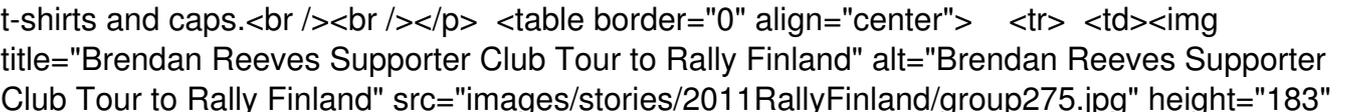
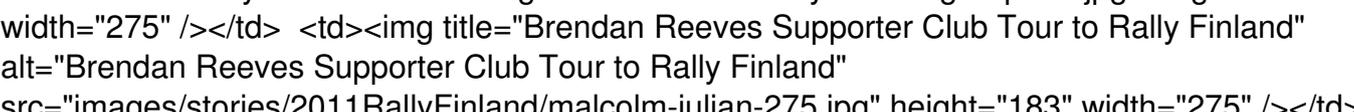
Rally Finland is one of those events that most rally fans watch on TV and dream about attending one day. Having watched countless rally videos and DVDs in my time, Rally Finland was the event that really stood out as the one to experience at least once. With its fast, flowing roads and infamous jumps, Finland's round of the WRC is the mecca of rallying, but, like most fans, actually going to watch it first hand seemed a bit of a pipe dream.

Then something happened to change all that. Back in December, having qualified for the brand new 2011 WRC Academy Championship, Brendan Reeves asked me if I put together a tour to the rally so that his supporters could go and watch he and Rhianon in action at the rally. It didn't take me long to say yes!

After months of planning, eight Aussies and two Kiwis arrived in Helsinki to start the Brendan Reeves Supporters Club Rally Finland Tour. Most people arrived on the Tuesday to allow time to recover from the long flight and to get used to the unseasonably warm Finnish weather. We enjoyed a getting to know you dinner at the hotel on Tuesday night and then saw the sights of Helsinki on Wednesday morning on a three hour city tour.

Late afternoon we joined our fellow tour participants at Helsinki airport for the three and a half hour trip north to Jyvaskyla. Having never been to Finland before, we put ourselves in the very capable hands of Rally Travel, a UK company that specialise in WRC tours to most of the European rounds of the Championship. In total, there were 50 people on board the coach, but the Brendan Reeves fans stood out with our distinctive Supporters Club t-shirts and caps.

	
--	--

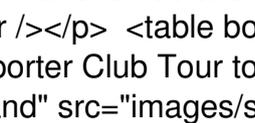
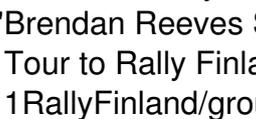
On Thursday morning we were up bright and early (which wasn't difficult given that the sun rose at 4am and didn't set until 11pm!!) and on the bus at 6.30am on our way to Shakedown. Shakedown was held on the Ruuhimaki stage, home to some of Rally Finland's best jumps, so we were able to see all the top WRC crews put their cars through their paces in preparation for the rally. It was also our first chance to see the MINI WRCs in action.

A few hours of rally action had really whet our appetites and we were all eagerly awaiting the start of the rally proper. But first we had some other important business to attend. We headed straight from Shakedown to the Service Park in Jyvaskyla and had an opportunity to wander around and see the cars up close. This was also our first chance to say hi to Brendan and Rhianon and ask them about their preparations for the event. From there, we headed to a very informative Rally Forum hosted by Julian Porter of World Rally Radio, with Malcolm Wilson, the boss of Ford BP Abu Dhabi World Rally Team making an appearance and entertaining us with his thoughts on the WRC and how the new teams entering the Championship will affect Ford.

We then headed back to the Service Park to wish Brendan and Rhianon all the best for the rally, before hitting the stages! Three stages were held on the opening evening of Rally Finland and our destination was SS2. We spent a good couple of hours at the spectator point and it's fair to say that there was no easing into it from the crews - it was flat out from the word go and we could see we were going to be in for a top weekend's rally action. After a late night visit to the Service Park and a catch up with the

crew of Car 106, it was back to our motel at midnight.

Our departure on Friday wasn't until 7.30 but we had some extra companions today. The producer of Mobil 1 The Grid, a motorsport magazine show, had contacted me asking if they could follow our group for the day as part of their feature on Rally Finland. They wanted to emphasise how popular the rally is and as we had travelled so far to attend the event, thought it would be great to include us in the program. Of course, it was a great chance to give Brendan plenty of exposure, too, so how could we say no?! (The show airs on Fox Sports and ESPN and is scheduled for August 20 we'll have full details of the screening times on the website as soon as they are available.)

So, with a camera crew on our tails, off we headed for the mega trip to the day's spectator point near Lahti (about two and a half hours from our base). The viewing was great at this spot with plenty of spectating options. We watched the entire field come through on the morning pass of the stage, and then waited until Brendan had come through in the afternoon, before heading back to the motel. Whilst the rally action was fantastic, the Finnish spectators certainly added to the entertainment! We saw streakers, blokes stripping off and plunging into hot tubs and lots and lots of happy drunks. One Finnish guy was so impressed with our Brendan Reeves Supporters Club t-shirts, he paid for one on the spot and left his address so we could send it to him. We obviously looked very trustworthy!

Breakfast was again at 5am on Saturday with a 6 o'clock departure from the hotel. We were to see plenty of action today we watched the entire field on their first pass of SS13, then the historic rally competitors, followed by another hour of the main field. The WRC Academy cars finished the event after SS17, so we were madly waiting for stage times to see how Brendan and Rhianon had finished.

From here it was on to the Power Stage just outside of Jyvaskyla. There were plenty of vantage points from which to watch the cars with the big screen showing coverage of the entire stage. The roar that went up when local boy, Mikko Hirvonen, won the Power Stage was enormous.

With the rally winner decided (Loeb again), it was back to the Service Park for the Podium presentation. The Academy presentation had taken place earlier so we weren't able to see that, but we were keen to congratulate the Wedderburn duo on their great result. Despite a puncture on the first stage of the final day (Saturday) that cost them over three minutes, they had managed to fight back to finish fourth outright, putting them equal second in the overall Championship standings. A fantastic effort!

Those who were looking forward to some shut-eye headed back to the motel on the 9pm bus whilst a hardy few stayed on in Jyvaskyla for a few hours longer. This gave us the chance to see Brendan and Rhianon and hear their tales from the rally. They were really appreciative of the support of those who had made the effort to be part of the tour with Brendan commenting that he saw the Aussie flag and our t-shirts at each spectator point we were at! (Shouldn't he be concentrating on the road?!)

With an action-packed weekend over, we headed back to Helsinki on Sunday. A few unlucky souls flew out that afternoon/evening, whilst the rest of the group stayed overnight before heading our separate ways to various other parts of Europe.



Club Tour to Rally Finland" src="images/stories/2011RallyFinland/group-hotel-275.jpg" height="183" width="275" /></td> <td></td> </tr></table> <p> </p> <p>Sincere thanks must go to everyone who participated in the tour ♦ it was a fantastic group of people with whom it was a pleasure to experience Rally Finland. Thanks also to Neil and Jeff from Rally Travel who made spectating a breeze and who did everything they could to ensure we saw Brendan in action as often as possible. Our bus driver, Jari, thankfully didn♦t try to match the pace of his namesake, but got us from A to B each day safely. And lastly, but by no means least, a big thank you to Brendan and Rhianon for suggesting the tour and for giving us all so much entertainment over the weekend ♦ you did us all proud!!

</p> <p>View more photos of Brendan in action at Rally Finland in his Photo Gallery.</p>