Championship start. Such a result would surely have to rank as his best ever – so heavily are the odds stacked against him being first on the road for two days.

And then there's Ott Tänak and Raigo Molder, who go back to Mexico for the first time since taking a dip on last year's event. The good news for the

Estonians is that they won't be passing that lake again this week, the Los Mexicanos stage has been dropped from this year's itinerary.

The rally ahead...

FIA World Rally Championship round 3/14

WRC – WRC2 – WRC3

Date: March 3-6, 2016

Based: Leon

Service: Leon

Stages: 21

Competitive distance: 399.71km (248.37 miles)

Liaison distance: 684.27km (425.20 miles)

Total distance: 1077.08km (669.29 miles)

Longest stage: Guanajuato SS20 80.00km (49.71 miles)

Shortest stage: Monster Street Stage (SS1) 1.09km (0.67 miles)

Currency: Mexican Pesos

Time difference: GMT-6

Language: Spanish

Mexico population: 119.5m

Capital: Mexico City

Sunrise: 0707

Sunset: 1851

Shakedown:

The 3.44km (2.13-mile) shakedown stage at Llano Grande is identical to last season, based 19.36km (12.03 miles) away from the Leon service park.

Itinerary

Thursday March 3

Ceremonial start – Guanajuato 2000

SS1 Monster Street Stage 1.09km (0.67 miles) 2010

SS2 Super Special 1 2.30km (1.42 miles) 2130

SS3 Super Special 2 2.30km (1.42 miles) 2135

Friday March 4

SS4 El Chocolate 1 54.21km (33.68 miles) 0918

SS5 Las Minas 1 15.36km (9.54 miles) 1041

SS6 Street Stage Leon 1.41km (0.86 miles) 1214

Service Leon 1234

SS7 El Chocolate 2 54.21km (33.68 miles) 1427

SS8 Las Minas 2 15.36km (9.54 miles) 1550

SS9 Super Special 3 2.30km (1.42 miles) 1720

SS10 Super Special 4 2.30km (1.42 miles) 1725

Service Leon 1810

Saturday March 5

SS11 Ibarrilla 30.38km (18.88 miles) 0853

SS12 Otates 1 42.6km (26.48 miles) 1011

SS13 El Brinco 1 7.15km (4.44 miles) 1114
Service Leon 1229
SS14 Agua Zarca 16.47km (10.23 miles) 1408
SS15 Otates 2 42.6km (26.48 miles) 1536
SS16 El Brinco 2 7.15km (4.44 miles) 1639
SS17 Super Special 5 2.30km (1.42 miles) 1734
SS18 Super Special 6 2.30km (1.42 miles) 1739
Service Leon 1824
SS19 Street Stage Leon 1.41km (0.87 miles) 2035

Sunday March 6
SS20 Guanajuato 80.00km (49.71 miles) 0803
Tyre zone 1118
SS21 Agua Zarca Power Stage 16.47km (10.23 miles) 1208
Finish Leon 1430

Last year...

Cooler than expected temperatures on the opening morning allowed Sebastien Ogier to run a softer tyre and limit the damage of running first on the road. When he arrived at the end of the first day not just in touch, but 13.5 seconds in the lead, the rest of the service park might as well have packed up and gone home. Volkswagen's superstar Frenchman wasn't going to lose from there. He didn't, he sealed a Mexican hat-trick with more than a minute in hand over nearest rival Mads Ostberg (Citroën). Andreas Mikkelsen made two Polos on the podium – his Finnish team-mate Jari-Matti Latvala had been at the races and hustling Ogier when he slapped a bank and broke a wheel in Otates.

Result: 1 Sébastien Ogier/Julien Ingrassia (Volkswagen Polo R WRC) 4h19m13.4s; 2 Mads Østberg/Jonas Andersson (DS 3 WRC) +1m18.8s; 3 Andreas Mikkelsen/Ola Fløene (Volkswagen Polo R WRC) +1m25.1s

Top 10 entries

1 Sébastien Ogier/Juliene Ingrassia (Volkswagen Polo R WRC)
2 Jari-Matti Latvala/Miikka Anttila (Volkswagen Polo R WRC)
3 Thierry Neuville/Nicolas Gilsoul (Hyundai i20 WRC)
4 Dani Sordo/Marc Marti (Hyundai i20 WRC)
5 Mads Østberg/Ola Fløene (Ford Fiesta RS WRC)
6 Eric Camilli/Benjamin Veillas (Ford Fiesta RS WRC)
9 Andreas Mikkelsen/Anders Jaeger (Volkswagen Polo R WRC)
12 Ott Tänak/Raigo Molderr (Ford Fiesta RS WRC)
20 Hayden Paddon/John Kennard (Hyundai i20 WRC)
21 Martin Prokocny/Jan Tománek (Ford Fiesta RS WRC)

Leading WRC2 runners:

31 Hubert Ptaszek/Maciek Szczepaniak (Peugeot 208T16)
32 Teemu Suninen/Mikko Markkula (Škoda Fabia R5)
33 Max Rendina/Emanuele Inglesi (Ford Fiesta R5)
34 Radik Shaymiev/Mxim Tsvetkov (Ford Fiesta R5)

36 Abdulaziz Al-Kuwari/Marshall Clarke (Škoda Fabia R5)
38 Armin Kremer/Pirmin Winklhofer (Škoda Fabia R5)
39 Khalid Al Suwaidi/Giovanni Bernarcchini (Ford Fiesta R5)
42 Nicolas Fuchs/Fernando Mussano (Škoda Fabia R5)
44 Ricardo Triviño/Marco Hernandez (DS 3 R5)

Leading WRC3 runner:

61 Michel Fabre/Maxime Vilmot (DS 3 R3-Max)

Stuart Loudon's key stage:

Hmm... not hard this time: it's got to be Guanajuato on Sunday. The 50-miler kicks off at two o'clock UK time and I'll be locked-on to the splits on wrc.com, dialing up Race Centre Live on Autosport.com for a bit of wit and insight and listening in to WRC Live for an explanation of what's gone on. I can't wait!

Stuart will be watching... Thierry Neuville #4 Hyundai i20 WRC

Thierry shone in Mexico early doors last season and finished on the podium for the two years before that, so he knows what's needed to go quickly in this part of the world. I can't believe the bad luck which has plagued Neuville for the last few events can continue; he's a class act and this week will be the event which gets him back on track. Seventh on the road's going to help a bit as well...

Weather with you:

The few clouds hanging around for a drop or two of early-week rain should be gone in time for Friday. With wall-to-wall sunshine and temperatures in the high 20s forecast for the weekend. Classic sombrero weather.

The media week:

Wednesday March 2

0800-1800 accreditation open, Rally Campus, Expo Feria building
0800-2000 media centre open, Rally Campus, Expo Feria building
1715-1800 Hyundai media lounge, service park
1800-1830 M-Sport meet the team, service park
1830 Volkswagen meet the team, service park

Thursday March 3

0800-1800 accreditation open, Rally Campus, Expo Feria building
0800-2400 media centre open, Rally Campus, Expo Feria building
0900-1300 shakedown, Llano Grande
1330 pre-event FIA press conference, media centre
1400 autograph session, Rally Campus
1800 ceremonial start, Guanajuato

Friday March 4

0730-2300 media centre open, Rally Campus, Expo Feria building
1900 (approx) meet the top-three crews, service park

Saturday March 5

0730-2300 media centre open, Rally Campus, Expo Feria building
2100 (approx) meet the top-three crews, service park

Sunday March 6

0730-1900 media centre open, Rally Campus, Expo Feria building
1430 podium finish, Rally Campus
1530 post-event FIA press conference, media centre

Stuart Loudon's Restaurant recommendation:

La Estancia Argentina, Leon (+52 477 763 3080). The best steak this side of... well anywhere – which is ironic, given that the next round is in Argentina.

Recent winners Rally Mexico:

2005: Petter Solberg/Phil Mills (Subaru Impreza WRC)
2006: Sébastien Loeb/Daniel Elena (Citroën Xsara WRC)
2007: Sébastien Loeb/Daniel Elena (Citroën C4 WRC)
2008: Sébastien Loeb/Daniel Elena (Citroën C4 WRC)
2010: Sébastien Loeb/Daniel Elena (Citroën C4 WRC)
2011: Sébastien Loeb/Daniel Elena (DS 3 WRC)
2012: Jari-Matti Latvala/Miikka Anttila (Ford Fiesta RS WRC)
2013: Sébastien Ogier/Julien Ingrassia (Volkswagen Polo R WRC)
2014: Sébastien Ogier/Julien Ingrassia (Volkswagen Polo R WRC)
2015: Sébastien Ogier/Julien Ingrassia (Volkswagen Polo R WRC)

Most successful driver on Mexico's round of the WRC:

Sébastien Loeb (6 wins)

Stuart Loudon is a semi-professional co-driver who has started 52 rallies, 18 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.

Pictures courtesy of Red Bull Media House/Volkswagen Motorsport

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