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FOUR PLAY

On the way from Kothi to Rohtang Pass

The locals were awestruck at these weird contraptions as the first ever Quad ATV expedition in India propelled its way from Manali to Leh



By Akshay Kumar

Up to our waist in freezing waters we pushed hard to make sure that the 4x4 Quad did not get swept away. Three others tied a rope to the front end to anchor our efforts. The next thing I knew the ATV leapt up and flipped right back over me. In the nick of time I managed to scramble away from the potentially fatal impact I could have had.

"Stop!" Uri screamed at me from behind. Riding the ATV up a 50 degree incline over two feet high rocks I just about managed to come to a stop when Uri ran up and inspected the undercarriage of my ATV. To my

surprise I saw that the chassis had snapped right through the middle.

All this happened on the first day of the 10 day ATV Quad expedition from Manali to Leh. Many people have driven on this road, so what's the big deal?? Just that we chose not to go on the road. Eighty per cent of our expedition on twelve 4X4 ATV Quads was off road.

For your information, Quads are specially designed to drive on off road and rough terrain. In some areas Quads are also used for farming as small tractors. These powerful bikes come in ranges of 50 cc to 650 cc. The more powerful Quads are equipped with a 4x4 option and well known Quad manufacturers include Honda, Polaris and Yamaha. KTM is also now getting

into the Quad market. Though more stable than two wheeler bikes, Quads are still very dangerous machines. If you are not used to the power then they are very liable to flip over backwards leading to serious injuries.

Well, back to where it all began, it was the first ever Quad ATV expedition in India, and there was no way that I would miss this opportunity. A bunch of rich businessmen from Israel asked me to organise and plan an ATV expedition. Twelve ATVs were specially shipped in from Israel for this trip. With upto 400 horse power of raw 4 wheel drive under you, the capability to negotiate the most gruelling of terrain across the highest motorable road in the world, to go where no motor has gone before, camping at 15,000 feet and roughing it out in sub zero temperatures all combine to make a great adventure holiday.

The team had physically challenged drivers and even a 12 year old riding pillion. Riding my own ATV in the lead was an unforgettable experience. The locals were awestruck at these weird contraptions and their mad drivers. Scores of school kids everywhere along with their mothers wanted a ride on the ATVs.

We climbed up to Rohtang on the old mule track between Kothi and Marhi and dropped down into the Lahaul valley. After a failed attempt to try and get to the Chandertal lake we backtracked to the district headquarters at Keylong and carried on to climb to Baralacha La over an old, abandoned army road. Dropping down to the Sarchu plains we again left the tarmac and drove for 15 km along the river bed of the Tsarap Chu.

We took a steep shortcut to cut across the 21 switch backs from Sarchu up to Lachlung La. Despite dire warnings from the road workers we managed to safely get everyone to the top. Dropping down to the Pang Plateau we managed to drive the ATVs on to a ridge overlooking the Tso Kar lake.

The next three days we drove completely off road taking a circuit of the Tso Kar Lake over the Polokongo La and around the Kaigar Tso lake to reach Karzok on the banks of the Tso Moriri.

The grand finale of the trip was to find an off road section to climb from Leh to the 18,000 feet Khardung la pass — an amazing feat that took us more than eight hours to finish. In the end, all the ATVs were loaded on to a truck and shipped to Mumbai to be sent back to Israel.

(The writer is the CEO of Mercury Himalayan Explorations Ltd, an adventure travel company)



At Marhi en route to Rohtang Pass, The writer on Sarchu plains on the way to Leh



PATH FINDER

- For off road and 4x4 options, a minimum 350 cc Quad bike is required
- Rajasthan, Manali-Leh route and Spiti valley have already been earmarked for Quad biking. However, India offers limitless possibilities in the Western Ghats, Nilgiris in South India and Arunachal in the east.

- Quads though more stable than two wheeler bikes are still very dangerous machines. If you are not used to the power then they are very liable to flip over.
- For details, contact Mercury Himalayan Explorations Ltd. There will be Quads available on rent in India by the end of 2010. Email: mhe@himalayanadventure.com; Web: www.himalayanadventure.com