

# Getting There Is Half The Fun!

Load up the car, gear up, get going. Here are India's best driving holidays

Text and pics by Rishad Saam Mehta

IF ALL you've been doing in your old faithful four-wheeler is commuting to work and back, you're missing out – on what your car is capable of. India's open roads are right outside your city. They cover some of the country's most scenic routes, pass some of its fast vanishing treasures and

lead to some of its most exciting destinations. So the next time you go on vacation, cancel the flight tickets, pack your maps and see India from your car window – you might just find that the journey is as fun as the destination

brunchletters@hindustantimes.com

## The Sach Pass and the Pangni Valley

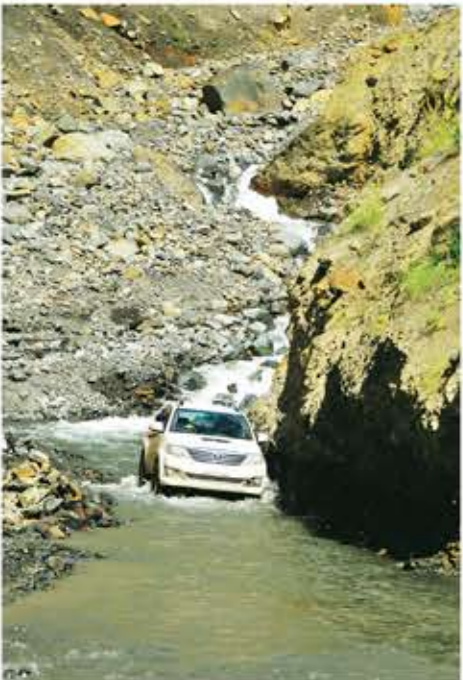
The diversity of terrain, culture and geography on this 1,410km round trip is astonishing. By the end, you'll have gone over smooth tarmac and unbelievably broken roads. You'll have passed streams, glaciers and maybe even a minor landslide. You'll have weaved through six valleys, two high altitude passes (the tallest at 14,930 feet) and traffic jams of stubborn

En route to Manali, you'll have seen views that will leave you gasping

yak and sheep. You'll have lived in tents, lodges and homestays. And you'll have seen views that will leave you gasping.

Start from Chandigarh towards Dalhousie to get acclimatised to the height. From here the drive heads east towards the Sach Pass. The first halt should be Bairagarh, 87km from Dalhousie. The first glaciers come up 5km before the pass. They seem to crowd the mountainside. The drive up the Pass and down, though precarious, is an amalgama-

tion of vertigo and wonder. The roads are so narrow that it seems that the mountains have grudgingly relented just enough width to make motor-ing possible. Drive cautiously; this road is by no way passive. Rocks hurtle down, glaciers groan mournfully and crack-ing thunderously, streams change course – but it's pure adventure. This is also the entrance to the Pangni Valley, one of the narrowest



valleys in Himachal Pradesh. The roads improve drastically and the scenery goes lush and green past the district headquarters of Udaipur and the road then joins

**AS YOU PASS BY...** The road is lush and green past the district HQ of Udaipur (top); You'll pass waterfalls en route (centre); The Pangni Valley (above); Roads narrow as you near the Sach Pass (left); Girls carrying wood in the Pangni Valley; You may have to drive through streams on this route

the Manali-Leh highway at Tandi, which is the next fuel stop after Chamba – 291km behind.

From here the road goes across the Rohtang and descends back into the foothills at Manali.

### HOW FAR, HOW LONG (KM/DAYS)

Chandigarh to Manali and back: 1,075/5



**JUST COASTING ALONG**  
The mighty Janjira Fort (left); Stopping for refreshment and sea views (above); Konkani-style breakfast at Guhagar

### Down the Konkani coast

This road that hugs Maharashtra's coastline goes past sleepy fishing villages, ramparts of once-proud forts and beaches which are as pristine, if not more, than Goa's. Cover the route over three days, savouring kokum soda and fresh seafood.

From Panvel on the Mumbai-Pune road, it's a quick drive to Pen, after which the route goes off the beaten path towards Alibag. Kashid is the first village on this route, followed by Murud, after which come the fantastic views of Janjira Fort in

the bay. Seaside views are a constant companion all the way to Rajapuri jetty – the

The Konkani drive covers fishing villages, forts and very pristine beaches

first ferry crossing. The road past Srivardhan, Harihareshwar and Harnai is smooth tarmac, with intermittent sea views and the next ferry (a 10-minute crossing) is between Harihareshwar and Bankot. Guhagar, 56km after Harnai, has yet another short ferry between Dhabhol and Dhopve and is a good first-night halt.



The next day's route is even better as views now alternate between the sea and swaying palms or mango orchards. The beaches Ganpatipule, Devgad, Kunkeshwar and Mithbhav are all pristine. Make your second-night halt at Tarkarli, just 70km short of Goa. The third day's drive is through Sawantwadi, after which the route goes past Vengurla and Shiroda to Terekhol jetty to the final ferry to Querim, 30km from Mapusa.

### HOW FAR, HOW LONG (KM/DAYS)

Bombay to Mapusa by the coastal route: 650/3 (the distance is approximate because there are so many little roads down the coast on this route that your actual kilometres might vary).



### HOW FAR, HOW LONG (KM/DAYS)

New Delhi to New Delhi: 1,850/8

### The Heartland - Orchha and Khajuraho

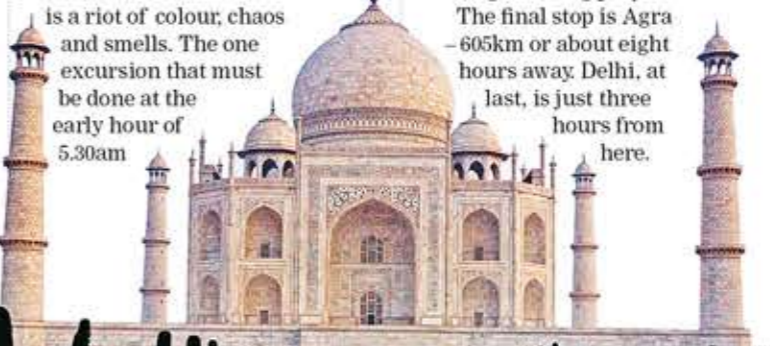
From Delhi, the 327km journey to Gwalior takes just over four hours. Leave at dawn to get the entire day to explore the city. The imposing sandstone Gwalior Fort is what warrants the stopover. Orchha is 120km from Gwalior, making it a two-hour drive (barring the mess of Jhansi). There are enough temples, palaces and cenotaphs to hint at what this town must have been like in its heyday.

A few hours' from Orchha is Khajuraho, full of pleasing symmetry in the temple spires and the imaginative contortions in the

**IT'S ALL IN THE GAZE**  
Orchha's famous chattris are a striking sight (left); Khajuraho will astound you

erotic sculptures. The 386km drive from here to Varanasi is a bit bumpy and will take seven hours. But Varanasi is a riot of colour, chaos and smells. The one excursion that must be done at the early hour of 5.30am

is the boat trip south from Dasaswamedh Ghat to Harishchandra Ghat and back. Watch the ghats come alive with the colour and clamour of pilgrims bathing and offering morning prayers. The final stop is Agra – 605km or about eight hours away. Delhi, at last, is just three hours from here.



### GET PACKING

While the whole idea of a driving holiday is to have flexibility in your schedule and give into impulse, it would be a little daft to jump out of bed, slip into your holiday clothes and take off. A little smart planning is needed before any road trip.

**How much, how long?**  
You really don't want to come back from your holiday feeling that your destination was actually the inside of your car. Plan short driving stints, rest days at locations you like and a few buffer days too.

A rule of thumb for average speeds to expect is: 80kph on express-ways, 60kph on normal highways, 30kph on smooth hill roads, 20kph on dirt tracks and broken roads.

While working out your fuel budget, reduce the kilometres per litre (kpl) by about 10 per cent and calculate fuel for that much. If you are driving mainly in the mountains then reduce the kpl by 30 per cent. Keep aside an emergency fund for breakdowns or repairs. Remote places don't accept credit cards, but wherever you can pay by plastic, do so and keep cash for places where you cannot. A good rule of thumb is to calculate all the money you'll need and carry twice that.

**The Car**  
A serviced car needs just a cursory check-up.

**This should include:**  
**Tyres:** Worn out tyres are not only dangerous, but they can ruin a road trip by constantly getting punctured.

**Lights:** Check if properly focussed. In the city, an awry high beam often goes unnoticed, but on the highway it can become very difficult to drive if your headlights are off focus.

**Spares:** Check the spare wheel and see that the tyre is inflated to the correct pressure. Sadly it is only when a puncture occurs that one realises that neither the driver nor passengers know where the spare wheel or wheel changing tools are kept, how to unsecure it or the point to put the jack to hoist the wheel off the ground. Familiarise yourself with all this.

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