

INSIGHT: 12-CAR RALLIES

Photos: Jakob Ebrey

SO WHERE'S THE PUB THEN?

Fresh from his IRC title success, Andreas Mikkelsen tried his hand at a 12-car navigation rally, and took Vicki Butler-Henderson along for the ride



Butler-Henderson and Mikkelsen try to decipher a map



Mikkelsen tries to work out where he's going next

As an ambassador for the MSA's Go Motorsport initiative, I'm very passionate about grass roots motorsport and, in particular, things that are cheap to enter.

Twelve-car navigational rallies certainly fit that bill – you can do them in your own road car without a special competition licence or any bespoke equipment beyond a 2B pencil and torch.

To prove how easy it is, I decided to have a go myself. I got the Go Motorsport team to sort out a suitable event, car and a decent team-mate.

We enrolled the driving skills of Andreas Mikkelsen thanks to Skoda UK. As the newly crowned Intercontinental Rally Challenge champion, Andreas is in the hunt – fingers crossed – to join Sébastien Ogier at Volkswagen in 2013 and thus was a perfect choice. At 22 years old this tall, lean Norwegian also has the talent behind the wheel to be a future WRC champion.

Before our chosen road rally – the Zebulon Pike Memorial 12-Car Rally, organised by the Loughborough Car Club – I talked to my *Fifth Gear* co-presenter Tiff Needell. He wished me good luck and joked that I'd be as sick as a dog in the car. I've started calling him Mystic Meg after that advice...

Beyond Tiff's advice I didn't really know what to expect. I knew I'd be navigating and naturally understood I'd be reading a map of some sort, which isn't exactly my specialist subject: I can get lost in a car park. Despite six years in the sport, it became apparent Andreas was equally clueless about the dark arts of 12-car navigational rallies. But you know you're in for a good time when you meet in a pub. Our starting point was the Globe Inn in Snarestone, just south of Ashby-de-la-Zouch in rural Leicestershire.

Mercifully, as total novices, we were given all the clues to the 60-mile rally 40 minutes before our allotted start time. The more

experienced teams are given them individually on arrival at the various checkpoints and then work them out on the way to the next one. It's no wonder Britain has produced so many top co-drivers because they need some sharp brainpower. As it was, I had to ask for some grown-up help to plot most of the route.

These entry-level events are much more than navigating through lanes after sunset. You have to arrive at checkpoints not a moment too early or too late, decipher a series of cryptic clues to help plot each stage, look out for 'proof of passage' boards to show you went the correct way, and keep a close eye on the clock.

To be honest the challenge blew my head, but I had faith in Andreas and our steed – a 180bhp Skoda Fabia vRS which is the closest showroom version to Andreas's Fabia S2000 competition car.

Setting off like whippets out of the trap, we showed our total lack of experience by overtaking everyone, which completely missed the point. Although we reached the first few checkpoints on time, we had missed loads of POP boards and then had a frustrating wait as the other cars leap-frogged back past us at the next checkpoint. The average speed is restricted to just 30mph, which we then duly adhered to, but it was too late for my stomach which emptied itself of pub grub down the side of our shiny green car. At speed, too: I insisted Andreas didn't pull over...

We cracked on and navigated to the finish. We weren't quite last, but if we'd been less speedy at the start and spotted all the POPs, we would have been second...

I had a great laugh though, and it was a fun way to spend a Tuesday evening. You exercise your brain, enjoy plenty of good banter and participate in a great sport with some healthy competition, and the darkness of the night adds a bit of magic to the proceedings.

All that for a £15 entry and a couple of gallons of fuel... You can watch the pair tackle the rally on *Fifth Gear* this week. Visit gomotorsport.net for more details

MIKKELSEN LEARNS THE HARD WAY

Andreas Mikkelsen might be this year's IRC champion, but a 12-car rally was a new experience for him. This is how he fared:

"It was different to anything I have done before. We don't have events like that in Norway, so it was completely new to me. We misunderstood everything and thought we needed to go as quickly as possible, so within the first mile or so we'd caught three cars! We missed all the boards that we needed to find and eventually ended up with four hours of penalties.

"It was really great fun, though, and I had a really nice time with Vicki. She got car sick, but there was

still an awful lot of laughing going on in the Fabia, and it didn't stop her trying to find the right roads and getting on with it. She is really tough and her navigational skills impressed me a lot, because she was spot-on every time.

"Navigational rallies are a fantastic way to start in motorsport. They're more useful for the co-driver to learn map reading and timing than it is for driver training. It's still important for a young driver to gain experience any way he can, but it's the perfect place for a budding co-driver to start off and I can now see why Britain has produced so many top world championship co-drivers over the years.

"Navigational rallies are also really cheap to do, as you can do them in a road car. We did our event in a road-going Skoda Fabia vRS, which was the first time I'd driven one. The country lanes were bumpy and narrow, but the car was really impressive and performance-wise it was more than you need to have a great time.

"The car ran faultlessly and – apart from some sick plastered down the outside – at the finish it was still in mint condition.

"It would be really nice to do a navigational rally again sometime in the future – especially now I know what we're supposed to do..."

It's not quite Mikkelsen's Skoda Fabia S2000...

