

Camping in the dry river-bed!

More than two years ago me and Sen had unearthed this place no lesser than heaven following the trail described by Kenneth Andersen in his book. Since then it has been in the back of my mind for camping overnight.

Every long weekend, there is this craving for going outdoors. So when last summer I saw some decent and pretty cheap tents at the Ann Arbor Myer's I had got one for myself. But it took close to a year before I could actually put it to use. Nevertheless, it was a fitting début.

This was the Ester weekend... a long one. So I teamed up with Jayant, Prasad, Samar and Vikas and planned a trip. Surprisingly there wasn't a single dropout and all five of us started from Bangalore on three bikes on Friday afternoon. Racing Samar's Pulsar and Jayant's Unicorn, Yammy devoured the piece of NH7 between Bangalore and Hosur in no time. At Hosur we stopped to pick up some of stuff for our overnight stay. Finding beer cans proved to be the most painful task as we learned the hard way that they don't sell beer in cans in TN state. So we reluctantly loaded our bags with the glass bottles and resumed on our way.

Racing against sun-set, we managed to enter the Anchetty ghats before the light faded out entirely. The road, though narrow, is smooth like silk. And to top that it was absolutely deserted with just a rare bus crossing our paths. We were descending for most of the time, till I spotted the familiar bridge. I urged everyone to hurry and we got our bikes below the bridge after a bit of off-road biking. This was a relatively safe place to leave the bikes as no one could spot them unless they searched the underside of the bridge on purpose.

We hiked along the dry river bed through the sand picking firewood on our way. Soon we found a good spot with a relatively flat stretch of sand. The tent was up in no time and then we prepared bed for campfire with some rocks which were available in plenty around. Firewood also was never a problem and soon we had enough stock to last for few hours at least. A quick glance at my cell told me it was 1900 hours. It was time for us to make arrangements for dinner. I took Jayant with me and got back to our bikes. Jayant picked out his Unicorn and we rode to the village of Anchetty which is barely 5 km further down the same road which we had descended. The village market was pretty abuzz. We packed water canteens, bread loafs and portions of egg 'bhurji'. Then Jayant got ½ kg of potatoes... he had something on his mind which we discovered was a masterpiece later. With everything nicely into my backpack, we got back to our camp. Despite the sky being moonless, other guys were waiting for us to light the campfire.

It was another first, when we managed to light the campfire with a single match and without the aid of any inflammable liquids. The wood was so dry that it ignited immediately and within minutes we had a nice crackling fire. I opened the beer bottles and passed them around. Jayant brought out the raw potatoes and began roasting them on the campfire. Even without salt or pepper, they tasted great. With our conversation intruding every topic relevant to guys, time flew by. Moon finally rose around 2300 hours.

The light suddenly made all our surroundings distinctly visible and the sand almost glowed white. We brought out dinner. Even the bread was warmed on the fire... its funny you find so many uses of fire once it is available.

I asked who wanted the first turn to stand guard and it turned out no one wanted to sleep at all. Prasad and Samar left for a stroll through the river bed further downstream. Jayant dozed off near the fire and Vikas climbed inside the tent. I threw some wood in the fire and roamed alone upstream. This was the direction I had not explored before. I passed the bridge and went on as the river snaked through the forest. But there was nothing particularly different except that the frequency of isolated tiny waterholes increased. I was pretty sure of existence of a dam somewhere in this direction, but had no idea how far it might be. About half an hour upstream, I turned back.

Upon my return to the camp I found Prasad and Samar still had not returned and Jayant and Vikas were fast asleep in their respective places. It was OK though since I had not gone too far and I had not seen any of wild pugmarks around to raise an alarm. So I lay down on the soft sand beside the fire, propped my head against a rock and closed my eyes to concentrate on the jungle sounds. Soon I could count at least 20 different notes. I could not help thinking how much more zeal the gurgling of this stream would have added to this already lively crescendo had there been even a little flowing water.

I had drifted just a bit when Jayant shook me awake asking where Prasad and Samar were. I told him not to worry since two of them were together and had the brightest flashlight amongst us, not to mention the glow of the moon which was by now overhead. He relaxed and went back to his last comfortable laying position. Prasad and Samar returned couple of hours before dawn and began reviving the fire from the bed of orange embers. This woke me up and I joined them. Soon Jayant and Vikas also joined us. Before we could come to end of words, dawn broke. We packed and cleaned up making sure we did not leave any litter behind. Hike back to bikes a pretty simple now with the light growing. The machines growled to life eagerly and we began climbing the ghats we had descended the evening before.

We emerged out just in time to catch the sunrise. After a few clicks at the sun and all around, we got back riding. It was a nice crisp morning with a little bit of chill in the air. The roads were winding and the air rich in oxygen. It was heaven, this ride and I wished it never ended. But soon we approached civilization and after a brief stop at a roadside coffee stall we reached Hosur by 0800 hours. NH7 opened its arms once more and ride till outskirts of Bangalore was almost traffic free. The city traffic though annoyed me a bit before I could find the relatively free stretch on Outer Ring Road. The throttle once more and I was home in no time.

Looking back I can't believe I had not stayed outdoors overnight for almost a year. I guess I have a lot to make up. So when's the next long weekend?