

# INTERNAL COMBUSTION

BOB RUPANI



**UNTIL THE LOCKDOWN, I NEVER REALISED THE IMPORTANCE OF LONG DISTANCE DRIVING AND ROAD TRIPS IN MY LIFE**

bob@overdrive.co.in



It may be somewhat symbolic, but it gives me great pleasure to say “Goodbye 2020”. It is a year I want to forget and literally kick out. While I hope that nothing like it ever happens again, some memories will surely stay. While most of the things that occurred are not worth remembering, few I shall recall fondly, like the clear blue skies and clean and pollution-free air that we experienced in the lockdown months, and even after relaxation of some of the norms. The absolute silence with hardly any traffic din and incessant

blowing of horns, or the commotion of construction and so on, is also something one will recollect warmly. It’s actually the first time many people heard the “sound of silence”. The reasons for it may have been tragic, but the peace and quiet was a welcome change from all the noise and blare we are normally bombarded with.

Looking back at 2020, I also realised it is the year in which I have spent the minimum amount of time behind the wheel of a car. Yes, it’s the least I have driven in the last 40 years. Obviously this was not out of choice, but due to all the restrictions on movement and travel. Normally, I drive about 40,000-50,000km every year. In fact until about a decade back, I was doing even more driving annually because of my passion for overland journeys and expeditions.

Driving good cars to great places has been a lifelong love and mission. And it’s my firm belief that “the pleasures of a well-planned road journey are equal to the delights of the destination”. But last year after the appearance of the pandemic, there were no road trips, no delights and no destination other than home. And more importantly, there was hardly any driving. From the end of March to the end of December, I must have barely driven 1,500-odd km.

Honestly, this lack of time behind the wheel and all the restrictions, have taken a huge psychological toll on me. In fact looking at my personal experience and the adverse impact the lockdowns have had on my emotional well-being, I believe the cost of COVID is much higher than many people realise. Yes everyone is aware of the precious lives lost, the suffering in homes and hospitals, the shutdown of businesses, the job losses, the huge negative impact on the economy, the misery of our migrant workers, etc. But I don’t think we have still properly accounted for the mental or psychological damage.

Long distance driving and testing and evaluating cars, is a form of meditation that brings me blissful fulfillment. To tell the truth, some of the best moments, experiences and times of my life, have been behind the wheel of an automobile. When I hold a steering wheel in my hand, my mind automatically switches into another zone. An engaging and twisting road, a responsive car, and continuous

hours of long distance driving, are my go to ingredients for exultation.

When I am on the open road, it’s almost as if my heart and soul have been set free to soar high and above. There is an indescribable feeling of joy and often I unconsciously slip into a happy state of mind that I like to term as “Highway Hypnosis”. In this joyful state of elated emotions, I feel myself connecting with the environment and all the elements around and inside me. If I am driving in the mountains, I connect with the curves and the elevations and drops. The staggeringly beautiful sights, the crisp mountain air, all uplift the soul. When I am driving in the desert, it’s as if every particle of sand is singing me a song. And if it’s forests that I am driving through, well I feel like I belong there. I become part of the surroundings, one with nature and all its beautiful creations.

Sadly the pandemic took away all these pleasures from me. Before the pandemic struck India, I had gone driving in January 2020 to the Rann of Kutch. In February I was motoring through the Western Ghats and in the early part of March 2020, I was in the magnificent Melghat Tiger Reserve. Soon after returning from that memorable 4,000km long driving holiday, I was forced into confinement. And this “Corona Confinement” has “messed up my mind”.

Until the appearance of COVID-19, I had never quite realised or understood how important a role driving played in my life. And what it really meant to see the world through the windscreen of an automobile. Like so many other aspects one has discovered during this pandemic period, I now value these things a lot more. Never again, will I take for granted the pleasures of getting into an automobile and heading out in the direction dictated by my internal compass. No longer will I assume or suppose that I shall always have the freedom to drive across cities, states or borders of countries.

The year 2020, has taught me to cherish all these things even more and the urge to get into a car and just getaway has never been stronger. I am longing to hold the steering and once again chart my own course, and it’s exactly what I aim to do in the New Year. Wish you a “Fantastic 2021”. 