

Sand 2 Snow.





EXPERIENCE

Sand storm The Thar desert is where the Thar was tested and developed; naturally it feels at home





The fastest thing you'll ever chase is time, they said. So we had to

How often have we dreamed of a single snow flake when we're being scorched by the harsh rays of the Indian summer sun? But it has always been just that, a dream. An impossible one at that. Unless of course you have a Mahindra Thar in your garage and 24 hours to spare. In which case you might just make it from the *tandoor* hot sands of Jaisalmer to the white relief of snowy Manali

Words **Rohit Nalawade** Images **Rohit G Mane & Abhishek Benny**



Just three clicks For the effort to be recognised we'd have to do 3km of driving on sand before touching black top

Prep 'em up Slap on some purpose printed stickers and drop those PSIs from the rubber. The Thar will do the rest



9 :30 AM

We're at DEFCON 1. The two Mahindra Thars have been lined up, sitting on the crest of the dune as our crew sets up for the flag off of this mother of all endurance challenges. Adrenaline courses through our veins as we work at fever pitch to ensure that the team attempting this crazy run gets going at the right time. The air around us is crackling with the excitement of something big about to happen. I'm dead sure that if I reach out I'll be able to touch the electricity in the air, cut only by the whine of Benny's drone that has just flown inches above my head. Meanwhile, our lead-from-the-front editor Sirish, has gone into full-on vlogger mode. He has whipped out the GoPro and is rolling off yet another PTC. "Sand to snow. In 24 hours! That really is pushing the limits of both the Thar as well as us," he tells the future viewer of the video that we know will be epic.

On paper it hadn't seemed quite as daunting in the beginning. Google Maps estimates it will take us 23 hours to get from Jaisalmer to Manali. Nowhere near impossible. What that doesn't take into account however is the Indian summer.

"The air around us is crackling with the excitement of something big about to happen. I'm dead sure that if I reach out I'll be able to touch the electricity in the air, cut only by the whine of Benny's drone"



The significance of sand Not only was this our starting point but it was also symbolic of the sands of time against which the team would be competing



Besides, we would have to drive further up north to get to the white stuff. All this, while keeping an eye on the clock. It would be a tall order for both man and machine. That is why we've called in the big guns of Indian driving for this challenge. Safe, reliable and fast, these are drivers we can absolutely count on.

Driving the hard-top Thar mStallion along with our enthusiastic Ed is the only motorsport Arjuna awardee and India's greatest rally driver, Gaurav Gill. Driving the soft-top, we have ten-time Raid-de-Himalaya and five-time Desert Storm winner Suresh Rana, and appropriately enough, the king of the mountains has been paired with the king of the desert, Madan Choudhary, who spends his days in the dunes. And we're going to be relying on that with Madan leading from the front through the most hardcore dunes in India before we head towards the unforgiving snows our country has to offer, with a massive jaunt across India's unpredictable, and at times, perilous, highway network.



10:00 AM

Shots in the bag, Mohit Vats, the adjudicator for the India Book of Records, flags off our epic record run.

Every minute counts and even as I hustle it back to the support vehicle with the camera crew, Madan and Suresh have already scrambled off in a trail of dust, with Gill and Sirish hot on their tail. Madan isn't showboating, but the lynchpin of desert testing is rather leading our posse through a safe path until we get to the Bharatmala road. "Driving the Thar in the desert takes a lot of practice. But thanks to Mahindra who spent one and a half years doing R&D and testing the Thar in the sand dunes, they have made it so capable," explains Madan. "It doesn't matter if you are a beginner or an expert driver. This machine can take you anywhere in the desert," he mentions with pride.

For our record to be valid, our Thars would first have to drive 3km in the sand before hitting the tarmac. Once we hit the

near-utopian sight of the Bharatmala road with its butter smooth tarmac, we shift to 2WD and Gill finally decides to stop hunting for the ESP-off button for performing slides. What lays ahead of us is a 1200+ kilometre sprint to the north and there's no turning back now.



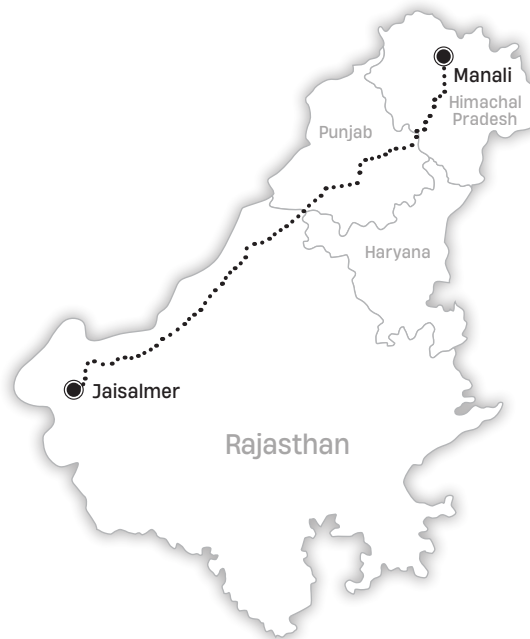
11:00 AM

An hour after hitting the black top, we clock a driving distance of 81km.

We roll past the 100km mark ten minutes later and the views are spectacular, with dunes as far as the eye can see and traffic seems to be non-existent. I have been on this very road barely a few months ago but the view, oh man the view, it never ceases to amaze me. I am already getting Dakar vibes. Our crew cruises past Pokhran, Phalodi and Gajner, and even though the Thar mStallions put out 150bhp and are good for sustaining high triple-digit cruising speeds, we keep enthusiasm in check, sticking to the 80kmph speed limit.



Taking a chill pill That's just before we've been flagged off. Once the flag went down, we were hotfooting across the Thar desert, in clouds of sand



It's a straight drive Forgive the cricket analogy but just look at that map. Can you think of a better analogy to describe the route that we'd be taking?



“Once we hit the the Bharatmala road with its butter smooth tarmac, we shift to 2WD and Gill finally decides to stop hunting for the ESP-off button for performing slides”



EXPERIENCE

Shoot and scoot With not a moment to lose, we, especially the click meisters, were happy to get pretty trees to shoot under





Rolling along at a ridiculous pace Indian highways have strangely slow speed limits. But you either stick to them or risk losing time talking to cops

“We’re taking it easy after lunch since time seems to be on our side, but it is not like we’re driving slow either. We cross the 500km mark six hours after starting off from the dunes west of Jaisalmer”

Take it easy On public roads the game is different. It isn’t a question of outright speed. Rather, a matter of maintaining a steady pace of progress

Besides, why risk losing time in a quarrel with cops armed with speed guns? “We’d rather stay within the speed limit even if it’s boring than risk losing time to a cop armed with a speed gun,” says Sirish.

You’ve got to remember that unlike our earlier endurance records, this isn’t a closed-off circuit that we’re driving on but rather a public road, and with the unpredictable nature of Indian highways with errant drivers and unexpected cattle crossings, safety is paramount and non-negotiable. So we stick to 80, with phones plugged in for navigation, music cranked up for a good time, and savour the mile-munching all the way to Bikaner.



12:30 PM

Everyone talks about SUVs being the rage of the sales charts today but few touch upon the reasons as to

why. And behind the wheel of the Thar which is a true-blue SUV and not some hatchback that has been jacked-up into a crossover, you find out precisely why. While the roads in Rajasthan were devoid of heavy traffic for the most part, passing through the smaller towns meant that we were swamped in choc-a-bloc jams. With two-wheelers cutting you left and right and people crossing the road without any sense of decorum, it helps to have a commanding seating position that lets you keep an eye on the road better. It is easier to muscle past traffic too in the Thar, ensuring that we make good progress. “We crossed Jaisalmer around 10:30 in the morning and the GPS is showing 20 hours to Manali — if we drive non-stop,” says Gaurav Gill from behind the wheel, clearly pleased about the ground that we’ve covered. At 1pm, the Thars make a quick stop for refuelling while the support crew pushes on towards





Thar meets the friendlies No matter where it goes, the icon attracts attention. People gather, children smile. The Thar is also a lifestyle statement

Bikaner, to grab a packed lunch from Narendra Bhawan which we later devour on the move. "Driving across the country is all about sampling the different food that you get across the country, but on this drive as much as we'd love to stop for a leisurely lunch, we cannot afford it," says Sirish, in between mouthfuls while behind the wheel.



2:00 PM

We continue to pile on the miles and turn off State Highway 6 at Dungargarh going up to Sardarshahar.

The highway here narrows down to a single carriageway but that said, it continues to be a spectacular road, complete with crests and gentle bends to keep things interesting unlike an arrow straight road which simply has us droning on through the desert. Our content crew is having a ball thanks to

the beautiful view, and Benny has his drone in the air once again, capturing our Thars as we trundle across the country. We're taking it easy after lunch since time seems to be on our side, but it is not like we're driving slow either. We cross the 500km mark six hours after we started off from Jaisalmer at 4pm, and it would've been quicker still had we not taken it easy and just pressed on in #FullSend mode. But this record is not a flex of the Thar's top speed or performance, but rather its comfort and usability over long distances. The mStallion TGD engine is mated to a very responsive torque converter automatic, which means that we cover long distances without breaking a sweat. What is shocking is the comfort, which is aeons ahead of the earlier Thar.

"This is a really amazing road trip for me as I've only played around with the Thar in the dunes until now and this is the



EXPERIENCE

Nothing more than a working lunch

That's all you get when you're racing against time



The big guns In a challenge such as this, it helps to have a man like Gaurav Gill on your side

first time I'm driving it for such a massive stint on the road," says Madan who uses a Thar CRDe as his daily driver and is blown away by the comfort of the new Thar. And it feels uncompromised on every front. There's air-conditioning, a touchscreen infotainment system with Apple CarPlay, cushy seats and the refinement levels are impressive. There is a bit of wind-roar which is inherent in the drop top Thar that Madan and Suresh are driving, but at legal speeds, it is never too much of a bother at all. There's good room for four with a decent amount of boot space, though with all our cameras and laptops stowed away in the rear seat and the boot packed to the brim, things can tend to be a tight squeeze.



6:00 PM

The odo clocks 638km as we cross the border into Haryana and tank up at the first pump that we see.

All our cars are being tanked up to the brim since fuel in Haryana is considerably cheaper than in Rajasthan — a staggering ₹13 cheaper per litre! We've been on the road for eight hours and despite our press-on driving style, the Thars have been consistently delivering

a fuel-economy figure of 11.5kmpl, not too bad considering the refinement and the power of the 2-litre mStallion engine which gets direct injection and turbocharging. The entire crew takes a moment to stretch our legs since we've been cooped up in our cars for so long. It has been smooth sailing until now with dual carriageways and lovely highways for the most part, but Suresh Rana warns us that our record run is far from over and in the mountains with their roadworks and traffic is where the going would get tougher.

“The odo clocks 638km as we cross the border into Haryana and tank up at the first pump that we see. All our cars are being tanked up to the brim since fuel is so much cheaper here”





Splashing through Time and tide wait for none. Neither do we





CLICK TO WATCH
THE YOUTUBE VIDEO

Rocky mountain high The mStallion engine is more than capable of holding its own in the mountains

EXPERIENCE

Colour no bar The Thar enjoys kicking up anything that is loose. If it isn't the desert sand, white powdery snow will do





From 40 degrees to minus 4 It's hard to imagine that we were being baked less than half a day earlier

With the tanks fuelled up, we drive onto the lovely dual carriageways of National Highway 52, as our chief photographer Rohit and cinematographer Sachin refuse to stop for a tea break, instead banking beautiful shots of the sun setting over the fields of Haryana during the golden hour, with our Thars basking in the last rays of the day. As nightfall approaches, we have covered 750km since the flag-off in Jaisalmer at 10am, maintaining an average speed of 70kmph. We're by-passing Hisar and stopping for a well-deserved dinner at 8:30pm in Kaithal instead.

“This road, National Highway 154 is Rana’s home turf and he leads through the mountains with elan in the soft top Thar, using every bit of smoothness, precision and experience”



9:30 PM

With the crew all fuelled up and all the bug splatter cleaned off the Thar’s windscreen, we jump back into the SUVs and are back at it. We cover the 130km to Chandigarh in just under two and half hours and get onto National Highway 21 which takes us to Rupnagar, Bharatnagar and past the Kiratpur Sahib. As we drive further up north, our spirits are further buoyed by the sight of pimped-out Thars with their maaasssive wheels which are a frequent sight in this neck of the woods. There’s no traffic to slow down for, all those tractor trolleys which wreak havoc during the day aren’t there to add to the chaos now, and our driving gets more spirited to the tunes of our music through the night. We make one last impromptu stop at midnight, to indulge our sweet tooth in the highly recommended *falooda* at Kharar, fully aware that it would now be down to the wire with a non-stop sprint through the mountains to Manali. And for the first time, I start to worry — would we make it to the snow in time?



12:30 AM

Motoring on into Himachal Pradesh, the mountains are in view as we hustle up the Thars through the

twisties. This road, National Highway 154 is Rana’s home turf and he leads through the mountains with elan in the soft top Thar, using every bit of the smoothness, precision and experience that he has to fall back on after winning the gruelling Raid-de-Himalayas ten times on similar roads. Gill being Gill, is in hot pursuit on Rana’s tail, using every bit of the mStallion engine’s power to keep the gap tight. The automatic ‘box doesn’t fail to impress either, with its extremely responsive shift times, we never have to stick it in manual mode. And as for the dynamics, the Thar is surprisingly well-controlled too, even with rally drivers driving enthusiastically behind the wheel. The independent suspension takes unexpected bumps and speed breakers well in its stride, and the robust underpinnings mean that we don’t have to slow down as much. We accelerate past slow moving truckies and tourist coaches, and when I see the peaks of the snow-clad Himalayas shimmering in the moonlight, that provides me with a glimmer of hope that comes crashing down as we cross Bilaspur.



3:00 AM

We zoom past Bilaspur without any problems but then Murphy plays his card and we are forced to stop



The twists in the turns 400km on the plains can be done in 4-5 hours. Up here, in the twisted world of the mountains, it could take 10-12 hours

due to the inevitable four-laning road works as we are about to exit the district. It is half-past three in the morning, Manali is just 240km away with Google Maps estimating a 6am ETA, and it is freezing cold, as Sirish whips out his trusty GoPro and steps down to give yet another piece to camera for our social media handles. The jam clears about half an hour later, and while we soldier on through the night, our average speeds have taken a massive hit, a victim of yet another major traffic snarl at quarter past 4 in the morning. Suresh Rana also explains that unlike the highways in the plains where 400km may take 4 hours to cover, in the mountains, the same distance takes about 10 to 12 hours!

"Driving at night in the mountains is a unique experience. You can spot headlights coming your way much earlier, but the visibility is much lower," says Rana from behind the wheel. Rana loves driving at night in the mountains but he warns us that due to the aforementioned four-laning, the road surface now has massive potholes with mud and slush in the mix. In any other car, you'd be reduced to crawling speeds, but with the Thar and its robust suspension, you hammer through everything without so much as a second thought, and we continue to claw back the lost ground up the mountains in the darkness. We've been awake for almost twenty hours now and I can't help but resist a yawn...



5:30 AM

We reach Manali at the crack of dawn and while the Mahindra Thar is more than capable of pushing on until we reach the snows without any complaint, our crew is totally spent from the long haul through the night. Instead we point the Thar towards The Himalayan, thrilled at the prospect of some much-needed rest in a luxurious bed. Time for our tired selves to snore away to glory!



7.00 AM

Having caught a breather at The Himalayan, we feast on piping hot breakfast, reluctantly leaving the cushy environs to get to the white



“It’s finally 8am when Mohit Vats, the India Book of Record adjudicator dons his tie and hands over the official record medal and certificate. After logging 1299.4km in 22 hours, the Mahindra Thar has done it”

Chuck the coffee, we’re good with doughnuts Gill celebrates in style once the record is in the bag

stuff. We point our Thars towards the Atal tunnel. The original plan was to turn right at the tunnel exit but since a landslide the previous day has shut it down, we hang left and drive for an hour, past the lone petrol pump in Tandi and the district headquarters in Keylong all the way up to the snow-draped river bank in Jispa. The view is simply the most breathtaking vista I have seen over the past 24 hours, so much so that I fill my phone storage taking video after video of nature’s masterpiece. It’s finally 8am when Mohit Vats, the India Book of Record adjudicator dons his tie and hands over the official record medal and certificate. After logging 1299.4km in 22 hours, the Mahindra Thar has done it. It’s about lunch time when we wrap up our filming and that’s when Gill decides to celebrate by turning off the ESP in the Thar and serving iced-up doughnuts, bringing an end to our epic, Sand 2 Snow record run. **4x4**

Curtain call A challenge is only as good as the crew that takes it on. In our case, we have the best

