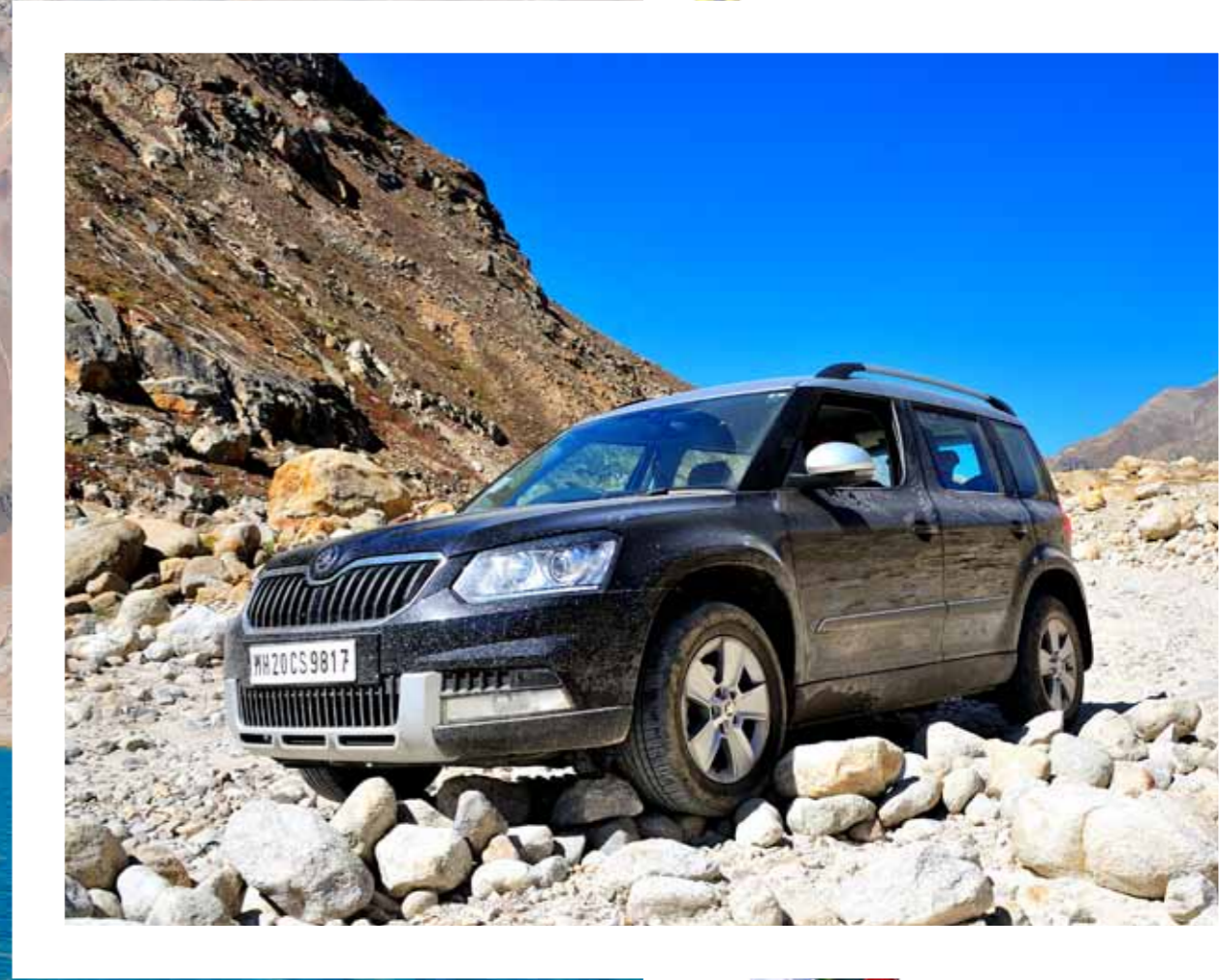


MISSION TO MOON LAKE



The road to Chandra Tal, in Spiti, is not for the faint-hearted. But, both the destination and the journey are worth the effort. We take the doughty new Skoda Yeti to the crescent-shaped lake

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS RISHAD SAAM MEHTA



'ROAD? WHAT ROAD? THIS TRAIL IS MINIMALLY MOTORABLE, BUT MAXES THE MIND OUT WITH BREATHTAKING VISUALS'



T

he tent's flap feels rigid and unyielding like robust Himalayan oak. I'm half asleep, wondering whether I'm actually inside my sleeping bag inside my tent, or whether the previous evening was just a dream. Then, I rub my eyes and realise that I am indeed inside my tent, with my friend blissfully snoring away, sounding like the indirect injection diesel engine of an idling dumper truck. I am still perplexed about why the tent's compliant flap is as inflexible as a plank. Then, I realise that it has frozen stiff, thanks to a layer of ice that has formed on it overnight. I dive back into my sleeping bag, wondering if I should wait till the sun creeps over the massive snowcapped mastiffs all around, and shines into the little mountain-ringed meadow we are camping in. But curiosity about whether it has snowed overnight gets the better of me. I slip into layers of protective clothing within the confines of the tent like a contortionist, cursing at creases and crumples in my fleece and jacket. The 'diesel engine' next to me sputters a bit at this disturbance. I try to push open the flap, but the frost has made it stick. In exasperation, I kick the flap and the whole tent collapses. The 'diesel engine' explodes into a roar of imaginative expletives...

A long weekend, the new Yeti conveniently parked in Chandigarh, and a good weather forecast has made my friend and I make a quick dash to Chandra Tal, Spiti's mystical Moon Lake. The lake is situated north of the mighty Kunzum Pass. While the pass is at 14,590 feet, the lake sits only 490 feet lower. We'd planned to make a quick run to Manali on Day 1. On Day 2, we would summit Rohtang, and drive the spectacular dirt track to Chandra Tal, a distance of about 115km. Unfortunately, the entire population of Punjab and half of Haryana has also decided to escape the sweltering plains and head to Manali for a weekend of Marley. So, traffic up in the mountains, on NH21, is like a Himalayan Derby, run by hooligan horses. We are at an advantage, because, compared to the plodding carthorse-like people carriers that most of the traffic comprises of, the Yeti is a frisky filly. Its self-aligning turbo vanes mean that there is no dead spot. The grunt starts almost as soon as the rpm needle starts to rise. So, we can cheekily weave in and out of traffic. This highway is pockmarked with potholes. But, like all of Skoda's India offerings, the Yeti's suspension is supremely suited to



Quite a sight to take in from behind the wheel



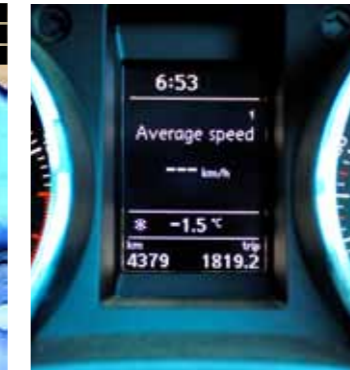
Dhaba owner's son studies for his big exam coming up after the long weekend



The narrow track to Chandra Tal often needs backing up skills to allow oncoming traffic to pass



A layer of ice formed on the Yeti's windshield due to sub-zero temperatures during the night



roads like these. And, its large wheels enable it to swallow a lot of the road's imperfections.

Manali is packed to the brim. And, our digs for the night is the comfortable Hotel Dragon Inn that is right at the very end of Old Manali. Driving to it through incredibly narrow streets and tight right-angle turns is an exercise in exact judgment and wafer-thin clearances. This is where the Yeti's precise steering and tight turning radius come to the rescue.

I am mortified by the amount of cars in Manali, and I know that they will all be heading to the Rohtang Pass the next day. So, we load the Yeti up (one large kit bag, pots, pans and other camping paraphernalia, three duffel bags, two camera bags and three adults), and are ready to head out towards Rohtang Pass by 5:15am.

The road to Rohtang is as deliciously smooth as Nutella spread on toast. Today, the Yeti's cornering abilities come to the fore as it whips around the hairpins with negligible body roll. We have the 4x2 version that is powered by a 2.0-litre diesel engine that is tuned to belt out 109 horsepower; it is adequate enough for the climb up to Rohtang. But, I have a feeling that I am going to miss the 4x4 version that features the same engine tuned to 138 horsepower on the more demanding roads beyond the Rohtang Pass.



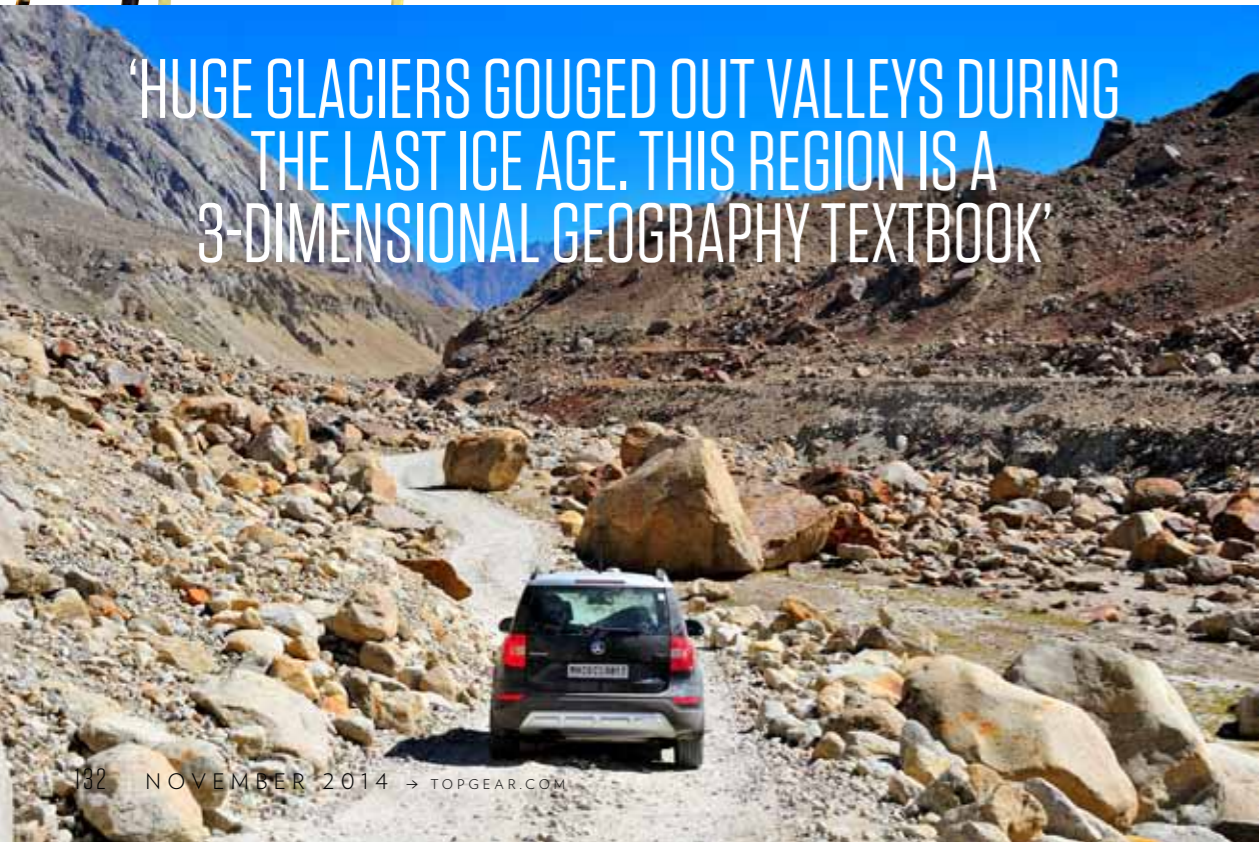
The Batal Dhaba is so popular, it may soon start accepting online reservations

We halt for a brief photo-stop by the colourful Tibetan prayer flags at the summit of the pass. In 70 minutes, we've driven 52 kilometres and ascended 6,330 feet. The multi-functional display says that the temperature has dropped from 18.2 degrees in Manali to 4.5 degrees at the top.

The Rohtang Pass also marks the end of smooth tarmac. By the time we turn right towards Chandra Tal at Gramphu, there is no semblance of road. But, yet, the Yeti handles the terrain with gusto, and the stiff suspension never bottoms out. The road from Gramphu to Chandra Tal is surreal. City-block-sized glaciers have gouged out



'HUGE GLACIERS GOUGED OUT VALLEYS DURING THE LAST ICE AGE. THIS REGION IS A 3-DIMENSIONAL GEOGRAPHY TEXTBOOK'



SKODA YETI 4X2
 Engine: 1968cc, diesel,
 110bhp, 250Nm, 5m, FWD
 Kerb weight: 1,445kg
 Price: ₹19.47 lakh (ex-Mumbai)

huge valleys during the last Ice Age. A giant trying to roll a lucky hand has strewn rocks like dice. The Chandra River is frothy and ice blue, and quite a contrast to the deep blue sky. The Yeti can manage a decent clip over pebble-strewn sections of the unsealed road, but it flounders around boulder fields due to a lack of adequate ground clearance. The clutch also has very little tolerance, and the car stalls often while trying to negotiate large rocks.

The final approach to Chandra Tal is a narrow 9km road, and it is this road that makes me pine for the 4x4 version. The pull of the front wheels is sorely insufficient over rocky, crumbly and steep hairpin sections. A push from the rear wheels would have definitely helped. Chandra Tal is sublime and, more importantly, clean and uncluttered. Wisdom has prevailed and camping by its banks has been banned. Campsites are located 2km from the lake. A hard wind has started to blow, and the temperature drops to 1 degree C.

We have to be extremely careful in pitching the tents, because if the wind manages to grab the tent it probably would set it down somewhere in Tibet.

The wind is blowing so hard that we need to use the car and the tents as a barricade, and cook in the relatively calm zone within. We make chicken soup, spicy mutton curry, saffron rice and semolina pudding using a small but very potent propane canister stove.

I feel my fingers are going to fall off as we wash the vessels. The water is freezing, and the wind has started blowing with even more gusto. I crawl into the tent and inside my sleeping bag and pray that the tent's pegs can withstand the onslaught. They do and the tent stands strong against the wind.

It is my frustrated kick at the flap from within that brings it down. After I have calmed down, and we have crawled out from within the billowing layers of nylon and polyester, we check the temperature. It is -1.5 degrees C. There is a layer of ice on the Yeti's windshield. A quick breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast, porridge and coffee later, we head back towards Manali. The sun is rising above the peaks, but shadows race across the valley. The hue of the land goes through a myriad of colour tones within just a few seconds. Moments like these reaffirm my firm belief that travel enriches the soul.

But half an hour after that holy moment, things go awry! I blow two tyres within five kilometers. The closest puncture repair shop is at Koksar, 12km away. A kind-hearted mini bus driver offers us a ride to Koksar, so the two of us ride there on the roof of the bus with the tyres in the freezing cold. Our return ride is courtesy a group of bikers from Boston and South Africa, who are riding to Spiti.

Since the sidewalls of the tyres are cut, we have to put in tubes into the tubeless tyres. On our way back we avoid the horrible NH21 and take the more scenic route to Chandigarh via the Tirthan Valley, Jalori Pass and Shimla. NH22 from Shimla to Chandigarh is a delight, with smooth sweeping corners. The car shimmies a bit due to the tubes, and ever so often the 'check tyre pressure' light keeps flashing even though the pressure in the tyres hasn't dropped.

Back in Chandigarh, I realise that we've driven 1,100km in four days; 600 of those over dirt and unsealed roads. With a lesser car, I would have had to check into a spa for some massage treatment. With the Yeti, a hot shower proves to be therapy enough.