

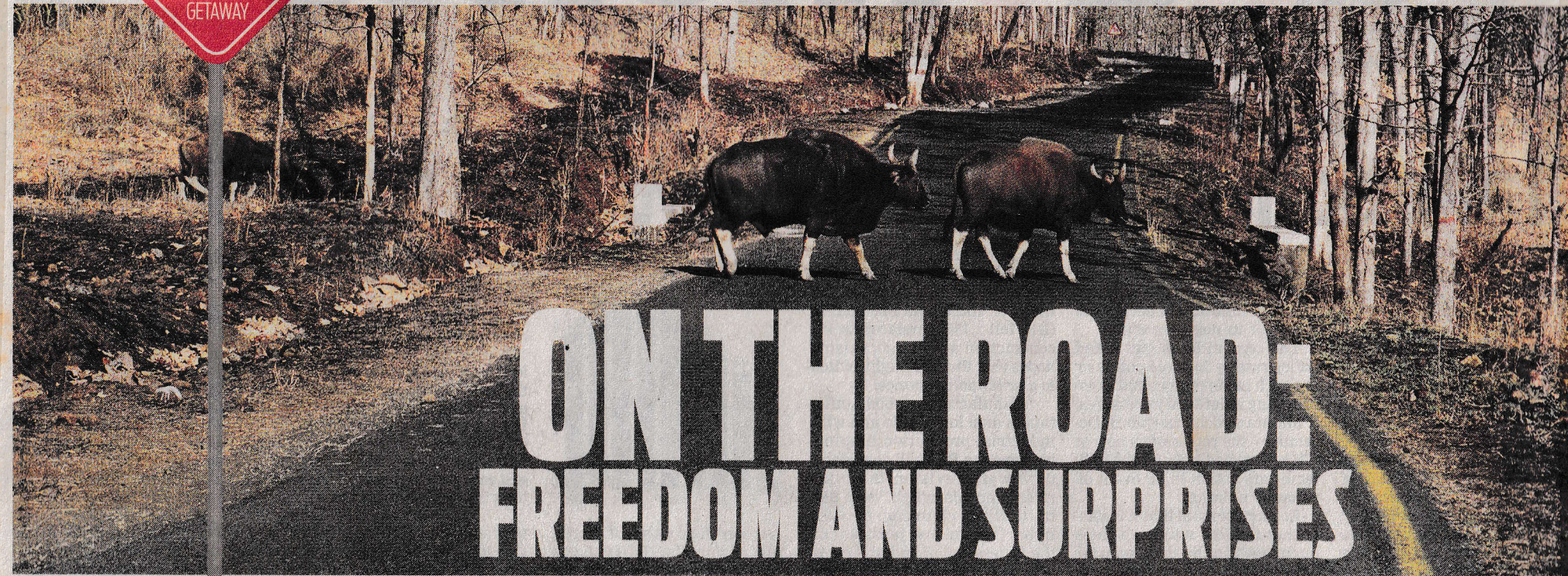


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# ON THE ROAD: FREEDOM AND SURPRISES

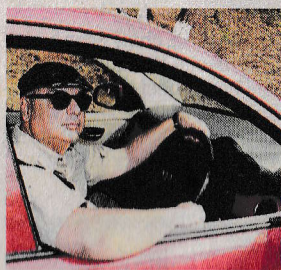
**Bob Rupani talks to Pooja Bhula** about his racing days, road trips spanning over 15 lakh kilometers, stories of incredible India and new routes mapped out in his recently launched book, *More Driving Holidays in India*

Even before your books on driving holidays, you were known for your road trips. How did it all start? I was always fond of cars and motorsports. I willingly volunteered for the 1977 London-Sydney marathon(car) during school, and in the early 80s I began racing. Some routes were so beautiful, I'd think to myself "I have to come back here". Speed and racing took me to rural India; I discovered our spectacular country and fell in love with the wild-

What are the delights and disappointments of road trips in India? Tourism in India brings revenue, but also disfigures peaceful and serene places. Near any monument, guides and vendors keep waving at you, and there's litter all over. In other countries, monuments of far less significance are maintained and lit-up so well that they become very attractive. In comparison to the North, in the South, cars are

reached in just 12 hours because the roads are so good. There are more in my book.

Tell us about some of your best experiences... One of my most memorable trips was to Jim Corbett National Park. I read all his books and was staying at the Forest Resthouse in Kanda, where Corbett had stayed to hunt the man eater of Kanda. Just seeing what had





## TIPS FOR PLANNING

- Read guide books to figure out the route
- Judge how much and for how long you want to drive; pace it out
- Don't book accomodation. If you find an interesting place en route, stop and stay there
- Ask locals for information, they give good advice and inputs

me. I therefore, while most auto journalists took their cars on the expressway, I took mine for long trips, wrote about my experiences and even drew maps on paper napkins. Soon auto companies approached me to take their cars for driving holidays.

### Your travelogues are steeped in culture and history. Do you get all the information on-the-go?

I do some homework before travelling, and also explore places as I go, because it gives you a different insight into the place. That's the freedom you get on road trips, you can explore at your own pace.

### When revisiting routes, what changes do you see?

Every place keeps evolving; some changes are good, others are not. I used to love Kanha National Park, but now shopping malls have sprung up just 300 m away. Road kills of wild animals seem to be increasing, but fortunately poaching has reduced in parks where it was rampant. Earlier all dhabas had charpais, on which you could rest after meal (for ₹5); very useful for truck drivers who travel long distances. But dirty plastic chairs and tables have taken over. Truck drivers tell me "After mobiles have come in, we keep getting calls: Where are you? Leave fast", so instead of "Will the food be good?", drivers ask "How soon will the food arrive?" Rural life is also changing. Villagers no more gather at baithaks to discuss news and events. Earlier if you stopped anywhere, even a shop, you were first offered a glass of water. Not anymore. The village youth have no time and don't care, even for directions I turn to old people, they will give you time and proper directions. On the positive side, you see more kids, including girls, going to school. Electricity, medical facilities are easily available at most places.

### Has the advancement changed the way you pack?

Oh yes, earlier I would carry four jerry cans (25 ltrs each) because you didn't always get safe drinking water. I also stocked cookies, chocolates, snacks...now available everywhere. Sometimes I carried bedsheets and bedcovers too, but hygiene levels have improved in most places.



Dhabas used to have charpais, on which you could take a nap after a sumptuous meal

Discipline is missing, roads have really improved. We also have some of the world's finest heritage hotels. When I was going from Nandhera to Chail one afternoon, a landslide blocked the road. Villagers suggested an alternate route, but warned that I wouldn't find food or water for miles. Knowing this, a forest guard insisted, "You can't go without eating." He took me to his hut and ensured that I ate before him. You won't get this kind of treatment anywhere else in the world.

### Have any new routes opened up?

20 or 25 years ago one had to be very well-equipped to go to Ladakh, it's much easier now with organised camps and hotels. I've mentioned a route from Srinagar to Leh via Kargil in *More Driving Holidays*. Roads of Madhya Pradesh, which once ranked among the country's worst, are much better. Previously a night stop was required when driving from Bhuj to Jaisalmer, but I recently

Once, on the bad desert roads of Bikaner I had a camel cart went past my jeep. I was pointing to the tyres he said, "These are aircraft tyres. We need them because the cart carries so much. They can go over these roads much more easily. India is incredible, she throws up amazing situations."

### Are road trips for everyone?

If you're used to getting things at a fixed time, a rigid mindset, road trips are not for you. You expect the unexpected. If you can't get a full happy with an omelet; and landslides were part of the experience. Years ago, Adil Jal Darukhanawala were stuck in the Himalayan sandwich of Lahaul Spiti Valley. Exits were blocked due to landslides. Other people have wondered, what now? We stocked up for emergencies, went fishing with villagers and enjoyed view of the Sutlej. Adil still tells me it's one his best trips. You have to take things in a stride.

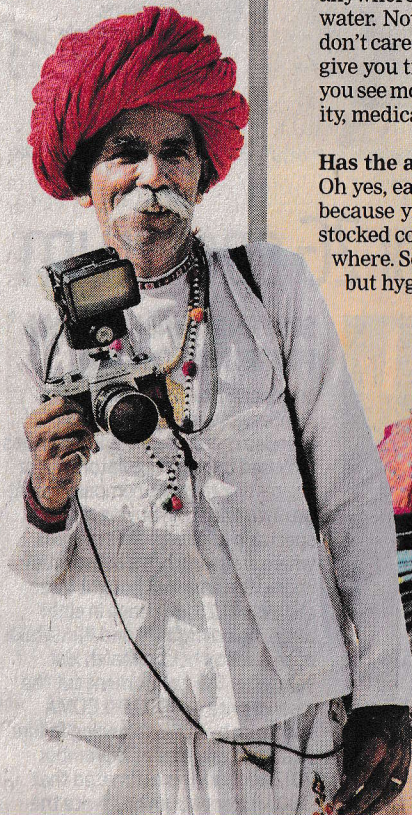
### How do you find the best food on such trips?

Talk to taxi drivers. The ones driving local cabs will tell you where to find the best batata wadas, and those with driving tourist taxis know the trends.

### What's on your bucket list?

The old road to Singapore via Burma and Thailand taken by Subhash Chandra Bose, and also the route from India to Europe via Pakistan and Afghanistan taken by Kishi Singh in the 60s. In the current scenario, it's not possible. There's a proposal to linking India to Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia and some other countries for trade; I'd love to drive on it too.

@PoojaBhula



Camel Carts with aircraft wheels

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