

TOP OF THE WORLD

That's how we feel on the first part of the Great India Drive from Leh to Delhi.

It is cold, very cold. Though the wind that threatened to bring down the tent all through the night has abated, the cold has seeped into my bones through the four layers of clothing. The sun is lighting up the peaks on the eastern side in a flamboyant show of light but the valley is still in the shadow. Sarchu, that during the season is littered with colourful camps strung across its grasslands holds a forlorn look as ours is one of the last camps standing at the end of the season. I am worried about the Hyundai Creta swathed in the Great India Drive stickers, parked outside the tent. The temperature at night falls below freezing and I hope the diesel in its tank hasn't frozen. I haul myself into the driver's seat and thumb the starter button. I keep my fingers crossed as the instrument panel lights up. A moment later the 1.6-liter motor

whirrs into life. No problem. Since the windscreen is covered by a layer of ice, I adjust the air-conditioning temperature and vents to de-ice the glass. It'll take more than a few minutes to completely clear the glass, so I get out the car and gratefully take the glass of piping hot tea that's offered to me. The Creta is the only car in this vast Himalayan canvas we are a part of, and it somehow seems to belong here. The car has been our home for the past 48-hours and has taken us through some pretty tough terrain without missing a beat. Today we will cross Barchala La at 16,040 feet. Though it isn't the highest pass on our route, experience has taught me that it can be tricky. After putting in 300km on the trip, I know that the Creta will make it without a problem.

The story started three days ago with our photography

Tanglang La at 17,840 feet is the second highest pass in Ladakh.





The Creta's cabin is a cocoon of comfort while its freezing outside.

chief Ashley and me boarding the Indian Airlines Airbus A320 at Delhi airport. Though I have been to Leh a few times, I have always driven to Leh and back. This was my first flight to Leh and I spent the entire flight with my nose glued to the window marveling at the mighty Himalayas as we descended into Leh. It is one of the most spectacular landings as the aircraft twists and turns till the last moment before the wheels touch down. At 11,562 feet, the oxygen level in Leh is much lower than at sea level and its recommended that you take it easy on the first day to let your body get acclimatized. We are here to take possession of a Hyundai Creta that the kind folks at Hyundai have driven up for us. The plan is to spend a few days exploring Ladakh and then drive back to Mumbai. Though we are rearing to go, we have to wait 24 hours before our body gets used to the depleted oxygen supply and we can get the keys to the Creta.

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The big news for the day is the inauguration of a new Hyundai showroom at Leh. It's the highest Hyundai showroom in Asia, and perhaps the world. While this showroom will cater to the people in the region, it'll be a boon for the travelers who drive up to Leh every summer. Knowing there is an authorized service center at the end of your trip where you can get your car looked at is a peace-of-mind factor many travelers and Hyundai owners will appreciate.

It's a bright sunny morning that we are flagged off from the Grand Dragon hotel in Leh. Our destination for the day is Turtuk in Nubra Valley. We have to cross Khardungla, the

highest motor able road in the world to get access to the valley. As we leave Leh behind and start climbing, Ashley starts seeing photography opportunities at every corner. It's late morning by the time we reach the snow-bound South Pullu. There's a long queue of vehicles lined up by the side of the road. The road ahead is closed. We decide to head back, and head to Tso Moriri instead. It's too late in the day to attempt Tso Moriri so we decide to spend the night in Leh, and make an early dash for Tso Moriri.

The next day we make an early start. The road to Tso Moriri goes through Upshi where the road bifurcates. As we reach

Whatever the terrain, the Hyundai Creta powered its way across without missing a beat.



A smooth stretch of black asphalt now runs through Morey Plains.



The mountain is blanketed with snow as we cross Baralacha La.

The tripmeter shows that it is over 800km since our last fill, and there are still two bars in the gauge

Upshi, there is more bad news for us. The road to Tso Moriri is closed. It seems Ladakh is closing down around us, and giving us a hint to leave. After all it's the end of September and winter is not too far away. We have no choice but take the road to Sarchu, and head for Manali. The exploration of Ladakh will have to wait for next year.

The charm of driving the challenging Leh-Manali where a mistake can land you thousands of feet down the mountain. At places, the outside edge of the road can crumble under the weight of a car. Slithering across a slushy track inches from a thousand feet drop is not for everyone. Or a water crossing across jagged rocks that can tear through the underbody of the car. Find the right gear, place the wheels correctly and the Creta determinedly clambers across every obstacle. Though this SUV doesn't have a four-wheel drive system, the high ground clearance and torquey engine is enough to take on the challenge.

After our cold night in Sarchu, we drove towards Baralacha La. It was the most breathtaking part of the drive since the pass was covered in a thick blanket of snow. The only thing that was not white on the mountain that day was our silver Creta, and the black strip of asphalt between snow banks on either side. It's one of those picture postcard moments that you can store only in your memory since no camera can catch its awe inspiring grandeur.

It was early evening by the time we reached Manali. The 20-liter can of diesel that we had carried in anticipation of our Nubra trip was untouched. And the Creta's tank still showed half a tank of diesel in its tanks. This car sure has long legs, a great advantage when you are out touring the country.

The trip from Manali to Delhi via Chandigarh is an anti-

climax after you have just climbed down the mountains. Though the Beas river accompanying us made a pretty picture it was no match for the magnificence we had driven through. The drive to Delhi was uneventful apart from us forgetting to look at the fuel gauge till we had crossed Chandigarh and were in the heart of Punjab. And when we did the tripmeter showed that it was over 800km since our last fill, and there were still two bars in the gauge.

From Delhi we return to Mumbai, not via our usual route but through central India. And learn more about the Creta after getting some hard knocks. To be continued in our next issue.

1000 demanding kilometers to Delhi, and the Creta performs flawlessly.



Its minus four Celsius when we wake up at Sarchu.



We leave the mountains behind us, and reach the plains.

