Challenge Day 1 – Maybe not a good start but still a good result!

Finally it’s the day the actual challenge starts, the day this whole team has been working towards for the past year and a half. At 8.30h Darwin time on Sunday morning all Solar Cars gathered in downtown Darwin to set off in the order that was determined by their time trial. Stella Era was 20th in line and as planned started with 4 people when bad luck struck, a red traffic light! Usually not a problem of course but this time it was uphill and all Momentum was lost. It was too much for her (too much used to the flat countryside of the Netherlands I guess?). Quickly the passengers stepped out of the car exactly according to the safety protocol and off she went.

At the start in Darwin

The rest of the convoy waited further down the Stuart Highway, along with some jolly people with seats, kids, parasols and coffee – who were waving at all solar cars. It really felt as if we were in a parade and if we were winners already!

The first 300km stint is a bloodbath (not literally luckily), teams overtaking each other trying to get ahead before the dual lane turns into single lane. With pride we saw both Twente and TopDutch driving past and that is still showing on the scoreboard. Results will be published online, including their energy efficiency but that doesn’t show until tomorrow morning. For the strategy guys this is very important information just like the weather conditions and who is driving with how many passengers. The more passengers (up to 3) the more points can be scored.

This highway is quite special for more than one reason, it is mostly single lane, which proves to be a challenge on its own as overtaking other convoys is not easy due to the oncoming road trains that go really fast. Often the speed limit is even 130km/h which doesn’t always help. Another special thing are the surroundings, a beautiful but harsh scenery, surprisingly fresh greens and the intense red
sand. Most if not all trees are scorched at the bottom with green leaves on top due to the many roadside fires apparently. In between the many trees there are funny looking red sculptures which turn out to be termite hills, sometimes wearing a t-shirt or even a bikini which looks really funny.

![Scorched but living trees](image1.jpg) ![Weird termite sculptures](image2.jpg)

After about 300km in temperatures of 40 degrees we reached the first Control Stop. As soon as the car is parked the driver has to get out fast and sprints to the officials to start the time. Nobody is allowed to touch the car for 30 minutes after which the new driver and freshies can enter the car and drive off as soon as possible. We bought a lovely parasol with pink flamingos to keep those guys and the observer a bit cooler than burning hot.

![Control Stop 2, just in time!](image3.jpg)

And off we were again, for another 300km from Katherine to Daly Waters to hopefully get there on time for Control Stop 2 which we did, just in time at 16.55.43. This means that tomorrow we are not allowed to start at 8am but 25.43 minutes later so we still stood still for the mandatory 30 minutes.
Twente and TopDutch doing great! We’ve also made good progress!

At the Control Stop at Daly Waters are camping grounds, which means a patch of land behind the gas station and some toilets and showers. In no time the whole camp was set up with tents, a work shop tent for Stella Era, a cooking tent, chairs, stretchers and lights. We prepared a red sauce pasta with loads and loads of courgette, onions, carrots, aubergines and tomato sauce. Then it’s time for the briefing of the team and all the tasks for that evening and morning. Washing up, typing this and then off to bed as soon as possible.
Camping within 2 hours

Dinner at the campsite

Tomorrow is a somewhat shorter day as we have to stop at Tennant Creek at 14.00h (or before of course) to recharge the cars. I somewhat as we have to get up at 5.30am so goodnight!!