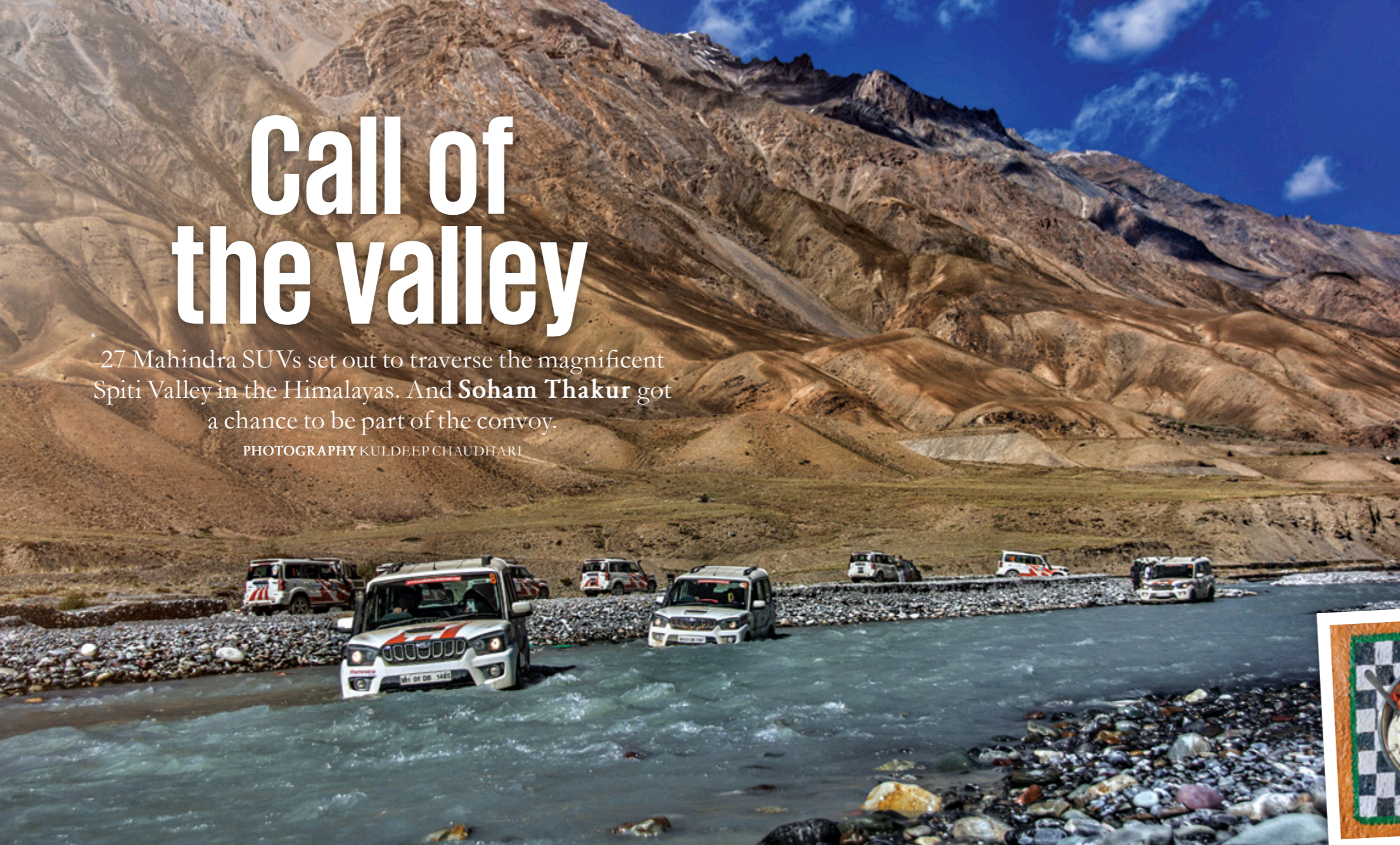


Call of the valley

27 Mahindra SUVs set out to traverse the magnificent Spiti Valley in the Himalayas. And **Soham Thakur** got a chance to be part of the convoy.

PHOTOGRAPHY KULDEEP CHAUDHARI



The top of Rohtang Pass marked the end of our 9-day adventure.



Monastery, we pointed the cars in the direction of Komic village which, at about 15,000ft above the sea, is said to be the world's highest inhabited village. We decided to take the road less travelled, and that turned out to be the best part of the trip for me. Just picture it – 27 Mahindra SUVs climbing up a Himalayan mountain, surrounded by snow-clad peaks on all sides with no roads in sight for kilometres. Pure bliss!

On the way back down from Komic, we made a pit stop at yet another "highest in the world". This time it was the Hikim post office, at a height of 14,500ft. After some customary postcards were sent out, we made our way back to Kaza to get some rest; very essential, given that the longest drive of the entire trip lay ahead of us.

My alarm set off at 4:30 am and it was 1deg C outside! After shivering through a quick breakfast,

we set off in the dark to our last destination on this expedition – Manali. The drive was not only long but also the most arduous. Boulders the size of small cars were strewn across what used to be a road. Landslides are a major issue in these parts, wiping out roads faster than they can be built. The route was also peppered with stream crossings, which were dealt with without much fuss in our 4x4 Mahindras. We stopped by the scenic Chandratul Lake on our way back too. The crystal-clear water and pristine surroundings made for some great photo opportunities.

Driving through the Rohtang Pass on the way to Manali, I started to ponder the entire experience. I mean, we had confronted everything, from heavy rains to strong gusts, from shivering cold to sweltering heat, from smooth tarmac to rock crawls, and from cold deserts to coniferous forests, all in a few days. It amazes me that our country has such a diverse and stunning landscape that could rival any other in the world. The Thar too had been the perfect companion on this journey and it never skipped a beat. I can't wait for my next adventure in the Himalayas. It's time to keep wondering which car I'll be driving next time. **AI**



Local food is simple but deliciously flavourful.

My first-ever drive experience didn't really get off to a great start. I was the last one to arrive at the starting point in Chandigarh, and by the time I made it, most of the briefing and interacting sessions had concluded. But more importantly, I had no idea which SUV I had been assigned; something I've been thinking about ever since I found out I'd be on this trip. Nevertheless, I was up nice and early on day 1 of our drive, trying to decipher which Mahindra I would get my hands on. As it turned out, it was exactly what I had hoped for – a Thar. Kuldeep, our resident photographer and I nodded at each other in approval.

Soon after, we stuffed our luggage into the Thar and set off in a convoy of 27 Mahindra SUVs with about 55 participants, all with one aim – to conquer the mighty Spiti Valley. Mind you, this is no mean feat. Our journey would involve driving 1,600km in nine days, through one of the most treacherous terrains in the world. Luckily, we had

the expertise of Mahindra Adventure and Team Drivetech India to fall back on.

The first day was spent getting acclimatised to the Thar, the narrow roads and the altitude. Our drive to Narkanda was relatively smooth and trouble-free. The drive on day 2, however, was where the going really got tough. We had to crawl through kilometres of rock and debris while being careful of the massive drops into the valley below. The slow progress at least gave us a chance to marvel at the massive hydroelectric projects that have been set up on

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Just the sheer size of
Spiti Valley is beyond belief.
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the Satluj and Baspa rivers along this route.

From Sangla, we took a small detour to Chitkul, which is the last village in India before the Tibet border. The next day, when the convoy was en route to Tabo, we finally entered the colossal Spiti Valley. I had to stop and take a moment to take it all in. It is really difficult to comprehend the sheer size and magnitude of this valley – simply breathtaking.

The following morning, we made our way to the famous Tabo Monastery, before embarking on the short 85km drive to Kaza. The monastery, which was founded in 996 AD, is the oldest functioning Buddhist monument in India and has been visited by the Dalai Lama thrice – in 1983, 1996 and 2004. It proved to be a time capsule of sorts, with paintings and idols over a thousand years old adorning the walls, while being completely isolated from the outside world.

Our day off in Kaza was action-packed and it gave the Thar a chance to show off its true potential. First, it was time to ford through the

icy cold Spiti river. And having never done anything like this before, I select four-wheel-low and nervously wait for my turn. I tiptoe the Thar into the river and gingerly start making my way to the other side. As the water level starts to rise and enter the cabin (the Thar has holes in its floor), I get an overwhelming feeling of just flooring the accelerator and making it across as fast as possible, thinking I would get stuck, or worse, stall the Thar. But the experts assured me that the car would make it across just fine, even if the water level rose above the bonnet. So I followed their lead, listened to the instructions and we made it across without getting our pants soaking wet.

After a short stop at the spectacularly picturesque Key



Residents of the Komic village treated us to a traditional folk dance.

The Thar really felt its element out here.

