

We are undertaking this challenge of a lifetime to raise as much money as possible for charity

Team Sanddodgers:
Gareth, Jon and Pete



An excellent adventure

The Alliance's Westminster Parliamentary Officer *Gareth Wallace* talks about preparing for an extraordinary personal challenge...

It's a cold Sunday evening in November; and tomorrow I will have to get up again for my day job at the Alliance. But by night and at weekends I am one of three intrepid university friends that make up Team Sanddodgers, official entrant into the 2007 Plymouth to Banjul Challenge.

This will be the fourth year of the world's most demanding and offbeat car rally. More than 400 applicants compete for around 200 places and a chance to drive four thousand miles from England through Europe and down the western coast of North Africa until we reach Banjul, capital of Gambia.

Team Sanddodgers were successfully selected to take part last April. Up until that point the rally was an eccentric dream, another one of my hare-brained schemes. I think the original idea germinated from my hobby of organising holidays coupled with the inspiration of Christian explorer Bear Grylls taking on the Sahara Desert on TV.

I remembered having heard Bear speak at a Westminster prayer breakfast in Parliament some years ago. Here was a great motivational speaker, an incredible athlete who writes books and raises money for charity. All of this while being a fantastic Christian witness who fronts the Alpha Course. The problem was that Mr Grylls achieves all this by taking part in adventures that involve near superhuman levels of fitness and exercise.

We had to come up with a slightly different approach if we were to achieve all that our hero Bear does - without the bodily pain and exercise.

The solution? Entering the Plymouth to Banjul Challenge, a quirky English banger race for charity.

The rules are short and to the point: it costs £7.50 to enter, and the banger we drive in the rally must cost no more than £100. It must be left-hand drive to comply with the so-called "import controls" of the countries the rally traverses, and we cannot spend more than £15 - yes, you read that correctly - on preparation of the vehicle.

Needless to say, this would require a lot of prayer, quite a few friends and several favours. As I write this we have been blessed with more than we could have imagined, but we need much more to help us complete the challenge.

An article of faith

The car we managed to acquire (from eBay) is a classic 1978 Saab 99 Turbo. It had lived for four years in a field, so as of November 2006, D minus one month, it was still proving remarkably unreliable. Fortunately for us, kind friends and companies (and friends who own companies) sponsored side squares on the car to cover the cost of rally-preparing our banger. As this issue of *idea* lands on your doormat, Team Sanddodgers should be in

Morocco on the road to Marrakech for New Year's Eve.

So I guess this article is also something of an article of faith that we will be there, because in truth we have no idea.

What is not faith is the fact that we are undertaking this challenge of a lifetime across some of the most inhospitable terrain on earth, with no experience in a clapped-out car, in order to raise as much money as possible for charity.

I believe that a team in a previous rally collected over £3,000 for their chosen charity, so we set ourselves the modest target of £10,000, which will be split evenly between the international development charity Tearfund and Macmillan Cancer Support.

As of late-November we were almost halfway to our goal. When you read this we will be over a third of the way on our journey. The time will have passed for people to help us by lending a mosquito net, a tin of tuna or a spare spark plug, although donations can still be accepted.

We are thankful for everyone's prayers and support in this project, and we intend to record and post online video diaries as we race through Africa from 26 December until 16 January.

► To follow the team's progress, or to donate tax efficiently online, visit www.sanddodgers.co.uk