

FIA European Rally Championship 2018: Round 1 of 8
Azores Airlines Rallye: Leg one, part two report, 23 March

LUKYANUK HOLDS ERC LEAD AS BATTLES RAGE BEHIND IN AZORES

- *Puncture delays local hero Moura in victory quest, Magalhães third
- *Ingram heads Koči in close ERC Junior U28 fight, Gago leads ERC Junior U27
- *Remennik on top in ERC2 following day of drama

The Azores Airlines Rallye once again showed why it is such a formidable opening round of the FIA European Rally Championship, but as others hit trouble, Russian Performance Motorsport's Alexey Lukyanuk held steady out front.

Not even a herd of cows blocking the road on Friday afternoon's iconic Sete Cidades 'volcano' stage could stop Lukyanuk from continuing to lead, the Ford Fiesta R5 driver taking advantage of a Ricardo Moura puncture this morning to extend his margin out front to 21.8s.

Sete Cidades was the setting for many dramatic moments, especially during the final pass where a roll for Tiger Energy Drink Rally Team's Tomasz Kasperczyk and a gearbox problem for Miguel Correia blocked and stopped the stage twice in quick succession.

Friday's top three was completed by Moura's compatriot Bruno Magalhães, who charged back up the order to third after a difficult trio of morning stages struggling with the balance of his ŠKODA Fabia R5.

A battle for **ERC Junior U28** honours raged on immediately behind Magalhães, as Briton Chris Ingram and Slovakia's Martin Koči traded places throughout the day. A quick time through Sete Cidades this morning put Ingram up to third initially, but after tyre saving dropped him back to fifth early in the afternoon loop, the ERC Junior Under 27 champion finished the day fourth overall, 11.9s ahead of Koči. Ingram is making his competitive debut in an R5 car, while Koči is driving his Fabia R5 on gravel for the first time.

Sweden's Fredrik Åhlin made it three ERC Junior U28s in the top six to underline the competitive nature of the category for young stars in R5 cars, holding former Azores winner Bernardo Sousa at bay despite clattering a bank on the first Sete Cidade run.

Briton Rhys Yates fended off a challenge from a quartet of Portuguese championship contenders to hold eighth overall, but admitted a loss of concentration when passing Fabian Kriem – who was struggling with a puncture – caused a brief spin in Sete Cidades. He sits fourth in ERC Junior U28, with a slim 3.2s gap over his nearest category and overall challenger, Frank Tore Larsen.

Larsen turned in a great performance to stay ahead of the same quartet of locals as Yates in ninth overall and fifth in ERC Junior U28, despite his road sweeping position and an early Thursday retirement from this event in 2016 meaning he had no experience of today's stages.

Portuguese champion Carlos Vieira completed the top 10, but was not helped by a broken anti-lag system during SS4. Luis Rego yo-yoed between eighth and P14, settling down in P11 by the day's end with powersteering issues. Ricardo Teodósio, José Pedro Fontes, Dávid Botka and Łukasz Habaj completed the top 15 with Botka slowed by a gearbox issue. Marijan Griebel is a frustrated P17, Fabian Kreim a puncture-delayed P20, Norbert Herczig P18 for MOL Racing Team and Toksport's Orhan Avcioğlu P19.

ERC Junior Under 27: Gago takes on Opel might

Diogo Gago took on the might of ADAC Opel Rallye Junior Team's pair of factory drivers and succeeded aboard his PEUGEOT 208 R2, moving from third to first over the course of a dramatic multi-way battle. Tom Kristensson made his first and final move in Friday's opening stage, going fastest by 0.2s from Gago. However, he went wide and rolled crossing the finish line, causing significant damage to his Opel ADAM R2 and forcing his immediate retirement. Kristensson's team-mate and previous category leader Mārtiņš Sesks picked up a front right puncture and panel damage in the day's penultimate stage. Rally Team Spain's Efrén Larena also dropped more than one minute with a puncture in Sete Cidades this morning as Saintéloc Junior Team driver Simon Wagner took advantage of the misfortune of others to move into second in both ERC Junior U27 and ERC3, the Austrian impressing on his first PEUGEOT gravel run. Larena dropped to fourth in ERC Junior U27 after his issue. He's also fourth in ERC3 ahead of fellow PEUGEOT 208 R2 pilot Ruben Rodrigues. Dominik Brož and Catie Munnings complete the Pirelli-supported ERC Junior U27 in fifth and sixth, Brož one of many to suffer a puncture and Munnings losing her front bumper on the second pass Feteiras Meo.

ERC2: Melegari's brief lead slips away with clutch issue

Zelindo Melegari had taken advantage of a puncture for chief rival Sergei Remennik in Sete Cidades to snatch first place, but his new found lead would last only one stage. Remennik quickly moved back to first after Melegari was forced to nurse a broken clutch through SS7 and SS8. His Subaru Impreza STI would go no further, forced to retire and handing second to Juan Carlos Alonso. Luís Pimentel completes the podium following a broken turbo with Menderes Okur fourth.

ERC Ladies' Trophy: Molinaro delayed, pain for Falcón

Tamara Molinaro continues to lead the ERC Ladies' Trophy despite a long delay in SS8 when stopped by marshals mid-stage after Joaquim Alves crashed. A mix of the delay and lost concentration led to more than a minute lost to her R5 competitors. Emma Falcón's day came to an unfortunate end late in this morning's loop, crawling to the end of Sete Cidades and retiring post-stage after a large impact on a jump landing hurt her back. Catie Munnings is second, five minutes behind Molinaro in her R2-spec PEUGEOT.

What's next?

The Azores Airlines Rallye's final leg consists of six stages covering 107.57 kilometres of competitive action, getting underway at 09h38 local time with the Graminhas stage. The finish is scheduled for 18h26 in Ponta Delgada. Click here for results: <https://www.fiaerc.com/live-timing/>.

LEG ONE, PART TWO HIGHLIGHTS ON EUROSPORT AND EUROSPORT PLAYER. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

ENDS Press enquiries: Richard Rodgers, media@fiaerc.com, +44 7503871575 **TV enquiries:** Pascal Petit: pascal.petit@discovery.com, Vianney Castillo: vianney.castillo@discovery.com **Drivers and teams:** Jean-Baptiste.Ley@discovery.com **Website:** www.fiaerc.com **Media site:** <http://media.fiaerc.com>

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