

Federation International Automobile (FIA) World Rally Championship leader Kalle Rovanperä kicked off his Safari Rally Kenya victory bid in supreme fashion by winning a very eventful shakedown stage on Wednesday morning.

The Finn, who headed a Toyota 1-2-3-4 finish here last year, propelled his GR Yaris to the benchmark time through the 5.40km Loldia warm-up stage by the picturesque Lake Naivasha.

He set the pace on his second and penultimate run, shading M-Sport Ford Puma rival Ott Tänak by 1.5sec in the process.

Rovanperä starts this seventh round holding a 25-point advantage over second-placed Thierry Neuville. His Toyota Gazoo Racing team has won every single Safari edition since it returned to the WRC calendar in 2021.

“We had quite a good feeling to be honest,” he said. “Everything seems to be as clear as it can be before a Safari Rally. Hopefully we can have another strong weekend and score more good points for the championship.”

Toyota part-timer Sébastien Ogier topped the timesheets after the opening pass but he slipped to third by the end of the session. The Frenchman, victor here in 2021, trailed Tänak by seven-tenths of a second.

Just 0.2sec behind in fourth was Neuville, Hyundai’s best-placed driver.

He and i20 N colleague Dani Sordo sandwiched fifth and six-placed Toyota drivers Elfyn Evans and Takamoto Katsuta.

Katsuta’s mechanics are in for a busy afternoon, however, after the Japanese driver rolled late in the session. He and co-driver Aaron Johnston were unharmed after coming unstuck on a right-hander which followed a jump.

Kenyan President William Ruto flagged the competitors away from the Nairobi start on Thursday lunchtime.

Ahead lie 19 gruelling special stages around Lakes Naivasha and Elmenteita covering 355.92km before Sunday afternoon’s finish in Naivasha.