



INSIDE

*On an expedition
of Nubra valley,
visiting a beer
factory, best slavery
movies and more...*

A NOOB IN NUBRA

An account of a one-of-a-kind off-road expedition to Nubra Valley and reclamation of my love for this lunar land

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WOULD IT BE TOTALLY cliché if I were to draw parallels between the song *Yeh Haseen Wadiyaan* of the movie *Roja* and the arresting valleys of Kashmir? I think it's fitting, really, considering the fact that our convoy grazed the circumference of Pulwama where a militant combat was taking place, while on its way to Srinagar. If you've read my previous travel stories you'd be aware it's not the first time I was in Ladakh. Back in 2016, I had already circumnavigated the Manali-Leh-Srinagar circuit albeit unable to venture to Nubra Valley owing to the landslides on the other side of Khardung La. This time, originally the Monastery Escape 2019 Expedition by Mahindra Adventure was to carve its way up to Leh via Manali, but 40 feet of snow walls across Baralacha La made it go the other way round, literally. Twenty SUVs, bumper-to-bumper, on their way to cross over the world's highest and treacherous passes look breathtaking and to be honest, slightly intimidating too.

"Media 2 (the name of my car in the convoy), try to bridge the gap! Adventure 5 fall back to your position; Convoy, bunch up!" The military style convoy system was fancy and added a certain character to the whole gig.

A little hotter than usual hot water shower, hits you in all the right places after a

EXPLORE NUBRA VALLEY

demanding all day drive. Adventure travel mixed with the right amount of comfort is difficult to achieve, but essential at the same time. The 5-star properties over the course of the journey made sure we were ready to take on every challenge come what may.

For those who belong to the 'been-there-done-that!' clan, let me tell you, this Ladakh trip was nothing like your usual Manali-Leh road-trip. For one, it seems like I have made it a mission to do at least one unusual thing while already on a trip to one of the most unusual places in the world. Last time it was venturing into the uncharted, glacial waters of the Zaskar River on a flimsy rubber dinghy. Now it was driving around on the pristine white sands of the Nubra Valley on tyres that had been partially deflated.

Reaching Leh via Srinagar was actually regular fare, crossing the beautiful valley of Sonamarg; going over Zoji La and a night in Kargil. What was special though was the amount of attention women drivers get on these roads from the oncoming traffic. A classic case of how-to-handle-fame moment for oh-so-humble-me! Of all the passes that I drove on, Khardung La, in spite of its altitude, is the easiest to negotiate. And in spite of a blizzard at the top it still felt overrated.

Each time I come to Khardung La I feel that people give in to the urge to capture their achievement so much that they forget to really experience the true magic of the place. So while people were running around trying to get that selfie at the Khardung La milestone, I was trying to walk the 100 metre stretch, breathing deeply with snow falling right into my mouth. Screw that selfie, I was just soaking in the view as much as I could. Who's to know when I'll be back here, if at all? I reached the edge of the mountain and was greeted by this massive white sheet. It was like the gods had laid a snowy bedsheet over everything that the eyes could see. It was one of those sights where the beauty of it all might make you stop breathing. I know I was breathless, light headed and overwhelmed. God, I love Ladakh.

A little ahead of Khalsar you catch the first glimpse of Nubra's famed sand dunes. It isn't quite like the dunes of Rajasthan where I come from but the idea of these dunes on either side of this 5km stretch of arrow straight road at an average altitude of 10,000 feet is quite something. It's ridiculous how easily you can get yourself stuck in the loose sand. The lead car spots a Safari Storme stuck not two feet away from the tarmac.



THE LAKE, 60 PER CENT OF WHICH IS IN TIBET, SHOWS YOU SHADES OF BLUE MORE NUMEROUS THAN YOU'D FIND ON A NEROLAC SHADE CARD

That we would pull him out wasn't even a question. There's something about this region that makes even random strangers bond without question. In anticipation of watching the recovery, three cars from the convoy impulsively parked a little off the road and ended up getting stuck too.

You might call them idiots but watching a car weighing 1.75 tonnes pulling out a car weighing almost 2 is quite the spectacle. That the Thar can pull the Safari Storme out like it's reeling a dead fish in gives you an idea of just how much this beast of a car can do.

The following morning our convoy headed back to the same stretch of road where we had played Good Samaritan just the previous day. The tyres were deflated partially to widen its footprint. This distributes the weight a bit more and helps prevent the vehicle from sinking in. We were supposed to take turns around a sandy off-road track.

The weather outside was bitterly cold with the mercury hovering around zero and sometimes tumbling a couple of notches below that as well. The bite in the air, the



mighty hills, the ferocious off-road machines and an immaculate skyline draws a picture worth every million dollar meeting you'll miss to be here. "Convoy members we're off-roading at approximately 10,000 ft. above sea level. It's not everyday that people get to do this so cheers to all of you!" crackles Vinod Nookala, DGM-Mahindra Adventure, over the radio.

From here on we were to drive to Pangong Tso and then to Leh via Chang La on the following day. Again, a route I hadn't seen on my previous visits. Numerous hairpin bends, dangerously narrow roads and the breathtakingly distracting beauty of the valley is all you'll see on this route. You only drive with your right hand with the left constantly shifting gears and managing the clutch because it is just so easy to burn right

through the plate. Fortunately, I was driving a brand new XUV 300 which makes for more than just a decent light off-road vehicle. Its 180mm ground clearance and 300Nm from the 1.5-litre turbo-diesel makes short work of the tarmac deprived roads of the Nubra and Ladakh valleys. The twists and turns and ever-changing scenery finally led us to our first stop for the day, Pangong Tso. Famished from a tiring drive we tucked right into lunch before driving another 15 kilometres to find a secluded campsite to find respite from an overcrowded Pangong bank.

The lake, 60 per cent of which is in Tibet, shows you shades of blue more numerous than you'd find on a Nerolac shade card. It's just miles of unending pellucid blue waters divided by barren brown mountains from the spotless blue skies. A scenery with such

A LITTLE AHEAD OF KHALSAR YOU CATCH THE FIRST GLIMPSE OF NUBRA'S FAMED SAND DUNES. IT ISN'T QUITE LIKE THE DUNES OF RAJASTHAN WHERE I COME FROM

sharp and vivid colours that it gives Snapseed and Lightroom a run for their money. But again, people running around to waste time in clicking different poses instead of taking in a scene striking enough to overpower Cleopatra herself. Why not just sit on the shore and ask yourself the questions you've been afraid to for the longest time? I don't mean to be poetic in an adventure travel story but Pangong Tso is just that inspiring. Next time, sit by the shore exchange an anecdote or two with a fellow traveller and see how long it remains with you.

Before I dive into another treatise on the right way to enjoy, why don't you plan your next expedition? Meanwhile for the next issue I'll write a story on getting sloshed at 10,000 feet, or maybe not, maybe some stories are not meant to be told but just to be lived. Where to next, Iceland? 🇮🇸



Clockwise from top: Massive icicles en route to Khardung La; A killer shot of a Scorpio bashing sand dunes; Various shots of a convoy moving; Travellers taking part in native cultural activities

