

COASTING IN AN AMBASSADOR

The ongoing Karma Enduro 2011, a 14-day Ambassador car race in the south of India, combines charity with adventure >>>

by **SHRUTI NAMBIAR**

A **CHUCKLING GROUP** of camera-wielding foreign tourists gather at the Baywatch Resort on Sernabatim beach in Goa. It is a nippy morning, with only the slightest hint of the sun, a perfect day for a long drive. Maps, driving instructions, advice and jokes are handed out by team leader, Alex Piria to the participants (mostly from the UK) of the Karma Enduro 2011.

The morning ceremony marks the flag-off of the 2011 rally. The 14-day, non-competitive race features participants in gleaming Hindustan Ambassador 1,500

DSL cars driving from Goa to Kerala, passing through different terrains and traffic conditions. The Ambassador, based on the iconic Morris Oxford, has been chosen for its classic appeal and for its connection with the past, since it has changed little since the Fifties.

This year, the race will cover close to 2,000 km finishing at the verdant backwaters of Alappuzha. Karma Enduro raises money for select charities every year. This year it hopes to raise funds for the UK-based Rainbow Trust Children's Charity (which supports families of children with terminal illnesses) and Adventure Ashram (which raises funds through

adventure travels).

The aim on the first day is to cover the 180-odd km to Karwar in Karnataka. In the early part of the rally, the cars splinter and rejoin as the traffic increases on the Goan roads. It is a beautiful ride, suffused by mid-morning sunshine, and backgrounded by palm trees. The drivers are all jolly sports, unperturbed by the stress of driving or the absence of clean toilets en route. They happily pose with random people for photographs, and liberally toss around "namastes". Food, surprisingly, is not a major consideration. The lunch stop is made near nondescript *tapris* selling mirchi bhajjis, vada pavs, fruits and ice cream. The drivers hurriedly tuck in their lunch and speed off for a non-stop ride to the destination.

By evening, the group is happily trudging into Lotus Resort on NH17, a little off Karwar. The drivers, their skin glistening and scarlet after the drive, are given a traditional welcome at the resort, after which they bundle into the lifts to their rooms. Many head straight to the bar, while others hit the pool.

Twenty-nine-year-old investment management professional Stefano Buliani, wearing a white Adventure Ashram tee,



“This is the best model to raise funds for charity. The combination of a vacation and the drive is great. Indians make it special; in other places you see a beautiful landscape and then move on. But here, your senses are always overloaded,” says a participant

who has visited south India thrice, looks weary, but is forthcoming when asked about his experience in the rally so far. Italian by descent, he has been a London resident for the past eight years. He has participated in the Arctic Enduro race as well, and hopes to come back in January for the Enduro biking rally held in the Himalayas. “This is the best model to raise funds for charity,” he says, “The combination of a vacation and the drive is great. The people of India make it special; in other places you see a beautiful landscape and then move on. But here, there is always something going on, your senses are always overloaded.”

The drive has helped “widen the horizons” of Kate Cooper, a 55-year-old photographer from Britain, who is quite charmed by the old Amby she is driving. “I



charmed by the old Andy she is driving. "I am fascinated by the everyday activities of Indians," she says. "In Britain nowadays we have become very reserved, we hardly have any physical interaction. So it is nice to see men here putting hands across each others shoulders while walking together," she says.

The idea of philanthropy on a holiday draws many people to Karma Enduro. With entry for two people in a car priced at 9,500 pounds, drivers must raise the money personally or through sponsors. Though the number of participants has dwindled over the past few years, the organisers insist that the level of awareness and money the races raise abide. "With the recession, there have been issues," admits Rajesh Krishna, the "man on the ground" for the Indian Enduro races. "Parking (en route) is a bit of an issue too, so we are thinking of holding races with a limited number of cars to make it easy to handle."

The Ambassador cars for the rally have been provided by Sanjeev Dogra, an entrepreneur from Shimla. "These drivers enjoy India so much," he says. "Whenever we pass, people smile at us. We spread smiles." Krishna and Dogra are also upbeat because of the snowballing popularity of the Himalayan races. "The level of achievement in the Himalayas is a different experience altogether. We pass three of the highest



OF PEOPLE AND PLACES: Participants don't merely drive from point to point, but also use the journey to interact with locals as the rally of Ambassador cars attracts attention

passes in the world and some spectacular landscapes. Many people want to do charity, but they need some form of motivation to decide how exactly to do it," says Dogra.

The idea for the Enduro races came from Londoner Simon Smith, a biking enthusiast, in 2003. Currently, Enduro rallies are held every year in the USA, the Arctic region (non-charity), Africa and Cambodia through the adventure company, Global Enduro. The south Indian version has been one of the most active rallies. It started as a 10-day trip and helped raise money for multiple organisations, including the WWF, and The Pain and Palliative Care Society, Kerala.

For Heather Wood of the Rainbow Trust, the rally helps "raise the organisation's profile, return with many ideas, and hopefully make lifelong friends". The tall and soft-spoken Fritha Vincent is the main

spokeswoman and fund-raiser for Adventure Ashram at the rally. "The races have raised 8,00,000 pounds so far," she says. "This Karma Enduro will raise 1,30,000 pounds, of which 70,000 pounds will go to the Indian charity." Adventure Ashram was set up in 2008 to make a difference in the lives of people along the route of all the Enduro races. So far it has helped projects in the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve in the Nilgiris, Spiti Valley in the Himalayas, and Palani Hills, Tamil Nadu.

The Karma Enduro rally headed to Murudeshwar in Karnataka on Day Two. After five days of traversing Karnataka, the travellers will reach Tamil Nadu. A jungle retreat and a jaunt in Kodaikanal's cool climates comes next, followed by a trip to Kerala. On the 14th day, the travellers head back to Britain, with a different perspective and memories to cherish. □