

THE LONG WAY HOME

A ROAD TRIP ACROSS NINE COUNTRIES, SPANNING
20,200 KILOMETRES AND EIGHT TIME ZONES, IN PICTURES

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My childhood was filled with stories of adventurers who put their trust in a single ship, steed, or motorcycle while they crossed continents. Stories in which the internal combustion engine is a trusted companion and ally fuelled my wanderlust. My parents had a passion for motoring but could only afford cars that were already three decades old. Their love for road trips meant that my childhood was filled with motoring holidays in cars that had to be coaxed to complete the journey. Those journeys, often punctuated with hissing radiators and groaning clutches, were the start of my lifelong affair with the open road. And the romance of trusting a single car for a long road trip started. From my teens, I began to dream of driving my trusty car or motorcycle across continents from Europe to India.

Given the political climate in Iran and Pakistan, countries on the shortest and most logical route from Europe to India, I had resigned myself to never fulfilling this dream. But because the universe works in mysterious ways, I was invited to drive one of a pair of cars from Germany to India along a route that entered India via the northeast.

This journey took me across Eastern Europe, Russia, Siberia, Mongolia, China, and Myanmar. And though I've travelled across the Himalayas on my old Enfield Bullet, this trip was the realisation of a cherished dream.

The route we took was once the only link between Europe and Asia. Along this route flowed ideas, inventions, cultures, languages, spices, even disease and gunpowder. But more than the excitement of following the footfall of adventurers, armies, and smugglers, for me it was the thrill of driving a Maharashtra-registered Audi Q7 all the way from Munich to Mumbai—a journey that spanned 2 continents, 9 countries, 40 cities, over 58 days, across 20,216 kilometres.

THE ABCs OF PLANNING A ROAD TRIP ACROSS COUNTRIES

The joy of driving your own car or motorcycle across countries and continents is unmatched

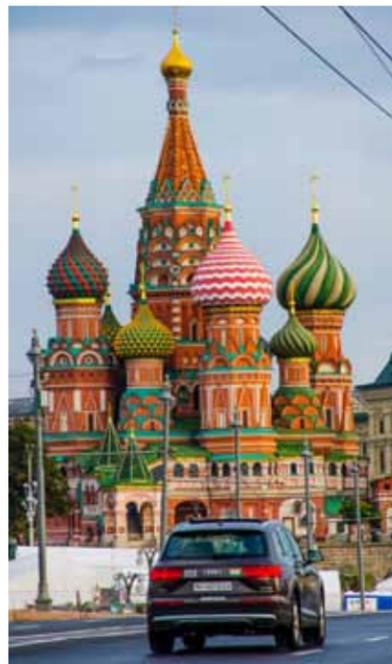
The logistics and paperwork for a drive like this are considerable, but if you break it down and give a year to the planning, it will become simpler. Now that the border between India and Myanmar is open for vehicular traffic, you can actually drive your own car into or out of the country.

CARNET DE PASSAGE Along with a passport and visas for every country you will enter, you need a document called the Carnet de Passage. It is like a passport for the car, and is issued by the Western India Automobile Association (WIAA) on behalf of the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA). It must be stamped while leaving and entering India, and is usually issued against a bank guarantee that is returned when the car is back in India.

INSURANCE You need international insurance for the car. Some countries also require you to buy local insurance to drive there.

DOCUMENTATION Among the documents you need are an international driving licence and proof that the car belongs to you or that you are legally allowed to drive it. China and Myanmar need provisional registration for the car and this has to be applied for in advance. China also needs all drivers to have a provisional driving licence that also has to be applied for in advance.

COST OF SHIPPING A VEHICLE Costs vary based on where you ship your vehicle. The cost of shipping the



car depends on the space (volume) it occupies on a plane, not its weight. While the Audi Q7 cost ₹9 lakh to ship from Bombay to Munich, my Royal Enfield motorcycle would have cost ₹45,000. A small car that is roomy inside is a good option. Sending your car by boat is even cheaper, but takes considerably longer. I put the car on a plane in Mumbai on a

Saturday and was driving it in Munich three days later, on Tuesday.

BORDERS Driving across eight countries was never a hassle. Still, border crossings are dodgy moments because language is a barrier and it is not every day that patrollers see Indian cars crossing over from Poland to Belarus, or Mongolia to China. Border and custom officials were surprised to see us. On border crossing days, keep a few hours as buffer. While you might waltz across some borders, it's possible that you will have to wait in queue for five hours at others. Pack in a way that everything from the car can be emptied and inspected easily. Smuggling of illegal goods is what most border officials are paranoid about.

HOMEWORK Research everything thoroughly. Find out about driving etiquette and requirements in the countries you are visiting. For example, in the Czech Republic, you have to purchase a vignette (a sort of highway tax symbol) which must be stuck on the windshield.

WHO CAN HELP? The local RTO can help with some paperwork. However, it's simpler to become a member of the local Automobile Association (AA) like the WIAA in Mumbai, and let them help with documentation. A company that specialises in arranging road trips abroad for Indians with their own cars or motorcycles is www.roadtripper.in. They can assist with visas, shipping, local guides, and more.

THE ROUTE



EUROPE

The drive started on familiar terrain across countries that I had already visited and driven in. We stopped at pretty tourist towns and cities like Prague (above) and Regensburg (right). The first few days through Europe allowed us to get used to driving a right-hand drive car on the right side of the road.





MONGOLIA

While most of Mongolia is standard steppes around the Gobi desert, Ulaanbataar is a vibrant capital city with the Chinggis Khan Square dominating it. Out in the countryside, we encountered many shepherds on horses, herding sheep just like they have since the time of Chinggis Khan.



RUSSIA

Russia is so much more than just Moscow and St. Petersburg. Driving across it, I realised that it is actually a collection of vastly varied cultures, cuisines, climates, and time zones. In Kazan, we saw a family dressed up in traditional Tartar attire (top) and at Lake Baikal we spotted the brightly coloured houses typical of Siberia (left).





CHINA

Driving across China was a revelation in food, history, and rapid development. I was astounded by the fact that the country firmly keeps its history alive yet is right on top with the latest gadgets and fashions. Oh, and the Chinese will never leave home without a selfie stick! At Chengdu we visited pandas and enjoyed the sensational street food in Pingyao (top).



MYANMAR

Myanmar is delightfully stuck in the past with gilded pagodas (facing page) and 70-year-old World War II bridges that are still termed “temporary” (top).

INDIA

Some 58 days later came the view of Amar Jyoti and India Gate in New Delhi, and the last leg of this road trip.

RISHAD SAAM MEHTA is a travel writer and photographer. His second book *Fast Cars and Fidgety Feet* (Westland) will be out in February 2016 .