





# THE ESCAPE ARTIST

## I was now in uncharted territory

The Mahindra Adventure convoy had just left behind the picture-perfect tarmac of the Bharatmala road and we were now headed towards the base of the dune. Behind the wheel of a Thar CRDe, my heart was pounding in my chest. My arms? They'd gotten a workout. My left leg would cry for mercy a few moments later. But despite being a nervous wreck, there was only one thought on my mind – don't mess this up!

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**Incredible India** Travelling through Rajasthan will have you stopping for plenty of photo ops



It was only a couple of months into my internship when Aatish, our assistant ed, rang me up and asked, “Do you want to go for the Royal Escape?” Given that he’d interrupted me during the not-so glamorous task of packing magazines for dispatch, I almost replied “Is the Pope Catholic?” Just the prospect of the Royal Escape seemed to tick all the right boxes. Road trip through Rajasthan? Check. Dune bashing? Check. Driving a Thar? Double check. I was already thinking of ways to sneak the keys to our cherry red long-termer that is the Ed’s pride and joy!

For a moment, I was hesitant to say yes however. I didn’t have the slightest clue about driving off-road and on a more trivial note, the thought of simply driving those hardcore 4x4s with manual boxes seemed daunting to an urban-dwelling softie such as me. The last thing I wanted to do as a cub journo was embarrass myself. But doing epic shit is our lodestar, proudly illustrated onto the walls of our office even. And having embraced the YOLO spirit, I found myself in Udaipur on the day after Christmas at Mahindra Adventure’s Royal Escape, with a definite mission in mind – to cut my off-roading teeth behind the wheel of a Thar.

Our convoy, which consisted mainly of XUV700s, new Thars and a Bolero Neo, snaked its way across Rajasthan before we made it to our destination – Jaisalmer. We had indulged in a light spot of off-roading en route, scaling a few tricky ascents in Jawai but this was the real deal. And considering the varying breadth of ability that our group had to offer, we were glad to be led by the pros at Mahindra Adventure. Enter Manish Sarser, head of Mahindra Off-road Training Academy. Over a cup of *chai*, Manish gave us a crash course on driving on sand.

The base of the dune was just 20 minutes away, and while most participants would be driving relatively cushy 4x4-equipped Scorpios, I was given the keys to a silver Thar CRDe. My excitement seemed to show no signs of ebbing! Getting behind the wheel however was a totally different experience. It felt like a beast to drive, an unforgiving one at that. Having managed to wrestle the Thar until the base of the dunes, it was game time. The tyre pressure on our SUVs was dropped to 20 PSI, ideal for driving on sand; and as I ham-fisted the transfer-case lever into 4x4 Low, it

**Kicking up a storm** Driving on sand means maintaining momentum and being generous when using the gas

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**Desert rose** Once the lights go down, the sand dunes would appear deceptively beautiful

**Mountain goat** Few cars come close to the capability of a Thar CRDe in the desert



**Motley crew** The XUV700 made its debut at the Royal Escape, joined by the Bolero Neo



was time to recall every last nugget of off-roading wisdom that Manish had taught us. Momentum is your best friend in the dunes. You stick the vehicle in second or third gear, accelerate well before approaching inclines and keep a steady foot on the gas. As we lined up for the first big ascent, I was shivering more than the vibrating CRDe motor. But being one of the last cars in our convoy, I could witness the spots where each driver had made mistakes, along with the volley of instructions on the walkies. I was mentally making notes of what to do and what not to.

When "next car," crackled over the radio all my senses went into overdrive. I shoved the gear stick into third, and for the first time, the Thar responded beautifully. I must've been at 30 or 40kmph, committed with the throttle wedged halfway to the floor, and the beast clambered up like a mountain goat. My line however seemed to be all over the place. I angrily applied a bit of corrective lock to keep the Thar going in the right direction, gassed it further, making it to

the crest with little to no drama. Phew. "Bach gaya" retorts Ryan Lee from Mahindra Adventure, his Sheriff's hat giving him an aura of *The Prospector*. The second ascent however is where Sheriff Lee would not sound so jovial. Having gotten to grips with the gas pedal, I still needed to work on the wheel.

Driving on sand is not as straightforward as tarmac, where you point the car where you want it to go. On sand, you let the wheel work for you by pointing it in the general direction and letting the tyres do their thing. On the other hand, I was fighting the wheel and over correcting, which meant the Thar would squirm and veer off the trail unpredictably. This is what I learnt when I later asked Manish to spot where I was going wrong. Fortunately, the Thar made it up the ascent without breaking a sweat, but the Sheriff did issue a stern warning to me over the next radio call.

As we plugged on and drove towards our final section of the dunes for the day, I couldn't help but feel invincible. Even with newbie me driving, the Thar had

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**Adventure is out there**

Self-drive expeditions like the Royal Escape are a true test of an SUV’s capability

not gotten stuck yet, while quite a few of the Scorpios needed to be winched out. That’s not to say that the Scorpio was any less capable than the Thar. In the capable hands of veterans from Team Adventure, the Scorpio looked majestic kicking up a dust storm behind it.

And I have to mention that the XUV700 AWD also made its debut in the dunes. In terms of outright capability, the XUV was edging towards the limits of traction. Yet Vinod, who led our expedition since Day 1, managed to get the XUV700 up the dunes quite skilfully. On road tyres. With his entire family in tow. And later he would drive it back all the way home to Mumbai once our expedition wrapped up. If that isn’t impressive, I don’t know what is! In comparison, the Thar CRDe felt as lavish and well-equipped as a monk’s living quarters. When I returned to the hotel later that night, my left leg felt as if it had turned to mush, having dealt with the clutch. My arms didn’t fare much better either, courtesy having to steer in sand.

That’s when you realise what a massive improvement the current Thar is over the older one. In the pages elsewhere in this magazine, I’ve also waxed eloquent over the cool quotient that the soft top brings to this already desirable SUV.

Most buyers who put their money down on one however would never explore the extreme level of capability that the Thar possesses. This is where expeditions such as the Royal Escape slot in. The well-oiled operation is planned down to the T, with service backup for the cars and off-road veterans from Team Adventure really have your back when it comes to undertaking such escapades. The Royal Escape is also one of the easiest ways for newbies to dip their toes into the world of off-roading. At the end of the Escape, I couldn’t help but feel triumphant, having stepped into this crazy world which happens to be great fun! As for mastering the manual ‘box however... I suspect the guys at the office will continue to pull my chain for some time to come. Sigh. **44**

