



Jeddah → Abha

A nerve-racking commotion.

In the bus taking us from the airport to the hotel in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, we were already awed by the commotion. The car that suddenly cut in front of us without so much as a turn signal made me unwittingly brace for impact, and I let out an involuntary cry at seeing how close the cars were to each other. The Drive Project team members were visibly tense. In the same moment that I realized how many Toyotas and Lexuses were on the roads, I also noticed how many

dents and scratches those new cars had. This country—one of sand and oil in the minds of the Japanese—required nerves of steel when driving on its roads.

Team captain Kan Suzuki assessed the beginning of the Middle Eastern leg by saying, “It was a nerve-racking start.”

While due to various complications the Japanese team members ultimately did not receive permission to drive in Saudi Arabia

he says of the chaotic urban traffic, “An accident is just waiting to happen.” Many times when we

thought we were in a traffic jam, it turned out to be a major accident up the road. That’s why the captain was intent on making sure that everyone put safety first.

Suzuki comments, “Of course safety is our highest priority. But what I really want to do is to use this major Five Continents Drive project to benefit my work. Through this project, I want to take back the quiet voices that are not easily heard and feed them into my daily work. I want to be sure that I take back these ‘elements’ that will drive improvements.”

The Drive Project leg started by having members learn the Arabic numbers written on road signs.

Scenery on a grand scale.

After a kick-off event, the team left the cacophony of Jeddah. The amount of cars on the road visibly decreased as spectacular scenery unfolded. The uphill road contained long, winding curves. Yutaro Sato of the EHV Electricity Converter Design Division said of his first impressions of Saudi Arabia, *“The scenery is on a grand scale. I don’t think Japan has very many roads with big, long curves that take a long time to climb and descend.”* The road was not in the

desert but on a mountain pass, unusual even in Saudi Arabia, with the team climbing more than 3,000 m above sea level.

The crosswind got stronger and the fog thickened the higher up the team drove. From his seat in the back, Toshiyuki Sekiya of the Advanced Technical Skills Institute asked local member Abdullah Qadi, who was driving, about how the crosswind felt in the Land Cruiser 200. He replied that it was not a problem, and Sekiya proceeded to quiz him about locals’ perceptions of how the brakes, the acceleration, and the Avalon’s modifications for the U.S. market felt. Making slight adjustments to a car’s feel is what making cars to fit local needs is all about. He will go on to





ask these questions many more times during his brief stay.

Strong winds and fog upend assumptions.

High-octane gasoline costs about 60 yen a liter, while regular is 40 yen. The prices, surprisingly cheap compared to what Japanese people expect to pay, are nonetheless double what Saudis paid at the pump in 2018. The soaring cost of fuel is gradually driving up demand for hybrid vehicles. Still, this demand is solely an urban phenomenon; the farther out you go in the mountainous regions, the more cars you see that are built for tough use and easy repairs.

GR Company EVP Sadakata gives his thoughts. *“What becomes painfully clear each time I join the Drive Project is the changing expectations for cars. The times, the environmental conditions, the city streets and suburbs—every*

aspect has some correlation. This is why it’s absolutely necessary to drive in the actual locations. I had no idea that we would get enveloped in fog while driving in Saudi Arabia.”

The members’ uniform image of the Middle East was upended after just two days on the road in Saudi Arabia. While surrounded by fog with visibility in near whiteout conditions, local member Abdullah said, *“It’s almost the same in a sandstorm. I think you’ll definitely encounter one sometime during the drive.”*



Distance: 788km
 Duration: February 19-21, 2019
 Days: 3 days
 Vehicles: Land Cruiser 200, Prado, Camry Hybrid, Prius, Avalon