



What's in a name...

Nerves. They hit you like a freight train

The guy driving ahead of me had already gotten stuck once, just a couple of metres in. It took the Mahindra Adventure team a good 10 minutes to dig him out of the sand, and I was up next. Leaving the comfort of this hard packed trail on the fringes of the desert, to surf the dunes

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The Royal Escape An incredible adventure that took our convoy of Thars to spectacular places such as Jawai and the Thar desert

I had been here before. A few months before the Royal Escape that had brought us to Jaisalmer, I found myself in the desert in a Mahindra Thar for our 'Thar to the Thar' story. So I had *some* experience on the dunes, but not enough to keep the nerves at bay. The fact that I was one of the more experienced journalists on the 'Escape wasn't helping. All these years, I have been the noob in more experienced company. But not today. I felt the watchful eyes of the others on me. Is this what performance anxiety feels like?

Slot one lever into 4-Low, slot the other into drive, and gas it. I recall what Madan-ji, our host when we were here last and an absolute master at sand driving told me – "You don't need to be too aggressive. 40-60 per cent throttle is all you need". Let's start with 40, then. I'd rather be conservative than go overboard like that overzealous idiot with zero mechanical sympathy.

"I'd rather be conservative than go overboard like that overzealous idiot with zero mechanical sympathy"

Take the plunge The new Thar is rather easy to drive and is not intimidating to novice off-roaders





Hitting the sand for the first time is always an alien sensation. And I can now confirm that hitting it for a second time is just as alien. Instantly, the Thar felt different. The steering felt heavier, the tyres were struggling for traction and I could feel it getting bogged down. Not good. Momentum was key in the sand, and there was a climb approaching. Instinct told me to floor it, but I remembered the advice I was given. 40 to 60 per cent. I eased the throttle pedal in a little more but not all the way. The revs rose, and so did my confidence as the Thar fought its way up the dune.

But we weren't done yet. I still had to get it down on the other side. Too fast and I would launch myself off the dune. Not advised, unless you know exactly what you are doing. I didn't. Too slow, and I wouldn't clear the crest and would have to back up, gather enough momentum and start all over again. Judging this is incredibly difficult because when you're pointing up a dune, all you can see are your white knuckles and the clear blue sky. I let off the throttle right before I hit the top of the dune. Both gravity and the sand worked together to cut speed much quicker than I expected but I had done enough. I felt the nose tip forward. The blue sky was replaced by a drop that seemed impossible, but I had no time to think. Momentum, remember? I managed to control the urge to slam the brakes and allowed the Thar to slide down the dune with the sand slowing it down without a fuss. Phew! Now the next one.

The Thar's ability is absolutely incredible. Here I was, an absolute novice at driving on sand, clambering up and down dunes like I had no business doing. I had attempted to drive the Mahindra Legend that was our lead car and spent more time stationary than I did moving. The Thar, on the other hand, was absolutely relentless. The ceiling of its abilities is so high, that you don't have to do much to keep it moving. As long as you have your basics in place and remotely know where to give it a little more throttle and where to hold back, you'll be fine.

It wasn't just me, either! We had some absolute novices here, including cub

Mahindra Legend

Our lead car on the Royal Escape and great perspective on how far 4x4s have come



Incredible views

The sunsets in the Thar need to be seen to be believed



Hardcore Off-road enthusiasts can push their own limits in the Thar



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journalists who had never touched a transfer case lever before, forget drive off-road. And they were confidently scaling dunes! They'd had a quick taste of the Thar's capabilities the previous day: crawling up the large granite monoliths in Jawai but that was nowhere as demanding of driver skill as driving on sand is. And yet, there we all were.

Time and time again, we've talked about how easy the Thar is to drive. How much more refined it is compared to the older Thar. How it is more comfortable and easier to live with. But you don't buy a Thar because it keeps you comfortable. You buy it for its ability off-road. And driving off-road in a Thar is now easier too. It's a combination of so many things. The 4x4. The diff locks. The automatic transmission. The lighter steering. You don't have to stretch your hand too far to engage 4-Low. Hell, the Thar will even tell you your tyre pressures so you can set them just right before you head out dune bashing. It isn't idiot proof though.

I saw one of the instructors on our drive surfing the dunes like those Dakar buggies do, and I followed in his wake only to find myself beached at a scary angle, with the Thar threatening to topple over onto its side. But again, extricating it wasn't too hard – I just had to turn in the direction I was leaning in and ease it out.

We've talked so much about how the new Thar appeals to the fence-sitters but does so without alienating its core audience. That outright off-road ability remains. Sure, bits such as the automatic transmissions may not appeal to the hardcore enthusiast but it gives novices the opportunity to explore the outdoors, without posing too much of a challenge. And the fact that its abilities are now so much easier to access, the fact that it is so much easier to drive, means it should get a lot more people off the tarmac, and into the mud, snow, sand, slush... pick your poison.

My nerves? Completely unjustified. **44**