

EXPERIENCE

**WINTER  
HAS  
COME**







## EXPERIENCE

**Snow mobile** The Thar enjoys being driven in snow and the various electronic aids make it easy to drive too





**Back breaking work** Zoji La is spectacular but accessing it is only possible thanks to the tireless work of the BRO





## We go hunting for snow with the Mahindra Thar

Only the bravest of the brave, the stupidest of the stupid or the maddest of the mad would think of tackling Zoji La in winter. Then again, we at Engage 4x4 have been called all three, so there we were slipping and sliding through snow and black ice in our very able Mahindra Thar on a first of its kind trip. Why? To have fun of course and the lofty objective of coming back with a lesson or two, or three, on how to drive in these hyper challenging conditions so you'll be chill when you go there

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**Up above the world so high** The Thar continues to shine like a diamond in the sky





**W**hy do people go on road trips? For leisure, right? To enjoy the journey, and take in the sights and sounds of a place. Essentially to relax. So people go to Kashmir and explore its heavenly surroundings. In summer, of course, when the plains are being scorched by a tropical sun. But that's for normal folk. At Engage 4x4, we like to do things a little differently. So we relax by getting into our Mahindra Thar and heading to the white heights of Zoji La, in the dead of winter!

The fact that this was also the perfect opportunity for us to experience driving in snow with the Mahindra Thar for the first time added to the lure. Now we've travelled the length and breadth of the country with this new Thar and really the only thing left to do was have some fun in the snow. So when the opportunity presented itself, we grabbed it with both hands and headed straight to a road we've know and loved over the years. The mighty Zoji La that connects the Kashmir valley with Ladakh.

Many of you would have read about the government's plans for an all-weather road up here but that's still just a plan. So no, the road remains closed in winter just like all these decades past. So how

did we get there? Sheer, dumb luck. We managed to catch a tiny window of opportunity when the pass had actually opened thanks to reduced snowfall. We made the most of this, by driving to Sonmarg, which was our base.

The little town sits at the base of the mighty pass which is at an elevation of 11,575 feet. Here, in this sky scraping world, it starts snowing in October. The snowfall reaches its peak in around January before tapering off slowly. Zoji La, the second highest mountain pass on the Srinagar-Leh highway after Fotu La, remains snowbound even as late as April.

**“This was the perfect opportunity for us to experience driving in snow with the Thar for the first time and added to the lure”**

**Patience** The arrival of winter means long lines and waiting for a window to get access to the Zoji La

**The crew** Vikram Kapur knows these parts like the back of his hand and guided us through the snow-bound passes





Saner people who come here in normal times when it isn't snowbound, will find that the 100-odd-kilometre drive from Srinagar to Sonmarg can be done in about three hours. The last few kilometres as you approach Sonmarg are absolutely spectacular, where you can see the mighty pass in the background and you drive along the river that flows to your right. It's especially mesmerising when all you can see around is snow and the black ribbon of tarmac you're driving on breaking the white sheet of monotony on the mountain slopes. I have always found its beauty breathtaking. Every single time.

**“As soon as we started our climb up the pass, the scenery around just kept getting more spectacular with every passing minute. And then there was snow!”**

This time though we wouldn't be staring at white snowy slopes but actually attempting to plough through a snow field with a sheer drop to one side and a white unforgiving wall on the other side. There were many unknown variables to think about but chief among them was how far the Thar would go in these freeing, soft, tractionless conditions. Just how far up the pass would we get before getting bogged down and having to ask for help?

One of the things we have learnt over the years is that there is no substitute to proper planning and preparation. And boy, oh boy, this was a trip that would need preparation. Beginning of course with the right equipment – a couple of good, strong tow ropes, D-shackles, ladders and snow chains, to say the least. On hindsight, we wouldn't have minded a winch. So if you're planning to head there too, get one fixed to your Thar if you can. Some heavy duty auxiliary lamps wouldn't be a bad idea either. And obviously, your vehicle has to be in top shape.

It would also obviously be a bit silly to attempt doing a trip such as this without proper support. And that's exactly why we had our good friend and mountain goat Vikram Kapur with us. Armed with the manual Thar and plenty of knowledge and experience in these parts of the country, we have relied on Vikram on some of our other epic adventures too. And he proved to be just the guide we needed. As an automotive journalist, we usually wake up at the crack of dawn to get the perfect shots as the sun rises. But not when the outside temperature is 10°C, below zero! For starters, the water in the pipes would be frozen, so you could forget about using water in the bathroom for anything. Out of the relative warmth of the hotel and in the comfortably heated cabin of the Thar, the next, and even bigger, challenge would be the black ice formed on the road.

**Captain Mod curve** Against all odds the 13 Field Company built this road in 1954. This memorial is to Captain H C Vadhera who lost his life when his vehicle slid down this curve







**Beauty of the beast** The Thar was right at home, running flawlessly despite some harsh terrain





**Ploughing through snow** Finding an empty trail with plenty of snow meant we got to test out the winter abilities of the Thar



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Difficult to detect, especially in fickle weather, it is essentially snow that’s melted from the mountain face and trickled onto the road during the day, only to get frozen again overnight, forming a thin layer of ice which almost camouflages itself on the road. One wrong move on this and it could send your vehicle into a massive slide or spin. With roads as narrow and tricky as they are up here in the mountains, that’s not the best way forward or backwards, in most cases, and downwards off the mountain side is the one you really want to avoid. Sure, we’ve had our fair share of driving on various types of loose surfaces but that doesn’t mean we automatically know how to handle a car in low-traction situations and you need to respect the conditions.

Which is why we set off only after the sun was well up and the possibility of encountering black ice on the road was reduced but not completely eliminated. Looking back I think it’s also why we were asked to turn back when we reached the base of the pass on the first day we attempted to climb. The authorities were very clear, that they couldn’t risk letting civilians up there. More so, since connectivity is almost non-existent here and not long before we reached, they had rescued a handful of vehicles stranded up there due to the changing weather which saw a snow storm out of the blue.

Well, it did require a bit of convincing but eventually we managed to assure them that we knew what we were doing and they let us through the following morning. Once on the move up, progress going up the pass was slow as we took a cautious approach, which was the

main advice the officers from Border Road Organisation (BRO) who build and maintain these roads, had passed on to us. We must appreciate the work and effort that these brave souls put in conditions that most of us would struggle to survive in, let alone doing hard labour. Despite the rarified oxygen levels and chilling sub-zero temperature and biting winds, they brave out the conditions to allow our troops to have access to places which are sensitive and need their vigilance.

They let us through knowing the abilities of the Thar and since we were also carrying most of the equipment required to bail us out of a sticky situation. But with the warning of not trying anything too adventurous or going further than we thought we could. As soon as we started our climb up the pass, the scenery around just kept getting more spectacular with every passing minute. And then there was snow! Now obviously this wasn’t on the main road going up the pass, but a path just off the main road, leading towards a village which was obviously not inhabited during the winters. This meant that the trail was barely used by anyone at this time of the year and was free of traffic, as was the pass for that matter with just a few army trucks moving along with a few locals.

Driving on snow requires a little more patience than usual and most importantly a calm head. It’s important to remember that the car or in most cases SUV, is not going to behave like it does under regular road driving conditions. The level of grip is much, much lower and even if you think you have watched enough videos or tutorials, the actual, practical feeling is something that you definitely need to experience to really enjoy. The Thar, it took to the snow (without trying to sound cliché) like a fish to water. Of course you get maximum traction once you engage 4x4 mode, but to have some childish fun and slide around, it’s best kept in two-wheel drive.

The rear is playful and always lets you catch the slide. And thanks to its quick steering and short wheelbase, it’s actually pretty easy to catch. But you need to remember one very important thing when driving on snow and ice, that the





steering wheel isn't your only means of steering the car. The throttle becomes equally important and you have to learn how to use it to your advantage, always feathering, rather than going full on or fully off. Feel the rear rotate and adjust your input accordingly. Too much and you'll find yourself spinning around. Too little and you'll find yourself buried in a snow bank. It's all about finding the right balance. It's also important to remember not to suddenly stomp on the brakes in such slippery conditions. Most modern cars and SUVs are equipped with ABS and once this gets activated on such a surface, the car will most likely just slide straight on. It's always advisable to keep longer braking distances, where you have sufficient margin for error.

The trail we drove on didn't require us to bring out the snow chains as it fortunately wasn't thick snow or completely frozen. Part of this credit should also go to the Thar's excellent and intelligent four-wheel-drive system

which sends power to the wheels with most traction, almost never letting you feel the lack of grip from the surface. And despite our car being an automatic, it was very easily controlled when things got tricky. You can take manual control via the gear lever, which honestly, I didn't have to bother with. All the electronic trickery in the Thar has definitely made driving in extreme conditions a lot easier and even accessible for people without much experience. It's for experiences such as these and the ability to literally go anywhere, that you would want a Thar.

Once done messing about in the snow and getting some of the great shots you see on these pages, we continued our climb up Zoji La. Despite there being close to no traffic, driving was still a challenge thanks to the slippery road surface. There was plenty of ice on the road and even loose mud in certain sections, which made judging the terrain all the more important. We also encountered sections where it was only wide enough for a

single vehicle to pass. This was especially tricky and it's where you need to be super alert. Looking far ahead is the key and anticipation also becomes important.

By late afternoon we had safely negotiated our way up the mighty Zoji La. While it was mentally challenging for us to overcome the cold and road conditions, the Thar had no such trouble. In fact, we barely even exploited the true potential of its 4x4 abilities, despite conditions being pretty extreme for man and machine. We set off to tackle the unknown and get a true taste of what winter feels like in Kashmir, which I'm happy to say we achieved. What made it all so much fun was the adventure that came with the challenge.

For us adventure crazy folk, driving the Thar to Sonmarg and then up through to Zoji La in winter ticks all the right boxes. The fact that we managed to find some fun snow trails and let the Thar loose like the wild child it is on the white stuff was just the icing on the cake that we





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**No chink in the armour** The Thar was so comfortable on snow, we did not even need the snow chains



**Wildlife spotting** Is not that difficult, we came across this bear on our way down

needed. It even taught me more about having better control over the power on tap and even steering wheel inputs, while using the electronic aids to my advantage for winter driving. It was just the right amount of power for most conditions and more than that, the right type of ability to tackle whatever we threw at it.

The unpredictable weather and road conditions in this part of the country during this time of the year did everything it could to not let us through. But with the Thar at hand, we were confident of facing whatever was thrown at us. That's not to say you can drive in snowy

conditions easily or just go without much prior planning. And talking about planning, Vikram tells us that Ladakh with its frozen lakes and mountains looks straight like something out of a Game of Thrones scene from beyond the Wall. But he also warns us that temperatures tend to plummet below minus 30 degrees. And just getting there can be a massive challenge in itself. At least, for people. Maybe that's where we should head next with the Thar and test its mettle. Now if we can be mad, brave and stupid one more time, it would make for a great story, right? Stay tuned! **44**