

Cruising along the Silk Road

Eleven vehicles, 11 countries, 15,000 km and 50 days to drive from Berlin to Mumbai via the Silk Road

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THE Silk Road 2013 was an expedition organised by Land Rover-Experience, Germany. Though trade on this road is said to have begun in (202 BC-220 AD) in the first and second centuries AD, the name 'The Great Silk Road' was only given in the 12th century by the German geographer and geologist Ferdinand Von Richthofen. Stretching more than 10,000 km, the Silk Road gets its name from the lucrative trade of Chinese and Indian silk. Along with silk, many other goods were traded and various technologies, religions and philosophies, cultural practices, languages, recipes and cuisine along with tales and disease also travelled via the Silk Road.

I was the only Indian invited to be part of this expedition and drove from Astrakhan in Russia to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. My co-driver was Henning Luke, a young man who is a social media specialist. He builds and manages online communities. Over the next eight days we established not only a good friendship, but also a daily driving routine. Henning 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. Every day we would drive for about eight hours but one day we ended up driving for some 14 hours and this was because of a bureaucratic problem we had at the Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan border. 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. Finally, things got sorted and 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 'travel-lunch' 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.

The next day was an early start as we had to drive about 800 km. We first



Clockwise: Bactrian double-humped camels along the Silk Road; natives are warm and friendly; Uzbek women wear a dress known as salwar, identical to Indian salwar kameez; and a shop where carpets are sold

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 a 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 in these cities have a distinctive style with decorations highlighted in shades of turquoise.

We also came across many Bactrian double-humped camels — heroes of the historic Silk Road that connected Hindustan (as India was known then), Tibet and China to places as far away as Rome and Greece. The Bactrian camel was the main pack animal for the caravans, because of its ability to withstand cold, drought, and high altitudes. It carried loads of up to 250 kg and travelled 50 km a day! And thanks to the Silk Road, some Bactrian camels are still found in the Nubra Valley in Ladakh.

The roads in Kazakhstan were quite

bad, but fortunately there was hardly any traffic. What's also remarkable is how disciplined the drivers are and this made driving across these countries so much safer and stress free. In my drive of some 3,000 km, I do not recall having to brake suddenly even once. In India you have to this every 3 km.

While driving through this former Soviet region, I also got quite enamoured by the Russian cars, like the Ladas, that we saw everywhere. Some were old enough to be classics, but were still used on a daily basis.

While driving on the Central Asian flatlands and steppes, the range of visibility was so good, that I said to Henning, 'here you can see today, who will visit you tomorrow'.

We were greeted with warm smiles everywhere, but what was strange is that 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, in Uzbekistan, a local FM station also plays Hindi film songs on a show called 'Namaste Hindustan'. Many words used in Uzbekistan are familiar too with shops known as *dukan*, gardens as *bagh*, mother as *maa*, etc. Uzbek women too wear a dress known as *salwar* which is identical to our *salwar kameez*. The



QUICK FACTS

How to get there: If you want to experience true solitude and the barrenness of the desert, go to Kazakhstan. Fly to Astana and Almaty. Airlines that fly here include Air Arabia, Lufthansa, Etihad, etc. Get a local guide and then travel around.

For more information visit <http://visitkazakhstan.kz/en/about>. Uzbekistan is far more organised for tourists and you can fly to Tashkent, Samarkand or Bukhara. Among the airlines that fly here are Air France, British Airways, Emirates, Luftansa Thai Airways, Turkish Airways, etc.

Where to stay: Accommodation is no problem with hotels to suit all budgets.

For more information visit: www.tourism.uz

food in Uzbekistan is fantastic too. The kababs, naan, pilaf (similar to *pulao*), and *somsa* (baked *samosa*), are 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 my overland expedition-unforgettable and most enjoyable.



Fishing boats now lie scattered on the dry bed of Aral Sea
PHOTOS BY THE WRITER