

From Snow-caps to Sandy Beaches

Car India was handed the keys to Hyundai's all-new Creta in Leh, the starting point of a journey that ended all the way in Chennai. Here's how it panned out

Story: Harket Suchde Photography: Sanjay Raikar





▲ And we're off!



▼ Prayer wheels before steering wheels



▼ The Friendship Gate bids us goodbye



▲ Adorable little furballs! The Himalayan Marmot

THE AIR IS THIN; SEEMINGLY TRIVIAL TASKS such as walking and ascending a flight of stairs make you gasp with breathlessness, the air has a distinct chill and the wind bites into your very skin, and the imposing presence of the mighty Himalayas casts an indomitable shadow on the horizon wherever you look. And I love it! You get used to the lack of oxygen, you adapt to the cold, but the beauty of the mountains can never ever cease to mesmerise.

I can't dawdle about taking in the beauty surrounding me for too long, though; because the Creta's keyless entry remote sits firmly in my grasp, the car itself glistening in the early morning sun. Climb in, strap in, let's go! Only not quite, first there's the flag-off ceremony to be observed. Soon as I'm waved away, I feathered the accelerator; the six-speed autobox takes care of the rest, easy. That 1.6-litre turbo-diesel emits a husky thrum as we exit the hotel and head out towards Keylong in Himachal Pradesh. The roads are slick. A light drizzle, vestige of a heavy downpour from the previous night, still lingers, and the massive colour blast from the Friendship Gate signifying the beginning (or, in our case, end) to central Leh stands stark against the desolate, cloud-covered sky.

Our first real stop *en route* is Stok Palace, but we take a little pause at a prayer wheel before getting there. Just 15 kilometres outside Leh, the Palace has been around for centuries, and is the perfect example of how a palace doesn't need to be opulent or garish to stand out. The road leading up to the Palace also offers a particularly breathtaking view of the mountains and the fields

surrounding it, and as such seems to be a beehive for photography buffs, a few of whom immediately dropped what they were doing at our arrival and started asking us questions about the Creta.

Of course, I was itching to see how capable this compact SUV was off road, and no sooner had we left the palace behind than we found a vast, muddy expanse allowing me to do just that. Due to its light weight and torque-y engine, the Creta just glided along without a hitch, despite the fact that it doesn't even have all-wheel drive.

In all the excitement I had forgotten to plug my USB stick in, but I rectified that lapse in memory immediately, as Freddy Mercury's distinctive voice from the Bohemian Rhapsody came on, the Creta's capable speaker system belting out the iconic 'Queen ballad' as we hit the road again, the perfect set-up for me to see what this baby could do. *"Because I'm easy come, easy go, little high, little low, / Anyway the wind blows doesn't really matter to me..."*

Foot down and an almost imperceptible pause for turbo-lag later the Creta is off. The 128 horses it packs peak at 4,000 revs, and an even torque spread of 260 Nm from 1,900 to 2,750 RPM keeps her going as I engage >

▲ Beautiful snowcaps at Tanglang La



◀ Far over the misty mountains cold

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▼ Taking (photo) stock: At the Stok Palace



manual and shift up through the gears. Of course, this being India, potholes and errant animals meant I had to take the foot off the gas and plant the brake pedal down instead, and in a hurry, and, luckily, the brakes were as responsive as the throttle, allowing us to comfortably avoid any untoward incident.

Soon enough we were approaching the mighty Tanglang La, a mountain pass at 17,000+ feet, and I caught a glimpse of what my eyes had been searching for ever since we embarked on this road trip: snow. Fresh, soft snow, and it was still descending ever so lightly as temperatures dropped to the lower reaches of single digits and we continued onward, turning the heater up as we went.

We stopped off at Pang for some grub, and continued

on towards Lachalung La, Nakee La, and the 22 hairpins of the Gata loops before we were brought to a standstill at Sarchu. The reason for the standstill — apparently Baralacha La had been shut since the previous evening, meaning no Keylong for us today; we had to doss down in a tent at Sarchu that night. After a near sleepless night in sub-zero temperatures, the Creta rumbled to a start on the first attempted push of the button, and off we went to see if Baralacha was now motorable. It was, and it was also covered in black ice, snow banks, and was barely wide enough to allow a single car to pass, much less vehicles coming from either side. A few hairy moments involving blind turns and broken-down trucks later, we were descending the pass and heading towards Manali. ▶

▲ Loopin' around: The Gata Loops show off the Creta's handling creds

▼ Ooh heaven is a place on earth



HYUNDAI CRETA

PRICE
Rs 16.09 Lakh
OTR, Pune

ENGINE
1.6-litre CRDi
inline-four turbo-
diesel

TRANSMISSION
6-speed automatic

MAX POWER
128 PS @ 4000 RPM

MAX TORQUE
260 Nm @ 1900-2750
RPM



▼ Satisfying stomach pangs at Pang



< Holy gate: the entrance to the Dhakpo Shedrupling Monastery



> Watcha lookin' at? A Kashmiri kid goes full-gangsta on us

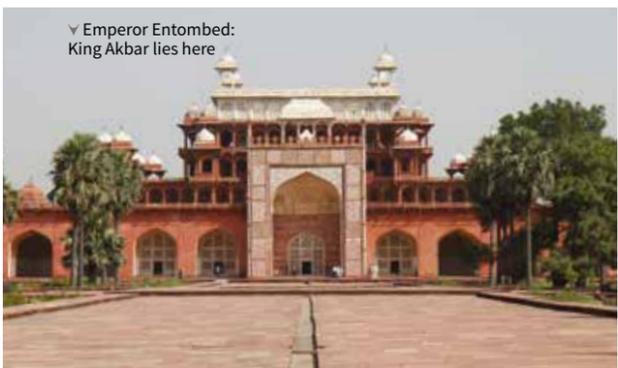




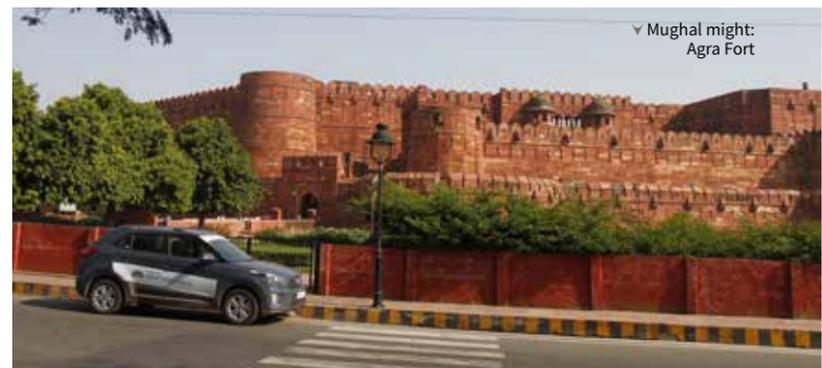
No point stopping at Keylong now, we had some catching up to do. After what we'd experienced earlier in the day, crossing Rohtang was an absolute breeze by comparison, and Manali was reached as afternoon faded into evening. After a regrettably short night's stay at Manali, we were off, aiming to reach Agra that night. We stopped off at the famous Dhakpo Shedrupling Monastery before heading out towards the highway that would take us past Chandigarh and Delhi and lead us to the Yamuna Expressway and Agra beyond. The roads leading to Chandigarh weren't what you would call pleasant, but as soon as we reached and bypassed the city we hit proper multi-lane highways where the Creta had the opportunity to stretch its legs. The Yamuna Expressway is easily one of my favourite roads in India, and driving there again in the Creta just reinforced that belief. We reached Agra and checked into our hotel by dinner time – perfect timing.

The following day, we did all the touristy things in Agra, visiting the Agra Fort, and, of course, the Taj Mahal. After marvelling at the strength and beauty of the two structures respectively, we thought we'd visit Sikandra and the tomb of Akbar. Now it may seem a little macabre that Akbar built his own tomb well before his death, but it shows two things: one, that he recognised his mortality, despite being one of the greatest kings of one of the biggest empires in the nation's history, and, two, that he had style, because the tomb is beautiful, tasteful, intricate and astounding. A massive 105 m sq >

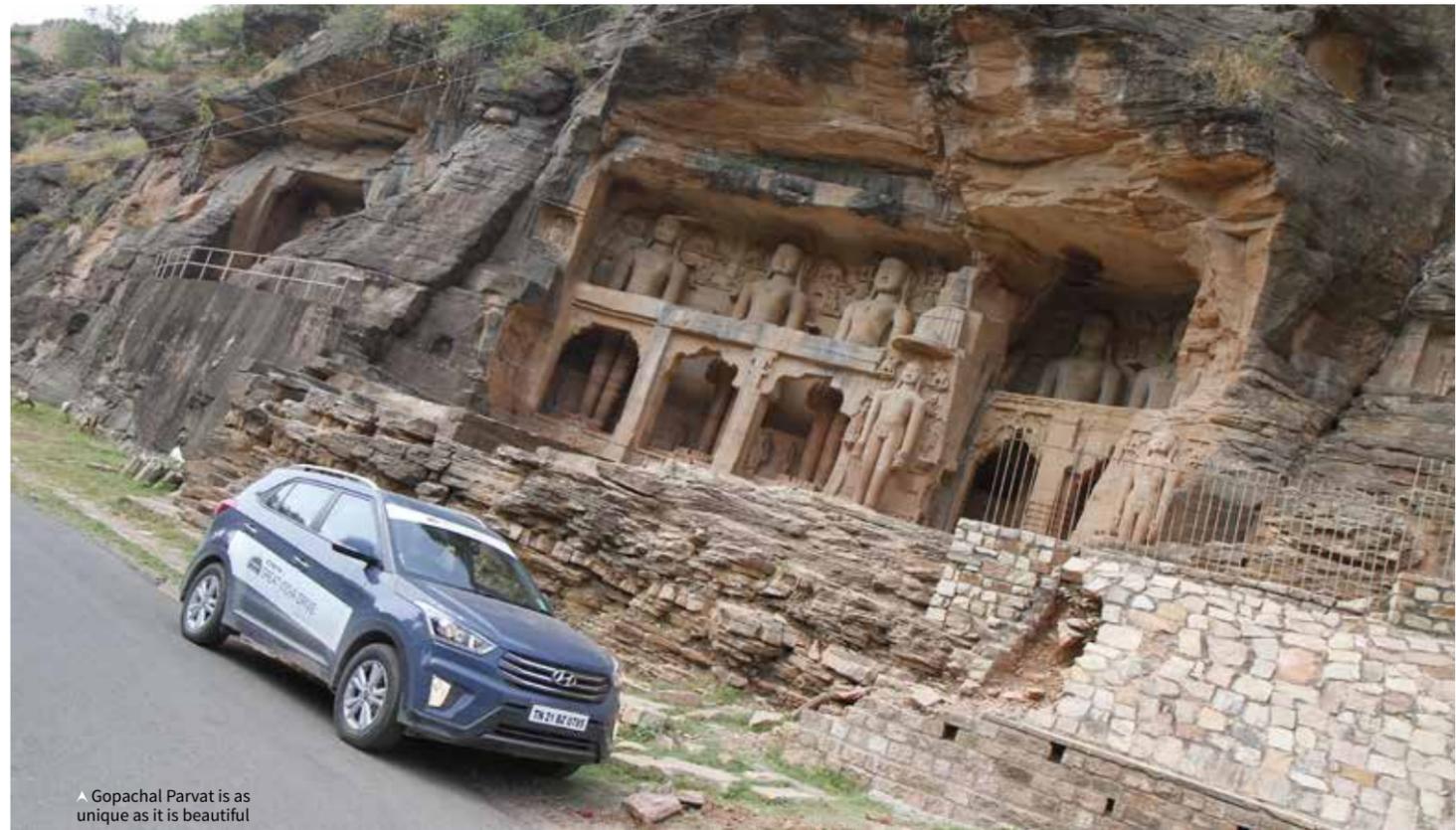
FOOT DOWN AND AN ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLE PAUSE FOR TURBO-LAG LATER THE CRETA IS OFF. THE 128 HORSES AND AN EVEN TORQUE SPREAD KEEPS HER GOING



Emperor Entombed: King Akbar lies here

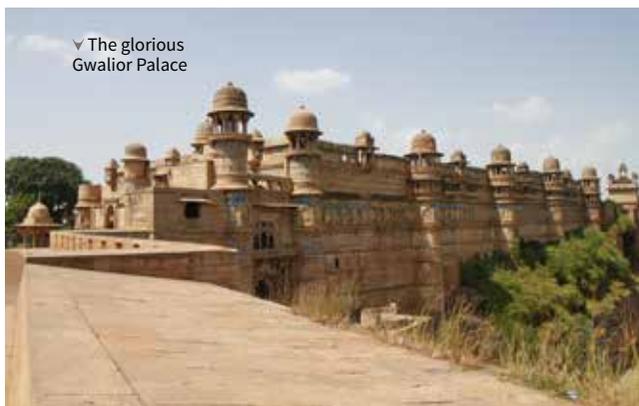


Mughal might: Agra Fort

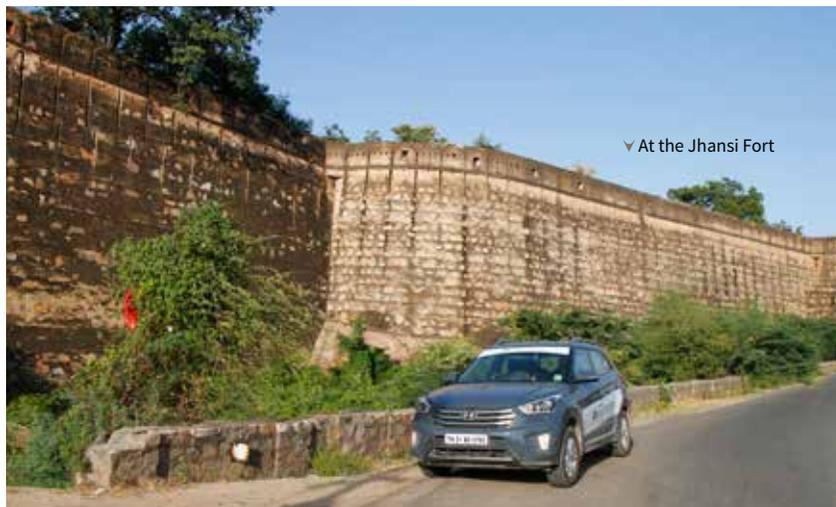


Gopachal Parvat is as unique as it is beautiful

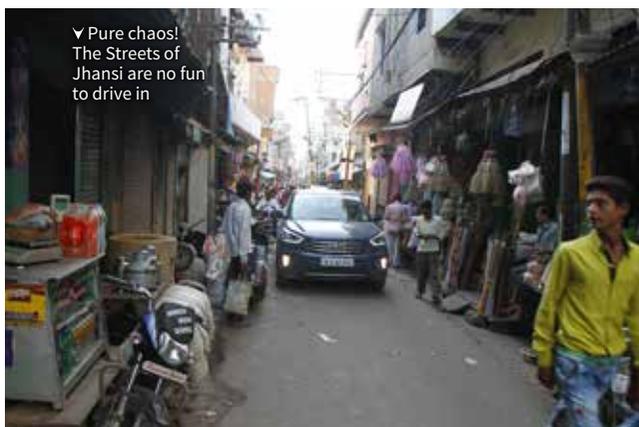
Hyundai Creta Great India Drive - I



▼ The glorious Gwalior Palace



▼ At the Jhansi Fort



▼ Pure chaos! The Streets of Jhansi are no fun to drive in



PLACES TO VISIT

LEH

Shanti Stupa, Leh Palace, Thikse Monastery, Stok Palace, Tsemo fort, Hall of fame, Jama masjid

MANALI

Solang Valley, Rohtang Pass, Pandoh Dam, Bhrigu Lake, Hidimba Devi Temple, Manikaran Gurudwara, Dhakpo Shedrupling Monastery

AGRA

Taj Mahal, Agra Fort, Tomb of I'timad-ud-Daulah, Mehtab Bagh, Akbar's Tomb, Guru ka Tal

GWALIOR

Gwalior Fort, Phool Baug, Gopachal Parvat, Sas Bahu Mandir, Gwalior Palace, Gurudwara Data Bandi Chhod, Jai Vilas Palace Museum, Sun Temple, Tigra Dam

JHANSI

Jhansi Fort, Rani Mahal, St. Jude's Shrine, Govt. Museum, Maharaja Gangadhar Rao ki Chattri

establishment, the tomb grounds hold a swathe of stately animals, including deer, peacocks and squirrels, among others. It is amazing as it is peaceful, and has been well-maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India, so props to them.

Next stop — Gwalior. Gwalior, from a tourism point of view, is unique, not to mention convenient, because all that you could possibly wished to see is packed within the walls of the Gwalior Fort. Enter through the gates, and the first interesting monument to catch your eyes will probably be the Gopachal Parvat.

Gopachal Parvat is situated on the mountainous terrain at the slopes of Gwalior Fort. The sloping cliff-face (hence the name) has been carved into likenesses of Jain *tirthankars*. As many as 26 of them are etched into the hillside; the real standout, though, is the 47-foot tall and 30-foot wide sculpture of Lord Parshvanath seated on a lotus, and the whole thing was carved out of a single stone. Work on the monument began in AD 1398 and was completed by AD 1536, and was commissioned by the Tomar kings that ruled Gwalior during that period. Once you ascend to the upper level, you reach the absolutely spectacular looking Gwalior Palace, the famous Sas-Bahu Mandir, called so because King Mahipala of the almost unpronounceable Kachchhapaghata dynasty built the first temple for his wife in AD 1092, one dedicated to Lord Vishnu. However, his daughter-in-law was a follower of Lord Shiva, so another temple was built alongside this one, so that she could pray to her chosen deity as well. What could possibly be the coolest part of the fort's many

buildings is the Scindia School. Not because it's very historic (built in AD 1897), but because the kids that board there actually get to live in a full-blooded fort surrounded by historic monuments! How wicked is that?

Having had our fill of Gwalior, we set off for the nearby and equally historic town of Jhansi. The problem with Jhansi is that certain parts of the town are accessible only by a network of small lanes which weren't really meant for cars to begin with, but add to that encroachment by roadside vendors, parked vehicles and pedestrian traffic, and you have a situation that is not at all fun. Anyway, we somehow made it to Jhansi Fort without a single scratch, no mean feat that. This was the home, of course, of the famous Rani Laxmibai, and the stronghold from which she battled the invading British in the 1850s. The fort houses a cannon with by far the most epic name in the history of cannons, the 'kadak bijli', which was again used in the 1850s war against the British. After the Fort visit was done, we got lost for a few hours, despite the excellent GPS the Creta is equipped with. This is due mainly to the construction of an overhead bridge which has wreaked havoc on the roads, which forced us to stop exploring and eventually make our way to our hotel, the excellent Jhansi Hotel, where we spent the night.

The next morning we woke up bright and early (we needed to give that chaotic traffic a skip and navigate those lanes that little bit easier) and hit the highway again, Nagpur entered into the GPS. But that's a story for another day, and you'll have to wait till our December issue to read about it. **CTA**