

SILK ROAD 2013

AN AWESOME EVENT WE WERE LUCKY TO BE PART OF.

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Проезд по проезжей
части моста
СТРОГО ЗАПРЕЩЕН!

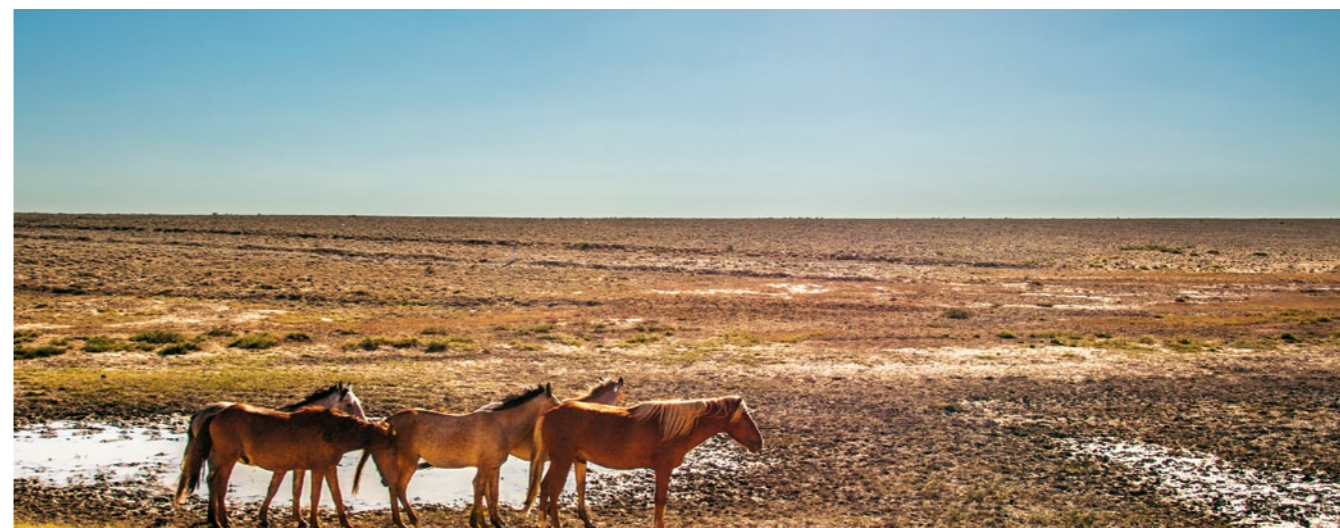


1 11 vehicles, 11 countries, 15,000 kilometres and 50 days to drive from Berlin to Bombay. Via the Silk Road, and I was a part of it. Wow.

The Silk Road 2013 is an expedition organized by Land Rover-Experience Germany. The expedition is led by Dag Rogge and the convoy of 11 vehicles consists of 4 Land Rover Discoverys and 7 Range Rover Evoques, with 4 of them being 2014 under

development models fitted with a 9-speed automatic gearbox. Land Rover says this is the world's first 9-speed automatic transmission for a passenger car.

The expedition was flagged off from Berlin on August 26 and finishes in Bombay (Mumbai) on October 12 and I shall be joining them again on the last leg (story in next issue). But now let's focus on the leg I drove – from Astrakhan in Russia to



Tashkent in Uzbekistan. I was the only Indian invited to participate and when I met the group in Astrakhan, I realized I was also the only non-German participant (apart from British photographer Craig). There were two people to a car (except for Expedition Leader Dag, who drove solo in a highly modified Discovery fitted with amazing features and technologies) and my co-driver was 26-year-old Hennings Luke, the youngest participant. Hennings is an online social media expert and also a qualified Land

Rover instructor. The other participants included some select German print and online media, a television crew, a few senior Land Rover officials and invitees and a group who won a contest to go on the expedition. About 35,000 people applied and after several tests 12 contestants got selected. The criteria for selection were things like driving skills, ability to adapt to situations, leadership qualities, ability to work with others, etc.

On the morning of September 5, the convoy started moving at



4:00 am sharp. By 6:00 am we were at the Kazakhstan border and soon crossing a long pontoon bridge. All vehicles were connected with shortwave radios and Dag and the others often transmitted messages. As all conversation was in German, Hennings was translating for me. He also drove the first stint, as I had arrived only the evening before, after 3 long flights and was quite jet lagged. We had 786kms to drive that day and when I got behind the wheel, the Evoque instantly felt very smooth and refined. The 9-speed auto quickly upshifted into a higher gear and at 100kph, the engine revolutions were around 1300 to 1400rpm, just a little over idling speeds. This resulted in not just better refinement, but also improved fuel efficiency and lowered emissions. Over the next 8 days we followed a fixed pattern. Hennings would take the wheel at the start of the day. I would drive a longish middle stint and he would again take over towards the end.

The roads in Kazakhstan were really very bad – even worse



than some of our most terrible roads. But the almost complete absence of traffic made it easier. Kazakhstan is larger than Western Europe, but only 17 million people live there. What's even more important is that its population density is less than 6 people

per square kilometre! Compare this with India. Ours is the seventh-largest country and the second-most populous one with over 1.27 billion people (by a recent estimate). But more significantly, population density is almost 400 people per square km!

IN FOCUS SILK ROAD DRIVE



Which means that when you travel in a country like Kazakhstan, you wonder where the people are. In between cities you have vast stretches of desert flatlands and steppe grasslands with not a soul to be seen. You can drive for 500km and not see even 5 people! In fact while driving we saw more camels than people in the countryside! Simply unbelievable. What's also amazing are the Russian cars, like the Ladas that you see everywhere. Some are old enough to be classics, but are used on a daily basis.

Surprisingly, we did not see a single tree in Kazakhstan and no

land being cultivated either. But we did see some horses and horsemen herding sheep. This desert land is barren and bare, but still beautiful. We also came across many Bactrian double humped camels – heroes of the historic Silk Road. The Silk Road is an ancient trade route passing through Asia and connecting East with West. This route was traversed by traders, pilgrims, soldiers, nomads, etc, from China, Tibet and India for a period of about 2000 years. Stretching some 10,000 kilometres, the Silk Road gets its name from the profitable trade in Chinese and In-



dian silk. Silk was a major item of commerce, but many other goods were traded, and various technologies, religions and philosophies, cultural practices, languages, recipes and cuisines



along with tales and disease also travelled between many countries via the Silk Road. This trade route connected Hindustan (India) to Rome and the Bactrian camel was the main pack



animal for the caravans, because of its ability to withstand cold, drought, and high altitudes. They carried loads of up to 250kg and travelled 50km a day! And thanks to the Silk Road, some Bactrian camels are still found in the Nubra Valley in Ladakh.

After spending the night in Beyneu, we reached the Kazakhstan border early next morning. Getting out of Kazakhstan posed no problem, but entering Uzbekistan proved to be a big one. The immigration and custom officers confined us to a barbed wire enclosure in no man's land for some 12 hours. Simply because we had lots of gear which they were not sure could be brought into Uzbekistan. While confined to the enclosure, I had a strong urge to defecate. But there was no toilet. Nature waits for nobody and I finally grabbed some toilet paper, went behind

a wall in no man's land, and did what had to be done. No kidding – in no mans land. Crazy shit.

By the time we crossed the border and entered Uzbekistan, the sun was setting and we soon found a nice camping site. Dinner was a pre-cooked meal of pasta from a 'travellunch' packet and then I spread out my sleeping bag under the amazingly clear desert sky. Not only could you see millions of stars, but the Milky Way was also very clearly visible. A truly starry night.

The next day was again an early start as we had to drive about 800km. We first drove to the Aral Sea, which was once one of the four largest lakes in the world with an area of 68,000 sq km. Since the 1960s, it's been shrinking rapidly because the rivers

that fed it were diverted by the Soviet government for irrigation projects. By 2007, the Aral Sea had become 10 per cent of its original size! This is 'one of the planet's worst environmental disasters' that's resulted in the creation of a desert on the former lake bed. Fishing boats now lie scattered on the dry land and it's actually a very sad sight. Fortunately everything else we saw in Uzbekistan was beautiful. The historic cities of Khiva, Samarkand and Bukhara are simply spectacular. The magnificent monuments have a distinctive style with decorations highlighted in shades of turquoise. Everything is cared for and kept very clean – something we Indians surely need to learn. Even though many foreign tourists visit these historic cities, I did not come across a single tout or beggar and was not harassed even once, which again is such a welcome change from our country. We were greeted with warm smiles everywhere, but what was strange though, is when asked where I was from; if I said India – it evoked hardly any response. But when I said Hindustan, there was instant recognition and I was often, greeted with a 'Namaste'. In fact a local FM station also plays Hindi film songs on a show called 'Namaste Hindustan'. The food was fantastic too. The kababs, naan, pilaf (similar to pulao), and somsa (baked samosa), were all truly delectable. You get 'halva' for desert and a piala of chai after that! The Silk Road has truly helped connect countries, cultures and people in a most incredible manner and this made the expedition even more memorable.