

EXPERIENCE

**In
No
Hurry**



EXPERIENCE

Dambuk Across the river bed enroute to river rafting





EXPERIENCE

Tawang Winding through the Eastern Himalayas enroute to North East India's remotest corner



Shergaon campsite Warrior tribe dance greets our intrepid road trippers



Hurry Singh earned his stripes on the rally circuit

Spectators, and there were plenty back in the day, always knew when Hari Singh was coming. He'd be pulling 500 more revs, holding on to a gear longer than his rivals, and have one, two, three or – if you happened to be pointing your camera lens at him – all four wheels in the air

Words **Ouseph Chacko** Images **Jatin Verma**



Hari Singh

Before Narain Karthikeyan, Karun Chandhok and Gaurav Gill there was Hari Singh – the first big name and recognisable face of Indian motorsport. Star of the JK rally team, he won 4 national championships and the 2000 Asia Zone title. As head of operations at JK Tyre motorsport he now conducts national championship events and leads expeditions to remote corners of India.

At times Hari wouldn't even have a wheel attached to his car. Not that he would let such trifling matters dent either his confidence or commitment. They say a picture speaks a thousand words, and the one you see on the left tells you everything you need to know about one of the greatest drivers India has ever produced. This was taken on the Calcutta rally, on a live stage. The cloud of dust in the background tells you straight away that Hari is still in a hurry. He's now driving without pace notes, 'blind' is the term rally drivers use, and the reason for that is his co-driver is otherwise occupied hanging on for dear life on the bonnet. Perpetually sideways, Hari was a touch too exuberant this time and ripped clean the left rear wheel along with the brakes, suspension and all the paraphernalia that connected it to the body. Men would have parked up. Hari threw Bittoo on the bonnet, his weight keeping the two front wheels on the road, and thus equipped Hari finished the stage, brought the car into service where repairs were effected, and off he went to rip through another stage.

Always in a hurry was our Hari. Four national rally championships, the inaugural Asia Zone title, and heaving trophy shelves is clear enough proof that he was among the fastest drivers this country has ever produced. But I said greatest. And that's down to his versatility. When the plug was pulled on his rallying career, at his very peak one might add, he directed his skills towards

making road cars handle better and the tyres they run on perform better. With a life spent in the mountains he led driving expeditions to the Himalayas, taking the first lot of journalists overlanding through Ladakh. Whenever a new World's Highest Pass opened up, he was there. The first winter drives, he was there. Snow chains, he's the man who taught us all to use it. And then we stepped back to see how he clawed through four feet of snow and ice to open up tracks in his Mahindra Legend.

Hopefully we won't be needing snow chains on this drive through the deepest, most remote, the most pristine depths of Arunachal Pradesh. But even if we did encounter the white stuff there's nothing to worry about. Hari Singh is at the head of the convoy in the new Thar. And he's in no hurry.

“When the plug was pulled on his rallying career, Hari directed his skills towards making road cars handle better, and the tyres they run on perform better”

Man



I've driven the old Thar plenty and I love it to bits but I know that to most people it was a bit of a camel – very capable and iconic but a bit too hardcore. This new one? The intent is clear – keep the iconic shape but send it to finishing school; teach it some manners and chisel out the sharp edges. I'd say the result looks timeless. It makes you want one before you even step into it.

Step into it and I want one even more. Where the old Thar invited you to experience the elements, the new Thar puts a nice layer of suave between you and the outsides. The seats are superb; they've upgraded the old hose-down interiors into something that you can still hose down after an off-road session but one that doesn't make you

feel like you've been shortchanged. Heck, it even has a touchscreen display and Apple CarPlay.

We have been handed the diesel manual and on the road out of Dibrugarh the smooth engine delivers punch torque. Assam (the Dibrugarh part) has always been and I believe always will be a pain to drive through but with this engine's overtaking power and the Thar's road presence, lesser vehicles and errant cyclists scurry for cover as our convoy of 12 Thars approaches them. We get to the Arunachal border without too much stress and once we are out of Assam, the roads and the scenery improve drastically.

It is on the second day of the drive that the new Thar proves that it is still

“Ensconced in the new Thar's nicely insulated cabin and relying on the auto-diff lock and clever electronics made everything child's play. It makes even modest skills look more than Instagram worthy”



as capable, if not more, than the old one. Our destination for the day is Basar in central Arunachal. We are supposed to take a regular highway route but find it shut due to construction work. An alternative route is suggested but that turns out to be closed too. And so, to our luck, we end up on a 100km off-road track through the forests. It is beautiful, driving through heavy rain on a road that's used by nobody. Driving through that forest on a road littered with rocks, slush, slippery hairpin bends and mud should be quite difficult but, honestly, I don't notice. Ensnconced in the new Thar's nicely insulated cabin and relying on the auto-diff lock and clever electronics make it child's play. Sit back, steer and stare in wonder at the beauty

of the landscape all around you.

This new Thar is much easier to drive over the rough stuff than the old Thar. The old one demanded more concentration, more corrective inputs, and more skill to take you through the really tough sections. This new one is on another level! The electronic brake locking differential makes it almost point and squirt easy! Since we are in the manual we only have to make sure the transfer case has four-low engaged, the correct gear is engaged and that's it – steer where we want to go. It's just that simple.

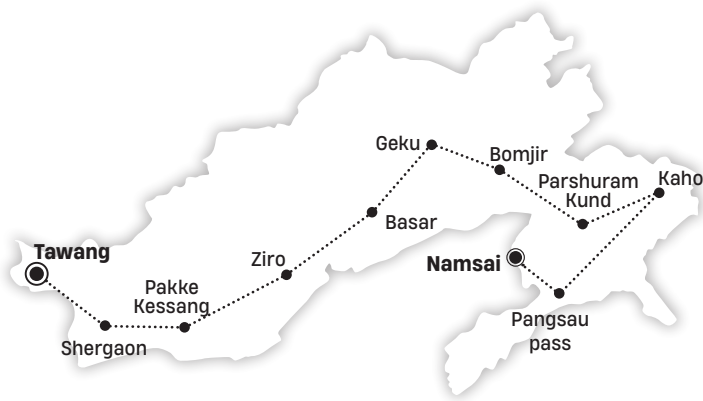
I know a lot of people will appreciate how, at the very least, the new Thar will make their modest skills look more than Instagram worthy!



JK Ranger H/T tyres Newly developed for the Thar tested on this expedition



Machine



“Roads that wind their way over mountain tops and drop down into valleys carved out by tributaries of the Brahmaputra – it really is paradise”

Trans Arunachal Drive 2021 Starting at Namsai we went further east to Kaho, the easternmost village of India, and then headed west across this remote, pristine and spectacular state to end 15 days later at Tawang

Arunachal Pradesh in many ways, is the last frontier. It is the biggest of the seven sister states of the North East of India and it has seen wars, has ancient cultures and traditions, and offers spicy food and *apong*.

Apong is a local alcoholic drink made out of fermented rice and on one of my earlier trips to Arunachal, at a village called Thembang, I was treated to a very nice tradition where visitors are welcomed with song and dance and the women make you sing and dance while pouring copious amounts of *apong* down your throat. But there’s so much more to Arunachal. The people are very hospitable, the landscape is spectacular and the accommodation is, erm, basic. Because it is so far east the tourism infrastructure, though being upgraded at a rather rapid pace, isn’t as great as the traveller might expect. And, because the infrastructure is being developed, you will find incredible roads that wind their way over mountain tops and drop down into valleys carved out by tributaries of the Brahmaputra. It really is paradise. You can also expect terrible roads that have been recently blasted out of the mountainside; roads that are wheel deep in mud because of the recent showers; roads that make you glad that you are driving something like the Thar that can handle all that Arunachal throws at you.

Believe me when I say that this easternmost state of India is still one of the last frontiers of real adventure in our country.

Active local administration support Hari Singh greets Pema Khandu, chief minister of Arunachal Pradesh



Culture



Legend



Hari Singh has had a long association with Mahindra and he's driven the old Thar extensively. I know because about two years ago, I was on a Mahindra drive with him in Himachal Pradesh. It was winter, there was snow and the original plan of heading into Spiti was buried overnight under seven avalanches that blocked our way into the valley. Hari was leading the convoy and his plan B was an assault on Chanshal pass. There was one small problem – the road to Chanshal was also was under three feet of snow and ice.

And so, for the next eight hours, Hari and his crew showed us how to winch, smash and ice-axe our way through the next three kilometres. We didn't make it up the pass but we did learn a lot from the Flying Sikh about how to not give up and more importantly, how to stay warm after the sun goes down.

We learn a lot from him this time too. One evening, as the *apong* flows, I ask him what he thinks of the new Thar and in his deep baritone he tells me he is really blown away by it. He says it is quick and quiet and a whole world away from the old Thar.

What's really impressing him he adds is the fact that the Thar can take all that hammering and yet is so comfortable! He says that he thinks it is able, comfortable, and has all the skills to be used as a daily driver.

He knows what he's talking about because he has been leading this Mahindra and JK Tyre Trans Arunachal Drive since it began two weeks ago. We've been rafting, fishing, off-roading on the still under construction road to Ziro (yes, same place where that awesome music festival happens) and are now heading over the 13,700ft Sela pass towards the town of Tawang. From there, we head up to Sangetsar lake. It's been an awesome drive – everything, the place, the mode of transport, the people who are in charge of the drive – it has all come together to make this one epic drive.

As I've come to realise over the past few days, the new Thar makes you want to get one for yourself the minute you lay eyes on it. Under its new layers of sophistication beats the heart of a hardcore mountain goat and that mix is what makes it so cool. As for Hari, he's just cool. Always has been, always will be. **44**

“Everything – the place, the mode of transport, the people who are in charge of the drive – it has all come together to make this one epic drive”



Pakke Kesang Detour to avoid road works delivered a spectacular 100km route through the forests