

High on lakes

In celebration of our third anniversary, AUTO BILD INDIA chose to explore the three highest lakes in the country. The challenge was to chart a route to these uncharted destinations. Join us as we take you to magical lakes of mystical Ladakh...

Pictures: Pawan Dagia



Ladakh they say is a mystical place. Time and again explorers make their way through treacherous terrain and respond to its calls. Last year we endured this treachery in trying to get the cheapest car in the world on top of Khardung la, the highest road in the world. This year we have embarked on a journey to travel to the highest lakes in the country. Admittedly though this time we are in a vehicle better suited for the journey – a brand new HM-Mitsubishi Montero.

We make our way to Manali, a popular destination for tourists from all over, from where our journey really starts. However as we start our drive to Rohtang Pass, we receive the grim news that the pass is closed, thanks to landslides. Nevertheless we drive till Marhi, where the climb to Rohtang starts, and wait along with a million other tourists most of whom will go no further than the snowy slopes at the top of the pass.

As hours pass, some decide to return to Manali. We however decide to wait it out. Suddenly we hear commotion. Bikers running to their bikes, drivers running to their cars. The police are letting cars through towards Rohtang!

But as we reach the summit, we see a couple of cars stopped ahead. There's been a fresh landslide! It's total chaos with people scampering away and BRO workers trying to ensure no one gets hurt and so on. A couple of hours later however the BRO manages to clear the road. By this time heavy rains have turned the road into a slush pool. Regular 2WD cars have already started spinning their wheels in search of traction. However we are part of a happier lot. We slot the shifter in 4WD and the Montero eases out of the slush.

Soon this results in us being far ahead of the crowd and we reach the top of Rohtang. Thanks to the road being closed for a while, the top is filled with snow. It's a lovely feeling. As we drive down toward Keylong, we realise trouble ahead. The only fuel pump at Tandi has shuts at 8pm and the next fuel station is a full 365km later! We decide to hole up for the night at nearby Keylong.

Full of enthusiasm after a good

The call of the majestic Himalayas is always hard to ignore. Especially if there is an adventurous streak in your heart somewhere, no matter how dormant. Every bend, every turn of the winding mountain roads seems to lead to a view more breathtaking than the one before it. From lush green pastures on gently sloping hills further south to the rocky, pine lined slopes higher up to the icy, cold, barren and perhaps even scary peaks surrounding the high passes, there is no place on earth that can replicate the feeling of awe that one develops for Mother Nature as it does here in the Himalayas, especially in the remote regions of Ladakh where the feeling is heightened by rare instances of inhabitations



night's sleep we decide to push on to Leh next morning, certain that the Montero's large fuel tank has more than enough fuel to make it. This ensures we are amongst the first to hit the road as the other few travellers head back to Tandi to refuel. En route, we cross the snowy Baralacha La at 16,043 feet before descending to Sarchu and heading towards the 21 loops of Gata and the More Plains beyond. Further on lay the icy Tanglang La at 17,500ft. Only then will we start the descent towards Leh. By the time we reach it's well after dark.

The next morning begins our quest to get to the first of the lakes we intend visiting – Pangong Tso. A virgin destination till recently, Pangong Tso has suddenly become popular after some scenes from Aamir Khan's 3 Idiots was shot on its shores.

But before we can drive off to Pangong Tso, we must get a permit – an Inner Line Permit to be precise. We get one from the Deputy Commissioner's office in Leh and then head off. For those of you who will read this and go off to

Treacherous terrain and inhospitable conditions are a given for travellers from Manali to Leh. Rain, snow, slush and landslides can play havoc on one's schedule and it is advisable to come prepared with extra time in hand to account for unexpected exigencies. The Rohtang La or Rohtang Pass in particular is quite prone to landslides and is frequently shut down by the BRO, who then clear the slide and make it passable for traffic again from both sides





see the lakes, please keep about two hours in hand to get the necessary permits. Also, please remember that the DC's office only starts functioning at 10am.

Formalities done, and permits in hand, we start driving towards Pangong which is around 161km away from Leh. As we move out of the world of tarmac and start our ascent into the mountains the roads get narrower and the climes get colder. It takes us a couple of hours to reach Chang la, which at 17,586ft is the world's second highest pass after Khardung La.

We are pleasantly surprised to see that the ever present Indian Army is not only serving hot tea, free of cost to all tourists, but is also selling souvenirs! We take a break and sample the army's hospitality, which is cordial and warm, despite the biting cold in the air.

From Chang La we start going downhill to reach our destination around 75km away. Now that might not sound much to you but believe you me in these conditions it takes a hell of a lot of time to travel 75km.

As we begin our descent, we spot short cuts through the mountains. Confidently, we slot the Montero into 4WD and go for the kill. In just a while, we have a feeling that we might have chewed more than we can swallow. However thanks to



Suraj Tal, at 16,020ft, is the second highest lake in India and the world's 21st highest. It lies just below the Baralacha La in the Lahaul-Spiti valley in the state of Himachal Pradesh, around 65km from the town of Keylong. The lake is the source of the Bhaga river which joins the Chandra river at Tandi to form the Chandrabhaga river. The Chandrabhaga is called the Chenab from the time it enters the Jammu and Kashmir valley.

After Khardung La at 18,380ft, which is the highest motorable pass in the world, Chang La at 17,586ft is the second highest. Travellers to Pangong Tso must cross the Chang La to get to the valley beyond wherein lies the immense lake. Atop Chang La, the Indian Army has set up a small tourist centre that provides weary travellers with a welcome cup of steaming tea. That too free of cost! There's also a small souvenir shop from where one can buy mementoes





PANGONG TSO

ALTITUDE : 13,940 feet

AREA: 700sq km

Pangong Tso is the largest trans-national lake of South Asia. At first glance it looks smaller than Tso Moriri, but that is only because the lake is a lot narrower than it is long. Of its 700sq km area, about a third lies in Indian territory while the rest lies under Chinese control, in Tibet. In fact the Line of Control (LOC) between India and China runs right through the lake. The shores of Pangong Tso also saw some heavy fighting between Indian and Chinese troops in the 1962 Sino-Indian war. Recently, the lake has gained popularity after it was shown in Aamir Khan's film 3 Idiots. The waters of the lake are said to be salty and does not support aquatic life, except some crustaceans. Also, the lake is what is known as a Remnant Lake and is said to have been formed when a larger water body dried up, leaving the lake.

PLACES TO STAY

There are two options for travellers who wish to spend the night on the shores of Pangong Tso. We stayed at the Mart-simek camps, which offers both tented accommodation as well as cottages. Both are clean and basic and cost Rs 2,000 per night. One can add in dinner for Rs 150 per person. The fare is simple but tasty and the staff courteous. You can also stay at a similar camp at Spangmik, which is 7km further ahead.



Ladakh sees some very extreme variations in terrain, thanks to its tree-less landscape. So, while in peak summers the sun could be harsh enough to kill with heat strokes, bitter cold and frequent snowfall could mean the danger of fatal frostbite

the Montero's capability we actually swallow the problem. Its superb ground clearance and ramp and departure angles ensure that we can comfortably play mountain goat.

We make it to Pangong Tso just as daylight starts to fade. Unbelievable shades of blue mesmerise us all. There aren't too many places to stay at Pangong Tso. We chose tented accommodation at a property called Martsimek, which also has cottages.

The next day once again brings along bad news. We had decided to get to our second lake, Tso Moriri via Chushul and Loma. But the Section House Officer of Chushul informs us that we cannot travel via that route since Loma is too close to the Sino-Indian border. He suggests we head back towards Karu and take a detour via Upshi. With no way out, we head back. As we climb Chang La again it starts snowing heavily. So much so that the Montero is soon covered in snow and the road is slippery. However it is here that the Apollo Hawkz on the Montero show their mettle as they provide the much needed traction.

On the other side safely, we carry on towards Chumathang on

The Montero

Many SUVs are available in India now. Some are best retained for mild off-road terrain and then there are the serious off-roaders. The HM-Mitsubishi Montero is definitely the latter and hence was our choice of vehicle. On this journey we encountered every terrain possible, from snow to gravel and of course tarmac - both broken and smooth. The Montero, with its 202bhp, 3.2-litre V6 diesel engine mated to a 6-speed auto transmission, proved a potent off-roader with enough power to conquer the steep Himalayan gradients. Not to mention its easy-to-engage shift-on-the-fly 4WD ensured we never got stuck. Last but not the least, its myriad luxury features, including heated seats, made the driver super comfortable.



the banks of the mighty and green Indus. After 142km, we reach a Y-junction. As we had been told, the road ahead disappears giving way to a barren rocky flat land.

As we momentarily hit 100kmph, the Montero's suspension soaks every bump, rut, pothole and what have you, like it's a piece of cake. As the speedo hits 100kmh, we hit a immense hump and the huge hulk of the Montero leaves ground momentarily! As the traction control light comes on, we try everything possible to ensure we don't crash. Thankfully we land safely on terra firma. With our confidence in the Montero growing, we decide to plough on at the same speed hoping the numerous computers on board the vehicle and the fantastic traction offered by the Apollo tyres will see us through.

Far away, we spot a bit of blue! Is it Tso Morriri? Some nomads' tents being the only place where we can confirm whether it is indeed the lake we are looking for, we head towards them. Turns out the lake ahead is not Tso Moriri but another one called Kyagar Tso. This was certainly a bonus for we had only bargained on visiting three lakes and this was not one of them.

After reconfirming that we are on the right road, we head off to-

Yaks are found aplenty in the Ladakh region. They are found not only in the Himalayas but also in the Tibetan Plateau, Central Asia, Mongolia and even as far north as some parts of Russia. Domesticated yaks are often used as beasts of burden



The Gata Loops is a series of 21 bends and hairpins that take you from 15,302ft up to 16,547ft. It's probably the most twisty stretch of road that can be found anywhere in our country and requires immense concentration from drivers



TSO MORIRI

ALTITUDE : 15,075 feet

AREA: 121sq km

Tso Moriri is part of a wildlife conservation area, and boards prohibiting hunting in the region can be seen on the drive to Korzok. Among other animals and birds, one can spot the very rare black necked crane, great crested grebe and black necked grebe here. Tibetan wild ass have also been spotted in the vicinity of Tso Moriri. Although sightings are very rare the region is also home to the Himalayan Snow Leopard. Tso Moriri is also the largest high altitude trans-Himalayan lake that is entirely in Indian territory.

PLACES TO STAY

Tso Moriri sees quite a few tourists, who according to locals, have increased in numbers. As a result there are three accommodation choices here. There is the Crane Guest House in Korzok. One can also choose to stay at the Tourist Centre, which has a few rooms. We however recommend the Tso Moriri Lake Camps and Resort. The resort offers both tented accommodation as well as cottages. Both are clean and comfortable and will cost Rs 2,500 per night. The tariff includes dinner as well as breakfast for two people. Meals are a buffet affair with a limited selection but the food served is tasty and the staff are super courteous.





TSO KAR

ALTITUDE : 15,080 feet

AREA: 200sq km

There is an ancient Ladakhi legend as to how Tso Kar was formed. Legend says that there was a super human who protected this region from the evils of the world. One day, he drank some hot tea much too quickly and ended up sneezing hard. Two drops of water from his tickled nose fell onto the world and they became two lakes, one of which is Tso Kar. Indeed, as we approached Tso Kar we saw that there are two lakes instead of one.

PLACES TO STAY

Tso Kar is the least frequented of the three lakes we went to, presumably thanks to how difficult it is to get there. As a result there are no places to stay around the lake. The only village we saw was about 5km further on. Should you want to visit Tso Kar, we recommend you do it on the way back to Manali from Tso Moriri. Otherwise, you should head back to Tso Moriri where there is accommodation available for tourists.



We found this single horn on the banks of Tso Kar, presumably lost by a ram in some fight or some old sheep. In these desolate mountains sheep and mountain goat are the only animals that one sees in numbers. Yaks aside that is



wards Tso Moriri. A few kilometres ahead the flat lands disappear. A small lane is what we are on with a drop on one side and mountains on the other. True to the words of the nomads, we spot a lone metal bridge. We cross it and spot the massive Tso Moriri! It's a sight to behold as the clear blue skies reflect off the waters of the lake offering a spectacular panorama!

In our enthusiasm we plough on ahead only to realise that there are no signs of life. We are all a little confused, for we have definite information that there were camps and places to stay and a huge ITBP camp at Tso Moriri. It is only now that we spot the camp, but it's on the other side of the lake!

We make our way back to the bridge and turn off into what looks like no road at all. Snaking through we reach the ITBP tent and show our permits. Miles away we spot the road we were on and thank our stars that we have had the good sense to stop and look for the little cluster of buildings that passes for the village that is Korzok.

Unlike at Pangong Tso, Tso Moriri offers three choices of accommodation – a guest house, a tourist centre and a camp overlooking the lake. However we decide to pitch our tent that night! With sleeping bags laid, and tent pitched, we head into the village for food. The night is a cold one and it starts snowing! In our little tent we feel one with nature in a way that touches our soul.

We wake up to the beautiful rays of the morning sun bouncing off the waters of the lake. But as we take in the drama of the sight in front of us, we realise it has been a while since we have had any contact with folks back home!

Not knowing where else we could turn for help in a land where connectivity is as rare as a blue moon in the sky, we went to the ITBP camp and asked if they could point us to a phone booth or something.

Again, to our surprise, they rose to the occasion in a way we hadn't imagined. Instead of giving us directions to a phone booth, they showed us into their communication centre from where we could use their satellite phone to call home. It's at times like these that one realises that though we live in a world where calls on mobile



Our Montero was shod with Apollo's latest Hawkz A/T tyres. The 17in tyres proved to be an ideal companion on this drive. Thanks to the wide variations in terrain in Ladakh, we had to drive over a variety of surfaces. But be it gravel, snow, slush or tarmac, our Apollos provided the performance we desired. The Hawkz proved especially grippy while crossing overflowing streams and even when subjected to extreme torture on unforgiving terrain strewn with rocks, came out with flying colours.



phones, text messages, BBM-ing are the norm, there are still places where connectivity with the outside world commands a high premium.

To get to our next destination – Tso Kar, we head back the same way for around 43 kilometres and reach a small village called Tsumdo. As we approached the village it started snowing again. Yes you read it right! Snowfall in the month of June when the plains are burning. In a hurry to record the awesome scene with our cameras we jump out of the cosiness of the Montero's heated seats. The cold is shocking and numbing. The snowfall is so heavy that in the brief few moments of our stopover, we and the car, is covered with a thin white layer. Hurriedly we jump back inside. We turn on the heater and very soon, are back to feeling cosy in a cabin that seems as warm as toast at 22 degrees!

We trundle through the snow and after a few more moments are blessed with bright sunshine. It's a crazy world here. Ahead lies a stretch good enough to tear away



Pang, which comes after the phenomenal Gata Loops on the road from Manali to Leh is actually a motley collection of tents where you can get some food. After a hard day's driving, this will be the best tasting food you'll get even if the fare is basic

tyres to shreds and it is on this path that we encounter an oncoming truck. It suddenly dawns on us that this is the only vehicle we have seen on this desolate road since morning. We ask the driver for directions to Tso Kar and he tells us to carry on on the same road.

En route we tackle one of the worst mountain climbs we have faced so far with gradients beyond belief. In addition, every turn was strewn with rocks and gravel so that tyres were fighting for grip. Suddenly it all ends and from the top of the mountain we spot Tso Kar, and beyond it pristine tarmac!

Even from a distance we can make out that Tso Kar is partially frozen, which isn't something we had expected. Parked by the lakeside, we realise that this is where our journey of discovery ends.

That such beauty could exist in such a desolate land is a revelation. And that we've seen them is nothing short of a blessing.

Rahul Ghosh

