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Vol 5 | Issue No 06

Under the azure sky

Despite being my sixth visit to Ladakh overland, the photographer in me always finds a new dimension in the land of ever changing colours. And, to make the journey even special, I had the editor of the Lithuanian edition of AUTO BILD as my travelling companion

Pictures: Suresh Narayanan

Even those who are not geographically challenged would be hard put to point out Lithuania on the world map. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Lithuania was one of the first republics of the erstwhile communist state to declare independence and join the European Union before becoming one of the fastest growing economies in Europe.

But hang on, why I am talking about Lithuania. Well, the reason is simple: one Lithuanian citizen, Vitoldas Milius, is trying to become the first from his country to drive to the top of Khardungla (18,380 feet) – the highest motorable road in the world. And, this gentleman is the editor of AUTO BILD of the Lithuanian edition and I'm accompanying him on this adventure. This is not his first visit to the country where he believes people "drive on the wrong side." On another occasion he had come down to take part in the Mumbai International Marathon, and as an avid traveller he has driven to some of the remotest places on the planet.

But, Vitoldas has an immediate problem on hands. How to get used to driving on the 'wrong side' of the road? Fortunately, he has a solution – follow local drivers and drive

just like them. Trust me, it worked and in no time he became a minor expert of driving on Indian roads, pat down to honking.

On the morning of our departure I reached his hotel at 4am. "Good morning, how are you," he greeted. "Morning, I'm approximately fine, thank you," I greeted back. While setting the luggage in the boot of our Scorpio VLX 4x4, he had a quizzical look on his face. "What's this approximate business," he asked. "Well, you see, in our country, except for a few things, everything is approximate. By the end of the drive you will agree with me," I explained.

As the first light came up, we were out of the city limits of Delhi cruising along the NH2 towards Chandigarh, there was nothing of interest for me on this road, but for my companion at the wheel of the Scorpio everything was interesting, amazing, astonishing and unbelievable.

The new highway from Zirakpur near Chandigarh to Shimla is not much shorter, but reduces travel time by almost an hour. Our plan was to stay at the Banjara Camps in Thanedar, 15km further down from Narkanda, for the night. Being the fruiting season, apple and peach trees in the valley were



On the descent from Baralachala one usually sees the mountains covered with snow, but this year they had a barren look



stooping low under the weight of the fruits. The next day's plan was to reach Manali by crossing the Jalori pass. I was looking forward to the first good picture opportunity from the top of the pass, but my plan got washed away in heavy rain and sleet.

We reached Manali by the evening and checked into a hotel

Traffic jams (above) are a common occurrence on the way to the top of the Rohtang pass. Seen in the background, GREF personnel building a retaining wall to prevent landslides. Forging nallahs (below) is par for the course on this route

on the left bank. That's when Vitoldas sprang the whiskey logic on me. He staunchly believed a couple of shots every evening will keep the body's immunity system in fine fiddle. "You should never have one drink," he said. "One drink will affect only one leg, so you should have a second one to restore the balance of the other leg." Now, who can challenge that.

The next morning after a light breakfast we hit the Manali-Leh road. The going was smooth till we reached Marhi en route to the Rohtang pass. As we climbed up, the sight of taxis hauling up tourists towards the pass with skies sticking out of the window intrigued my partner. Being an avid skier he was bemused by the lack of snow and wondered where they





As you climb up the Gata Loops towards Lachungla, you get to see different hues of brown and grey



are going to ski. After endless jams and traffic snarls we reached the top where we saw people making feeble attempts at skiing and sliding sitting on rubber tubes tied to a rope. Seeing it he said, "Ahh! This is approximately skiing." I could only chuckle.

The traffic thinned out after crossing Rohtang, but we were considerably late due to the jams, so, we decided to halt at Keylong instead of our planned night stay at



The mountains in Lahul (top) change colour after every bend. Vitoldas raises a dust storm (middle) in the Scorpio VLX 4x4 on the Sarchu plains. He enjoys his bowl of noodle soup (right) at Bharatpur, about 13km short of Baralachala. Hawkers make a quick buck (bottom right) while people wait for the jam to clear. At the Tsokar camp (left), one can see the sky adorned with a billion stars at night. The moonless sky made the sight even more enchanting





Jispa. After an uneventful evening at Keylong, we began your climb up to Baralachala in right earnest. By the time we reached the top of the pass, a heavy cloud cover cast a grey spell over the landscape. The blue skies shone again by the time we reached the Sarchu plains and Viltoldas let loose the rally driver in him. Since we had plenty of time on our hands we decided to push forward. Climbing the Gata loops we reached Pang, where, after some refreshments, we decided to stay the night at the camp at Tsokar on the More Plains. At the turn off point on the highway, we found a signboard that said the camping sight was 3km away. In reality, however, it turned out to be more than a 13km drive. "Now, I know why in India, everything is approximate," said Vitoldas, even before I could say anything. On this moonless night, the sky glittered with a billion stars.

We finally reached Leh the next day by 4.30pm after a routine stop at Thiksey monastery. After a day's rest in Leh, we headed to the mighty Khardungla top and Vitoldas became the first Lithuanian to drive to the top of the pass by the afternoon. To celebrate the occasion, we set-

Vitoldas becomes the first Lithuanian to drive to the Khardungla top (above). Pangong Tso (below) has now become quite a popular tourist destination

led for bowls of hot soup and tea at the army canteen. With Khardungla conquered, we headed for Pangong Tso—the largest salt water lake in Asia of which 60 per cent lies in Tibet. We spent the rest of the day driving along the lake shore and taking

pictures, before finding a home stay accommodation in a nearby village. As evening fell on the great lake, Vitoldas poured a stiffer than usual measure of whiskey for both of us to reflect on the journey.

Suresh Narayanan

