

Memory lane

The venerable Ambassador has been around since the early days of independent India. So what better way to raise funds for charity in India than a drive across the heart of southern India in 24 Ambassador cars?

Pictures: Suresh Narayanan





I am not mistaken, it was in the mid 1970s. My school-mates and I used to walk to school through someone's compound, through the fields, across a small inland waterway doing a balancing act on a makeshift coconut tree bridge before crossing NH 47. For each and every stage of the way we would invent challenges to make the walk less mundane than it would have been otherwise. One of these was to spot which Ambassador variant would pass us on the highway as we walked along to the crossing.

Much water has flowed beneath the coconut tree bridge since then and the Indian automotive scene has moved ahead by light years. What hasn't changed though is the shape of the Hindustan Ambassador and when I recently had the opportunity to cover the Karma Enduro Charity Challenge 2010, organised by Hindustan Motors, all those memories from years ago came rushing back.



The 2,000km rally is aimed at raising funds for two charitable organisations – Rainbow Trust Children's Charity, UK, and Adventure Ashram. The former provides emotional and financial support to families with terminally ill children. The latter supports educational and medical care in remote Indian villages where even the nearest hospital is miles away and transportation to them is scarce.

The rally however had a twist. All of the 24 Ambassador cars were to be driven by foreigners. And most of them seemed to have taken to the smiling faces of the people of rural South India. "Happy people. It is very difficult to see smiling faces in European cities since we don't even have the time to smile," said Tom, who was driving car number 12 with a man named Phil as his co-driver. Surprisingly, they even seemed to be at peace with the chaotic driving environment that Indian roads offer. Having already driven for a week on Indian roads, from Goa to Mudumalai in Tamil Nadu, many of the drivers in fact found their driving experience in India educational! This experience was teaching them to be alert at all times and expect the unexpected, they all said, almost in unison. Of course the big difference in India was that they seldom crossed 80kmph, which meant there was enough time to prevent accidents. And they had the freedom to honk anywhere and everywhere. With, or without reason. Indeed most of them honked more in their week long drive in India than they would in a lifetime on Europe's roads.

The other big difference was in the choice of vehicle – the Ambassador. All the drivers were used to driving modern cars on good European roads. To drive a car that has remained virtually



Robert, who was driving car number 11, drives into a muddy ditch after being run off the road by a bus. (Below) A 100ft high waterfall at the entrance to Kodakanal, Princess of Hill Stations



Rally organiser Alex and his trusty Royal Enfield, lead the cars via a diversion after the route was found blocked by a landslide





The road to Munnar was narrow and bad, there was fog and the Ambassador is essentially a 50-year-old design. But most enthusiastic participants found the car a joy to drive. A red faced monkey (inset). Traditional way of mixing tea in Tamil Nadu (right)



unchanged since the 1950s on crowded, narrow and sometimes badly maintained Indian roads was certainly a challenge for most. But there were advantages to driving the Ambassador, which was derived from the Morris Oxford, on Indian roads. For starters, almost all of them appreciated the ground clearance, the suspension and the in-cabin space. That Hindustan Motors has added modern amenities like power steering, proved very useful for the drivers as they negotiated the twisty tarmac carved onto the face of the Nilgiri Hills.

The route took them from the Jungle Hut Retreat in Mudumalai to the hill station of Ooty, at 2,200m, before reaching Krumathampetty. Thereon it headed to the Palani Hills, which has the Palani Subramanya temple on top. Skirting the hills the route headed to Kodaikanal - 'Princess of Hill Stations', where we were greeted by a 100-foot waterfall and where the day ended. The next day saw us driving the 185km to Munnar through the plains of Tamil Nadu and the Udumalpet forest range before getting into Kerala. On the final leg the rally passed through Kumaly, Kottayam and Alleppey before culminating in Kumarakom where we finished in style accompanied by traditional drummers and a decorated elephant.

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Bad roads and no roads, combined with slush made the Ambassador the perfect car for the rally, courtesy its high ground clearance. (Below) The cars try to find a way from Kottayam to Kumarakom



1. Joys of childhood. Happiness even in the midst of poverty. 2. Learning to eat from banana leaves with their hands in the Indian way. 3. Tradition and modernity go hand in hand as the rally is led by this lone saree clad woman on a moped. 4. A common sight in rural India, south or north, where goods carriers often double up as people carriers as well. 5. Phil (right) helps yours truly take a shot while Tom (left) keeps his hands on the wheels and his eyes on the road ahead. 6. A traditional thatched hut in Tamil Nadu. While sights like these are common for us, it was a novelty for the participants who were helping raise funds for people like this old lady

