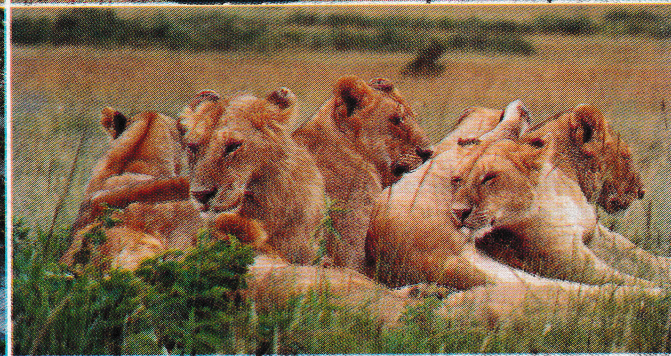


# First time in a Ranger

And memories of the one I drove in the Dark Continent



RECENTLY, ON THE 40TH BIRTHDAY OF Range Rover, I had an opportunity to drive their latest models in the UK. This was fun and it also evoked memories of the first time I drove a Range Rover. It was way back in 1988. I was in Kenya to follow the famous Safari Rally, and my friend Jay Mehta, nephew of the Safari Rally champ Shekhar Mehta, very kindly loaned me his. It was a first generation Range Rover (what is now known as Classic) powered by a petrol V8 engine. It had the now famous and celebrated long-travel coil spring suspension that endowed the Range Rover with good road manners as well as remarkable articulation for off-road agility. It had permanent four-wheel drive to cope with the power and torque output of the V8 engine and also disc brakes on all wheels.

Out on the road I was surprised at how easy the big Range Rover was to drive. You sat high and had a great all-round view thanks to the large glass area or greenhouse. The ride was also amazing and you hardly felt what you were going over. And if you floored it the V8 responded eagerly and crossed the 100kph mark in about 15 seconds, which was a very good figure back then. The Range Rover also had a top

speed in excess of 150kph, which was also the highest of any SUV available then.

Driving around East Africa I discovered what made the first generation Range Rover really very special. I particularly remember one incident on the rally. Most of the event was run on Murram (gravel) roads and also some completely unpaved dirt tracks. On the day that we were approaching the Taita Hills Wildlife Sanctuary, there was a big cloudburst and the rally got disrupted due to the heavy rain and rivers in spate. I also got caught up and was waiting on the banks of a river for the water to recede. I was all alone in the thickly forested area and feeling quite lost, when along came a local in a badly battered Subaru Brat pickup. He pulled up alongside and said: "Jambo Bwana, what are you waiting for?" "For the water to recede," I replied. He burst out laughing and said: "Man, you are in a Range Rover, just slam it in low and go. Hakuna Mattatta (*no problem*). But do keep a lookout for Hippos". He sounded so confident, that I shifted into low range and approached the water with my heart in my mouth. The Range Rover leapt forward eagerly and with a little wave building up

ahead we effortlessly crossed the raging river. The red soil on the other side of the sloped river bank was slushy and very slippery. But in an almost magic-like manner the Range Rover generated grip out of nothing and moved forward boldly. After the river crossing a new bond was established between us and I had lots more respect for it. Together we followed the Safari Rally, and then for the next four weeks traversed East Africa seeing many interesting sights including lots of wildlife. We covered almost 10,000km. We even crossed the equator and I fell completely in love with the vehicle Land Rover had started marketing as 'A car for all reasons'.

Looking back I can see the success of the original Range Rover was due mainly to its inspired mechanical design which gave it great performance both on and off the road. And this was mainly due to the massive box section ladder frame, prodigious ground clearance, the smooth V8 with good, low end torque, and last but definitely not least, a brilliant suspension design.

- Bob Rupani