

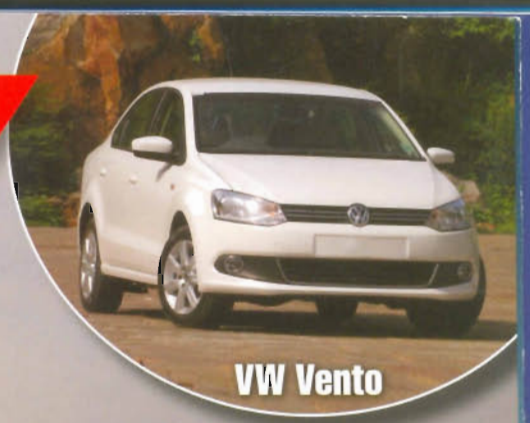
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Rs. 30

vol. 4 issue 11

september 2010



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# AN INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

Text: Murad Ali Baig  
Images: Cougar Motorsport

**W**e were lucky. We left Leh on July 26, or nine days before the disaster. Leh is a small town, and in the four days exploring the area, we got to know it well – so you can imagine how we felt when we got news of the calamity.

In eleven days of some really hard driving, thirty-six intrepid travelers in 12 SUVs and other cars, with a support ambulance and a service vehicle, covered over 2,000 kilometers on a rough road adventure going from Delhi through Himachal and Ladakh till the final destination in Srinagar.

Though Cougar Motorsports had meticulously surveyed and planned the entire route, and arranged the best available accommodation for each night stop, it was not a soft and luxurious ride because a very hard winter in Lahoul and Ladakh, and excessive rain in the Kulu valley had ruined the roads. Despite the best efforts of the Border Roads Organization, the heavy road traffic made them very difficult to keep in repair. The ten day grind was tough, but it's the hard holidays that are always the most memorable.

We set off from Delhi and drove the 400 kilometer first leg to Srinagar where we luxuriated at Oberoi's amazing Wildflower Hall. On the next day, we traveled 250 kilometers across the Sutlej and Jalori Pass to get to the pretty Tirthan valley and on to Manali. We passed orchards groaning with apples ready to be plucked and feasted on some sold at the roadside. Recent rains had made the beautiful Kulu valley a lush land with waterfalls on every mountain, and small festivals for the local deities.

The third day was a brutal 150 kilometers getting over the Rohtang pass to get to Jispa in Lahoul – the land of glaciers. It was only with a military escort that we could get across, but even that took four difficult hours with heavy traffic going both ways.

Near Keylong, the Mahindra Xylo that I was driving had a puncture that also caused damage to the sidewall of the tyre. While the big Bridgestone Dueler A/T tyres performed very well, the local roadside repairers do not yet know tubeless technology – so we had to find a tube and insert gaiters. It was





## The Himalayan Dash 2010

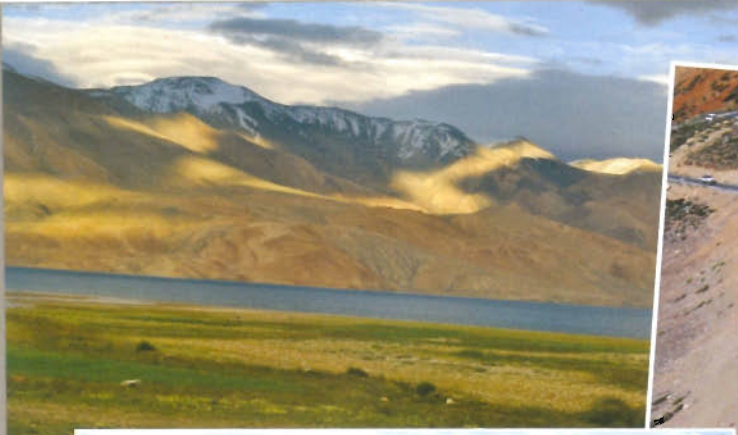
The Himalayan Dash 2010 was a unique Trans Himalayan Self Driving Expedition from The Lalit, New Delhi, to The Lalit Grand Palace, Srinagar, covering over 3,000 kilometers across 5 States. The expedition had over 40 participants, including 13 ladies. The 10 vehicles in the expedition included the Mitsubishi Pajero, Volkswagen Touareg, Ford Endeavour, Toyota Innova, Maruti Grand Vitara, Maruti Gypsy, Mahindra Scorpio and Xylo. A service vehicle as well as an ambulance with a doctor (specifically qualified to manage high altitude related problems) and medical supplies accompanied the expedition.

Over the course of 12 days, the Himalayan Dash crossed pristine and constantly changing

landscape, high-mountain passes including Jalori, Rohtang, Baralacha, Nakee La, Lachlung La, Changa La, Khardung La, Fotu La and Zozi La. The expedition also passed several beautiful lakes including Tso Morari, Pangong Tso, Dal Lake, as well as deep gorges of the Beas, Chandra, Bhaga, Indus and Zaskar rivers – on what can only be called a drive of a lifetime.







a lesson – every car must carry a spare tube and an easily available tyre repair kit before venturing into the wilds.

On the fourth day, we crossed the 16,050 foot Baralacha pass to enter Ladakh. La means pass, and Ladakh means the land of passes. It was a very picturesque drive, offering fantastic photo opportunities at almost every bend. We were lucky to spot a herd of wild sheep with thick horns while negotiating the 21 hairpin bends at the Gatta loops. We spent the night at a tented camp at Sarchu at over 14,000 feet.

Most of us had by now become quite well acclimatized, but our doctor explained the precautions. Contrary to popular belief, oxygen is almost the same at 30,000 feet as at sea level, but the pressure is much less, which is why aircrafts only make oxygen masks drop down when there is a drop in cabin pressure. Deep breathing exercises help oxygen absorption, as well as a low fat and fibre diet that puts lower demands on the digestive system, which needs as much oxygen as a 6 kilometer walk.

We next traversed the flat More plains where we saw wild asses, yaks and nomadic camps in the distance to cross the 16,613 foot Lachulangla pass and get to Pang where the wind erosion on the barren surrounding hills look as if they contain the carcasses of huge dinosaurs. The most amazing thing about Ladakh is the brilliance of the sky that makes all the colours incredibly vivid. It's a barren high altitude desert contrasting with tall poplars and fields of vivid green and yellow wherever the snow fed mountain streams flow. We were now truly into 'Little Tibet' where Buddhist Monasteries, prayer flags, and Chorten (tombs of revered elders) were all around. We then turned east past a turquoise salt lake to reach a bigger lake Tso Moriri where we camped at just over 15,000 feet.

The sixth day was a picturesque drive north to get to the river Indus that we followed downwards till we got to Leh. Indus is an Anglicization of Sindhu that is a river valley that the Persian King Cyrus the Great ruled in the 6th century BC. As the

Persians could not pronounce 'S,' Sindhu became Hindu – so all Indians are people of the land of the Sindhu. On the way we passed the monasteries of Thiksey and Shey. On the next day, the caravan went to Pangong Tso that is the world's largest water body above 4,000 meters. As I had been there earlier, we visited Leh and the nearby monasteries instead – little realizing how it would soon be devastated.

On the eighth day we crossed the Khardungla pass that, at 18,380 feet, is the highest motor-able pass in the world. It is also the gateway to the Siachen glacier area where India and Pakistan continue desultory military operations in the most difficult theatre of war in the world.

We then descended into the beautiful Nubra valley and spent the night at a tented camp at Hundar where we slept to the soothing sounds of mountain streams rushing past our tents. The Dalai Lama and Omar Abdullah, the Chief Minister of J&K, were inaugurating a great statue of Tara at Diskit monastery and many Ladakhis in colourful costumes thronged the roads. Returning to Leh, we were able to luxuriate with a hot bath, a comfortable bed and good food at the very hospitable La Ri Sa hotel that soon became our home away from home.

I was pleasantly surprised to see a large number of Xylo taxis at Khardungla and on the road. With its short bonnet and high roof, it's no beauty, but these features free up enormous inner space without increasing the bumper-to-bumper length so the third row had far more leg room than any Innova, Endeavour, Sumo or Scorpio. The responsive 112bhp diesel engine, having bags of reserve power, was able to quickly overtake vehicles on the road – although the first gear ratio was a bit long on really tough stretches. Best of all was a fuel average of over 12km/l with a big load of five people and their baggage in such tough conditions. I found the ride over bumps and potholes was quite comfortable but was surprised that the new swinging arm rear suspension offered very good handling for quite a tall vehicle. It may be no beauty, but is brilliant value for money.

Our vehicle had four of us and a driver, but the hero of our intrepid group was Armaan Gupta who celebrated his eleventh birthday on the road without losing his cheerful composure. His parents, Ashish and Pratima, are the promoters of Cougar Motorsport and Armaan's early initiation will certainly make him an avid motorsport enthusiast ■