

# THE GREAT INDIAN WORLD TRIP LEG I - SOUTH EAST ASIA

In this exclusive column, expedition leader and travel writer Tushar Agarwal chronicles the mother of all road trips. As Tushar and his team live their dream of driving around the world, HIGH5 brings to you what it feels like to be on a journey that has never been attempted by anyone in the world.

**A**fter creating 7 Limca Book of Records together with Sanjay, it was absolutely clear in my mind what we have to do next. It was time to finally put into action our long standing dream of driving around the world. It was time to go on The Mother of All Road Trips. The Great Indian World Trip.

In July 2012, we started planning the epic journey and decided to Flag Off in September 2013. A million questions hit home. What would be the route? What countries will we be visiting? How much will it cost? How long will it take? Who car should we take for the journey? We loved these questions. The fact that these questions were coming to our minds meant that the world trip preparation had started. We also asked our friend Prasad, an accomplished filmmaker from Mumbai to join us so that we could document the journey and produce a travel series on our historic expedition.

## CHASE SUMMER

Firstly, we did what we love doing the most. Design the route. We decided to start our journey sometime in September 2013 driving towards the Southern Hemisphere. Our plan was to 'chase summer'. We would drive through India, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. From Singapore, we would ship our car to Australia. After driving 18,000 km in Australia we would ship our vehicle

westwards to Mombasa, Kenya. We would drive from Kenya to Cape Town in South Africa via Tanzania, Zambia, Mozambique, Malawi, Uganda, Namibia and Botswana. From Cape Town, we would ship our car further west to Buenos Aires, Argentina in South America and after touching Ushuaia, the southernmost tip of the world, we would drive up the 74,000 km long Pan-American highway all the way up to Alaska after crossing Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, Panama, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Mexico and United States. We would then drive east through Canada to New York, ship the vehicle to Europe, drive through Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, reach the Gulf and finally ship our vehicle from Dubai to Mumbai and drive home to Delhi, Punjab.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME!

Route decided, we thought about the theme for the journey. "How about we drive all around the world to meet with NRIs? Let's meet Indian people in different corners of the world and find out how's life like living far away from home. We can meet truck drivers from Punjab in Canada, Indian Investment Bankers in London, doctors and scientists in US, shop keepers in Kenya." I announced my idea excitedly. "It is a grand epic journey so we call it 'Great'. It is being done by Indians by Indians so we call it 'Indian'. It is a road trip around the world so we add 'World Trip'. Put it together and we have 'The Great Indian World Trip'.



Tushar holds 5 Limca Book Records and has driven in more than 40 countries. He was the first person to drive from London to Delhi. He was also part of Indian Team in the ASEAN India Car Rally where he drove from Singapore to India. Tushar has driven in the most diverse terrains of the world including the highest mountains of China, Kyrgyzstan and Nepal; lonely deserts of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan; inhospitable, Austrians of Germany; nerve racking highways of Ukraine and Russia, Death Road and Salt Flats in Bolivia and the silvery freeways of US and UK. He is also a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society in London. Tushar has written a book titled "Road Affairs" on his various driving expeditions and records. Currently, Tushar is driving around the world covering 70,000 km in 50 countries.

## DRIVING, THE OLD WAY!

We also decided to add one more unique element. We decided to drive around the world without using any electronic gadgets. No GPS, no Google Maps. We would use road maps, read road signs and ask people for directions. We felt that using gadgets would isolate us from the people around us. We wanted to lose our way, we wanted to talk to villagers, we wanted to find ourselves in unplanned situations, we wanted to come home with interesting stories to tell.

## THE START

Finally, the D-Day arrived. Wearing our crisp yellow World Trip T-shirts, amidst huge applause, we flagged off on the greatest adventure of our lives from India Gate. As we started driving out of Delhi, I got a chance to reflect on my feelings. It was difficult to digest that we were on a world trip. How can you imagine or prepare yourself for something so big? It was difficult to

visualize or to imagine how the journey would unfold over the next 9-10 months. All I could feel was that we were going on a road trip somewhere out of Delhi.

## THE FIRST STOP: MYANMAR

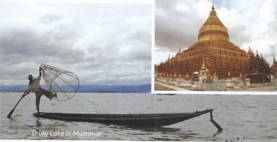
As we rolled out of India Gate, there was complete silence in the car. It was one of those rare moments when neither of us had anything to say. I guess it had it us that we were going on a journey on a lifetime, but the magnitude of the journey had not sunk in. It took us four days to reach the India-Myanmar border in Manipur. Every day in India was a unique experience. Eating Tunde kebabs in Lucknow, visiting Indigo plantations in a small town in Bihar called Forbespuri, visiting a food market in Nagaland where dog meat, live frogs, bee larvae, eel and lots of other strange and weird animals were up for sale. Finally, we drove through Manipur and crossed the Indo-Myanmar Friendship bridge to enter the first foreign country on our journey, Myanmar.



With Myanmar custom officers at Myanmar-Thai border

What's a road trip without a bit of a challenge? Our journey from Kalay to Monywa was nothing short of a thrilling experience which put our driving skills to test. At one point during this drive, we came across a river that was overflowing from one side of the road to the other at a fairly high speed. We carefully checked the water level using a stick and moved on. A couple of hours later, we tilted 40 degrees into soft ground and it took us 2 hours to get out and continue further. We were driving through extremely torrential rains and by the time we reached Monywa, we were absolutely exhausted.

Golden Pagoda in Bagan



Inle Lake in Myanmar

Someone has rightly said, "Everyone is wrong about foreign countries". The more I travel, the more I believe in this statement. The people here are always smiling. Be it the police, the shopkeepers, the hotel staff, the monks at the omnipresent Pagodas or people going about their daily chores in the local markets. Everyone greets you with a smile and a "Mingalawa" wherever you go. Our co-ordinator in Myanmar, Mr Tin, made the border crossing process very smooth for us. He escorted us in his patrol vehicle throughout our 8 day drive through Myanmar. We started driving

on the right side of the road in a country which is more than 50% covered with forests. There were no road signs or markings. Having said that, I still feel Myanmar is a great country to drive through. Dense forests, ocean, mountains, dirt roads, 16 lane highways, it has the perfect combination for a thrilling driving experience. I think Myanmar should also be known as the 'country of bridges'. On our very first day from the border to Kalay, we crossed 42 iron bridges within a 100 km range. As the car would drive over the bridge, the iron plates over which we drove made a loud rattling noise.

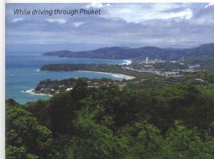
Next morning, we drove to Bagan, a 11th century historic town which is home to 4,466 temples, pagodas and monasteries. We climbed the top of one Pagoda to get an aerial view of Bagan and in every direction all we could see were monuments of all shapes and sizes as far as the eye could see. It was almost like someone had splattered temples and monasteries all over the place. Our journey only got better as we kept travelling through this incredible country. Our next stop was a town called Inle famous for the very beautiful, Inle Lake. We sat in the makeshift narrow but long motorboat and as the lake opened up in front of us, we all looked with eyes wide open at the perfect setting in front of us. The lake was surrounded by green mountains in all directions which were partly covered by clouds below a bright blue sky. The reflection of sun on the lake made the shimmering blue water shine even more.

After spending a couple of days in Inle, we took the recently constructed Mandalay-Yangon expressway, an 8 lane highway that connected Mandalay to Yangon. Driving on the expressway was almost like driving on the freeways of US or motorways of UK. There is nothing negative I can point out Myanmar. The country is very clean, no matter which part of the country you are travelling through, you will always find good food, clean toilets, fairly good roads and even though most people chew tobacco and pan all day long, but they never spit on the road. As we approached the Myanmar-Thailand border, our last stop was a place called Golden Rock. Imagine this massive rock hanging on the edge of a cliff for centuries without any support. Now, imagine this giant rock painted in gold, shining in the moonlight, covered in mist, with clouds floating below it. The calmness around it, the vibrations, the peaceful atmosphere, your eyes would automatically close and don't be surprised if you are lost in a trance.



#### THAILAND: GOOD TIMES GUARANTEED

Crossing the Myanmar Thailand border was nothing like we had imagined. Seeing the stickers on the vehicle, our world trip branded T-shirts and the route map of our epic journey was good enough for the custom officers to give us a green signal without any questions. In fact, the custom officers wouldn't let us go without getting a picture clicked with the entire border staff, "Thailand has something for everyone," said the Indian Ambassador to Thailand with a hint of a smile



The Royal Palace of Bangkok

### Interesting Figures

Total Distance covered from Delhi to Singapore - 8216 KM

Total Days - 27

Total fuel consumption - 798 Liters

Total Distance Covered in Each Country -

- A. India - 2619 KM
- B. Myanmar - 2112 KM
- C. Thailand - 2095 KM
- D. Malaysia - 1268 KM
- E. Singapore - 122 KM

Cost of Fuel (Diesel) in each country

- A Myanmar - 892 Kyaht/Lit (INR 62.90)
- B Thailand - 30.43 Bht/Lit (INR 61.58/Lit)
- C Malaysia - 2 Ringgit/Lit (INR 40/Lit)
- D Singapore - 1.67 Singapore Dollar/Lit (INR 85.25/Lit)

Max distance covered in one day - 900 Km | Bangkok to Phuket|

on his face when we went to see him at the Indian Embassy in Bangkok. I couldn't agree more. Thailand is a country where you are one hundred percent guaranteed to have a great time. Whether it is culture, beaches, food, shopping, massages etc. it is all available and in abundance in this land of happiness. Someone has rightly said,

"If you got bored in Thailand, something is seriously wrong with you!"

After driving for nine days through Myanmar, we finally entered Thailand and suddenly everything changed. I can never understand how does nature know that the country has changed? You draw one line on the border and on the other side of the line, the world is completely different. We said goodbye to Mr Tin in Myanmar and crossed Myanmar border into Thailand. On the other side of the border, it felt like a different world. Different faces, different buildings, different language, different trees, different flowers, different roads, different food, different smells, different everything else. All because we had crossed one line. Someone was supposed to bring a road map of Thailand for us at the border, but did not turn up. So we headed towards Bangkok without any maps. Our only help was sign boards and our compass. We managed to get on the correct highway without the help of a map but the concern in our minds was how to find the hotel in the concrete jungle of Bangkok. As we entered Bangkok, we looked for sign boards for the area where our hotel was located. Fortunately, we spotted the sign board and miraculously we reached our hotel without taking a single wrong turn. Over the next couple of days in Bangkok, a lot of people came forward to help us, to meet us, to treat us and to guide us. Be it the Indian Ambassador to Thailand, H.E. Anil Wadhwa, owners of Indian restaurants, principle of an Indian School, 'granthis' in the Gurudwaras, we got a chance to meet with Indian people contributing in their own ways in Thailand.

The journey from Bangkok to Phuket was a breeze. Cruising along on the Thai highways was as smooth as silk. No potholes, no one honking, no traffic jams, no angry drivers, no cutting of lanes, no animals or people trespassing the highways...it was the ideal drive. Just us, our car,

music and the idea of driving to one of the most popular destinations in the world, Phuket. Cool breeze, sound of the ocean, tattoo bars, massage parlours, karaoke clubs...It was a very different world compared to all the places we had driven through so far. After unwinding at the beach for a couple of days, we pushed ourselves to hit the road again before we got too comfortable lazing near the crystal blue Andaman waters.

The mutual feeling on leaving Thailand was one of happiness. It seemed like a laid back country where people work hard but party harder. Everyone here smiles, everyone here is willing to help, you will always be greeted with a "Swaadikaana" in a very typical nasal tone. But before you know it, you too will be returning the greeting. Be careful, it is easy to fall in love with Thailand, so make sure you visit the country with a return ticket or if you are the crazy kinds like us, with a visa for your onward country!

#### MALAYSIA: TRULY FANTASTIC

We entered Malaysia without any road maps, without a gps, with any local currency, without a clue about how to get to Penang, which we first thought was a city, but it turned out that Penang is not in fact a city, but a region. You may call us ignorant, amateurish...but if you ask me, it turned out to be the best plan! At the border, while we were walking in a confused state from one room to the other, an Indian Malaysian named Sanglee approached us. For the next few hours, he became our guardian taking care of documentation at the border, paying toll tax for us multiple times, feeding us in a local Tamil restaurant, arranging for a local person to guide us to Little India...all this was taken care of by him, how long did we know him for? A couple of hours! Could any of this have happened if we had a route map or local currency or knowledge about the routes? I rest my case.

After bidding goodbye to Sanglee, we said hello to Awing, one of my Malaysian friends who drove 700 km to meet us. He took us to a resort in Gunung Jerai, one of the highest points of Malaysia from where you could see paddy fields in every direction and also catch a glimpse of the ocean in the far distance. The resort was built on top of the mountain and as we sat in the balcony of our room overlooking the valley down below, the entire area got engulfed by clouds. From India to Myanmar to Thailand to Malaysia, meeting Sanglee during the day and then being in the balcony overlooking a beautiful landscape in Malaysia, we couldn't help get a bit philosophical.

"Travelling through so many countries, experiencing different cultures, meeting different faces everyday makes me realize where I belong" Sanjay said looking far ahead in the distance.



Petronas Towers



Our own Hanuman near Ratiy caves

"What we are doing, what we are experiencing, what we are achieving together is rare. I think it will take a few years before even we will realize what we did. It is going to stay with us forever," I added

After the clouds had cleared, the Black Label had emptied and the birds had started chirping, we were lost in our own dreams. My mind would jump from one continent to another.

"Calm down, come back, this is only the first leg, one step at a time, one day at a time" I would need to keep reminding myself.

Kuala Lumpur was a nicer version of Bangkok. The highlight of course was the twin towers of Petronas. Our journey in Malaysia started on a high note when we met Sanglee at the border. It became more interesting when we met Awing but what took it to a completely different level was the support given to us by the Automobile

Sanjay and Tushar in Malaysia



Everything you see is Vegetarian during the Chinese Vegetarian week



Deep fried Prawns and vegetables



Famous coffee chain in Malaysia



On way to Bangkok

Association of Malaysia (AAM). Mr TK Malhotra, President of Automobile Association of Upper India (AAUI) had written to the President of AAM about our journey. He had requested AAM to provide us with on-ground support and media coverage in Malaysia. AAM team went out of their way to welcome us. Not only did they get our car fully serviced at their very own workshop, they even managed to get us LIVE on the Breakfast Show on NTV7 Channel, the national news channel of Malaysia.

Sitting in the green room getting a 'touch up' done on our faces, Sanjay, Prasad and I couldn't help but look at each other and giggle.

"Driving can take you places, from highways to deserts to mountains to a makeup room" Sanjay laughed.



#### THE FINAL LEG: SINGAPORE

It was time to enter the final country on the first leg of our journey, Singapore. One of the most difficult and expensive countries when it comes to obtaining driving permits. We had to spend close to USD 250 for getting a sea of documents needed to drive on Singapore roads for only one day! We crossed the Malaysian border, entered Singapore and as the city opened in front of us, I couldn't help feel a bit sick thinking about how to navigate through the maze of roads, highways, flyovers and make sure we don't end up taking too many wrong turns or breaking any laws. But after some hiccups, we did manage to navigate through Singapore using road maps. As we drove to the Juroing Port terminal to put our vehicle on an Australian bound ship, I smiled secretly as I had a feedback on the last 25 days.

The world is better than we think it is. We are doing The Great Indian World Trip to experience different cultures, to meet people of varied backgrounds and to taste foods of different regions. I am happy to say that we got a good dose of all of the above on the first leg of our journey. But I am happier and very proud to say that despite the varied backgrounds and cultures in our own beloved nation, the common links that I felt in India and other Asian countries were kindness, hospitality and selflessness.

Next leg of our journey will take us to Australia where we will be driving 18,000 km and also attempt to create a Guinness World Record for driving the longest distance in a single country!

What is it that anyone is after on a cross border road trip? Food? Beautiful landscapes? Seeing historic monuments? Planning the route very carefully? Documentation? Currency? Making sure every aspect is covered? After driving for so many years, I have come to realize that all you need is access to the country and everything else is somehow taken care of. What is a road trip without a bit of apprehension, a bit of curiosity, a bit of uncertainty, a bit of no planning? Or should I say that we planned to not plan?

The Great Indian World Trip is organised by Adventures Overland ([www.AdventuresOverland.com](http://www.AdventuresOverland.com)), one of the first self drive expedition companies India organising incredible journeys in Ladakh, Bhutan, Himachal, Rajasthan and many other remote terrains around the world.