



Photo: De Car Guys NL

The Winter Trial was organised by Dutch 'Classic Events', but with the route and regularity sections designed by our very own Iain Tullie. Mike Cochrane was in the XJ-S hot seat for the first time, writes Ed Abbott.

A 930-mile drive took me to the Rally HQ in Krakow, Poland via the Hook of Holland. The car was scrutineered in the spacious 'M Sport' Poland premises, where they were busy preparing some 15 WRC Fiestas for WRC Rally Sweden, late in February. The 'Rally Safe' device was fitted and our Rally 'Welcome Pack' that included a nice 'Puffa' Rally Jacket and event magazine, complete with a photo of all the competing cars. Bit of a novelty to be one of only two RHD English cars competing out of 60 competing, mainly Dutch.

The 'Rallysafe' unit started and stopped the un-manned regularities and recorded our times at unknown controls en route and checked for any speeding infringements.

Day 1

Leaving Krakow City Centre we headed to a Motorsport Centre for the first tarmac test, then south into our first glimpses of rural Poland, it was cold but not much snow. We cracked off a few regularities, driving in kph of course.

At around 11:45, heading for lunch, after a fuel halt, the engine suddenly cut out. An hour of trying to start the engine using all my spares didn't work and left us no option but to call for recovery. Three hours later we arrived at Tatranska Lomnica, our overnight halt, somewhat crestfallen. Late that night, the breakdown guys found a suitable ignition coil and the car was running again.

Needless to say, the first day's results had us a resounding last in the 'Expert' Trial Class, with two hours and 25 minutes of penalties!

I did consider retiring at this point, harbouring doubts as to the ongoing reliability of the ignition system, but was encouraged by all around me to press on (thanks Mike and Richard Wort).

Day 2

Next morning, I was not surprised to find my door locks frozen, but borrowed another competitor's blow lamp to gain access into the XJ-S. Note to self... pack blow lamp next time or fill with WD40 the night before.

The car started, phew! And off we went, straight into a test and a detour into a local town to buy a spare coil (this was not simple or quick). We journeyed on and put in some top three regularity results by the end of the day, which certainly lifted our spirits. The car seemed fine, so we were back in business. No improvement on the results table!

The Event had a 'Trial Class' of 30 cars and 'Challenge Class' of 31 cars.

We soon reached our most south easterly position in Slovakia, journeying through some very poor villages and equally poor road surfaces. By now, thoughts of breaking down had receded and we got into a well-oiled stride of setting top five results on all regularities attempted.

There were only a few bands of marshals out on the event, so many were self-start regularities, driving five metres past the start line was enough to fire up the Rallysafe and another logger velcroed to the top of the dash.

We were now experiencing some lovely, if challenging, forest tracks and minor roads and once we got above 200 meters, snow was encountered. I was deliberately running with as much weight in the boot and kept the fuel tank as full as possible to aid traction on the slippery uphill encounters. The two spares had 12mm chains already fitted to them, as I considered it quicker to change a wheel than phaff about fitting chains in the cold and possibly dark conditions, should the need arise.

Day 3

Late morning, saw us steadily climb to pass over a mountain top from Slovakia into Czech Republic, the ascent getting decidedly tricky as we all fought for traction and some had stopped to fit chains. We sailed on up, cresting the summit into a minor ski resort.

Our instructions were to crack on and after 400 meters, start the decent. The way was partially blocked by a ranger-type person on a quad bike, slowing us down as he knew there was ice on the decent.



Photo: De Car Guys NL

Proceeding with caution and looking for grip, we descended, still trying to maintain the regularity pace. Several hairpins later, we encountered a minor RTA between a competitor and a member of the public, another warning, as if we needed one, on the tricky decent.

Thirty seconds later, with all wheels locked up, I was convinced we were headed for the Armco, when grip was restored and we continued down out of the snow/ice line into the Czech Republic... Phew, that was challenging!

That evening we had our first TC Section, which was timed for snow lined roads, except there was no snow. We arrived at each control 100 seconds early and sat them out. No fun in that.

Day 4

We had a great day now in the Czech Republic with improved road surfaces and were now putting in excellent regularity results, thanks to Mike's great navigation, not that we were shooting up the points table...

That evening we had two runs on the closed road 'Sternberk International' hill climb course. This was a five km climb on a nice wide smooth run and great fun for the driver who took no notice of the 'bogey' time made known to us 30 seconds before the 'off'. We got penalised for beating the time.

Day 5

A full day saw us heading back east, via a test at 'Steel Ring' Kart Circuit of Trinec and then into Poland. That night we had our much anticipated TC in the snow and hills.

Leaving the hotel at 7:30pm saw us sliding madly on very icy roads on the run out to the snow in the hills. The next four hours competition is worthy of its own report, but the bottom line is we triumphed when everyone else failed and we were elevated to fourth overall! We were equally elated and overjoyed.

Day 6

Morning full of regularities saw us maintain our fourth place overall, until the finish in Krakow, but when a 'Bogey' score was activated, we dropped to fifth and second in class.

The prize giving and event dinner was a spectacular affair, deep underground in the Krakow Salt Mine, in an auditorium as large as the Blackpool Tower Ball Room. In addition to our second in class award, we received best 'Newcomer' to the event award, some turnaround from my despair five days earlier, a moral in there somewhere I think...

Summing up a truly memorable rally, great organisation and route, (thanks Iain) friendly organisers and competitors, stunning scenery and food. I think the organisers were a bit disappointed by the lack of snow at low levels, but it did not detract from the event.

Mike and I had a blast and would definitely be up for next year's event, which will be in Eastern Europe again. A fair drive home and we clocked 2,950 miles for the whole event, whilst a post-mortem revealed that the two brand new and manufacturer supplied ignition coils had failed, costing us no end of grief and certainly second place.

The event was won by Rob Van Der Leeuw and Maurits Verhoeff in an Alfa Romeo Giulia. There is a great video 'The Winter Trial 2024', available on YouTube.



Photo: De Car Guys NL