

# OVERDRIVE

## **Mitsubishi rekindles the Pajero fire with its Heart in Mouth events for owners, Overdrive**

SUVs have become like microwaves. Both can do a heck of a lot of things, and rather well. But the latter basically has been reduced to re-heating food and the former, well, they're little more than spacious, urban runabouts for most of us. Many manufacturers have woken up to that and many SUVs are either de-speced to fit their on-road role better, or have little more than basic off-roading ability. Mitsubishi is the one manufacturer who has stood apart from this crowd. It still sells the old ladder-frame Pajero in India with fairly well-known off-road ability as well as the Montero - the flagship SUV - which again, doesn't look like it but can harness more than its fair share of planet Earth. Even the Outlander, no matter how much Mitsubishi underplays its off-road ability, is pretty handy off-road.



Now, Mitsubishi has decided to reignite the Pajero cult with a new series of events called Heart in Mouth, aimed at Pajero buyers. The idea being to allow them to see a side of their brawny SUVs that many have forgotten existed. I was called off to Chandigarh to attend the first of these events and I must say, I've never seen a collection of Pajero's chugging along at more weird angles all at once. Many first timers, in fact, hadn't even shifted into four-wheel low for a significant part of the drive and still made it through without getting stuck, which must be a massive compliment to how capable the thing really is.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. The 60km drive - about 35 properly off-road - began on the outskirts of the city with about 40 Pajeros taking the ceremonial flag-off. The route, charted by Overdrive's old buddy, five-time national rally champion Hari Singh, led the unsuspecting owners into a dry river bed - loads of sand, more than a few dips and climbs, followed by a run through an actual flowing stream, complete with a foot or more water, rounded rocks and finally, we were on a stretch where a highway was being constructed - the bridges weren't complete so that meant daunting uphill climbs on freshly dug Earth.



With the raising of the flag, the sun instantly disappeared for a siesta leaving behind an ominous collection of dark clouds. By the time the second car was flagged off, various Mitsubishi's officials were sheltering under the scarce protection of Ashoka trees as massive drops of rain

began to pelt down. As I cruised out of town in my Pajero - official car number two - accompanied by rally champ Sunny Sidhu, loud, repetitive banging sounds told us that it was time for the hail to join in the party.

When we turned off the road, it looked ominous. Like seven o'clock dark at three-fifteen ominous. Sidhu pointed to the mountains in the distance, barely visible through the pelting rain and said, 'That's where this stream begins. Hope there isn't a flash flood.' Thanks.

Having shifted into four-wheel low, our Pajero rumbled gamely through thick, soft sand. As people got stuck here and there, I found out that even walking in the stuff wasn't easy. Not that the Pajero noticed. I had a particularly scary moment when Sunny guided me past a stuck car by making me stick the right side wheels over a two-and-a-bit foot high piece of rock sticking out of the river edge. The world tilted crazily at angles that John Hopkins would smile appreciatively at. And the next minute, with a whump, we were back level, ahead of the stuck Pajero. Sidhu walked to the stuck, shifted into four-wheel drive and calmly rolled the Pajero out of the sand it was stuck in. I know it sounds tame, but there's nothing like the sight of a Pajero climbing a soft-sand embankment, kicking up three-storey rooster trails of sand, while moving at all of 5kmph.



I could see owners look alternately worried and astonished at what their SUVs were making mincemeat of. The sand, slightly crusted over by the rain, made the going a bit easier. But I spotted more than a few owners who dared to venture off the riverbed - the charted course - and into the wild grass on both sides, carving, literally, their own path. Amazing what a little encouragement will do, eh?

With the rain still coming down in sheets, we decided to skip the rest of the riverbed and head straight for the flowing stream. Once more, an impressive convoy of Pajeros thundered through terrain that would have had most so-called SUVs quaking in their uni-directional performance shoes. As the rocks crunched under the onslaught and tanker-fulls of water were displaced, our rally was already nearing the end. With an almighty splash at the last river crossing, we were out the other side.

I asked Hari why the route was so short. He laughed, "You have to remember that these owners have never actually been this far from tarmac before. We want them to be excited, to be thrilled, but not scared or tired." Besides, the relative inexperience on part of the 172 people who were in the convoy meant that no one was quite sure how many would get stuck and have to be towed or dug out. Obviously, Hari erred well on the safe side.

Mitsubishi's new marketing boss, Pritam Saikia said that the plan was clear. "We need the Pajero owners to see just what their prides and joys are capable of. We are thrilled with the response to this event and with the experience that the owners have had. We will now take this event to other parts of the country. Expect to see the event arrive on sand, snow and many other surfaces you wouldn't normally expect!"

Personally, I've always had a soft spot for the Pajero. It's always been a hardy thing, ever willing to get its feet wet and yet, with remarkable manners on the roads. This was the first time, I spent such an intense session with it off-road. And I can tell you this, I can't wait for more. I'm just waiting for Mitsubishi to microwave up some more instant thrills.

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