

# RUN TO THE HILLS

*What happens when a Jaguar's set loose in the chilly hill station of Pachmarhi? Read on and find out.*



*Sharp turns on the tight switchbacks were particularly rewarding.*

Pachmarhi. A name on every road-tripper's bucket list. It's a hill station that remains an offbeat haven to travellers in search of a soul-satisfying experience. For me though, it wasn't just Satpura's highest peak or the Pandav caves that drew me to this hill station, it was the roads - long and winding, surrounded by forests bursting with wildlife. The fast switchbacks and tight corners entice anyone behind the wheel to really cut loose and merge with the forces of nature.

The route we'd decided to take after flying to Bhopal was via Hoshangabad. While the final destination has some amazing roads, the highway from Bhopal to Pipariya is not one of the smoothest. The fact that there is currently a lot of four-laning happening meant that we needed a car that would keep the driver comfortable and fresh for the 200km journey and give us plenty of power on tap at the same time. So picking the Jaguar XE for this trip was a no-brainer.

## THE DRIVE

From the moment I took my position behind the wheel of the XE and flattened my foot on the accelerator, all the memories of having enjoyed this engine came rushing back. The Jag's 246hp, 2.0-litre Ingenium petrol is smooth, quick and

thoroughly enjoyable. Once we got out of the airport and hit the highway, with its recurring potholes and



'under construction' sections, the XE just ate up the bad sections without passing any of it to me; and we barely noticed when we transitioned onto the good sections of the road again.

It didn't take long for us to hit the less-travelled roads. Tucking into corners and zipping through the sparse traffic really brought out the instinctive steering of the car which, coupled with its heft, made me feel connected to the road. At points, narrow roads did force us to move aside to let oncoming

vehicles pass; and though the XE is low, it managed to drop a wheel off the shoulder quite easily. In areas completely devoid of traffic, it was exhilarating to take corners at higher speeds with full confidence.

The weather was great as we got closer to Pachmarhi and away from the regular highway truck traffic I switched off the AC, opened the sunroof and enjoyed the cruise, just soaking in the beautiful countryside. Here, the petrol engine shone again. A gentle dab on the throttle was enough to overtake easily. Every time I put my foot down, the wave of



*The view of the town from the top of the Pandav caves was breathtaking.*







*Doing doughnuts on the airfield was as satisfying as it was exciting.*



*The paddleshifters helped downshift quite effortlessly when we wanted to.*

unleashed torque took the entire experience to the next level.

That is the beauty of the XE - easy enough to cut through terrible traffic, comfortable enough to enjoy a leisurely cruise and dynamic enough to attack a road with gusto.

Upon reaching Matkuli village we realised we were close to our destination and begun to prepare ourselves for the 24km ascent to Pachmarhi. This particular section of uphill, winding road was easily the most rewarding part of the trip so far - one I would be happy to repeat endlessly. The combination of the power and the superb handling that this car delivers meant that I could enjoy the switch-backs and even take on tight corners easily. The paddleshifters also helped me stay in the right gear making the downshifts in a flash. Oh, the joy of a fabulous road and good car to match!

#### **PACHMARHI HIGHLIGHTS**

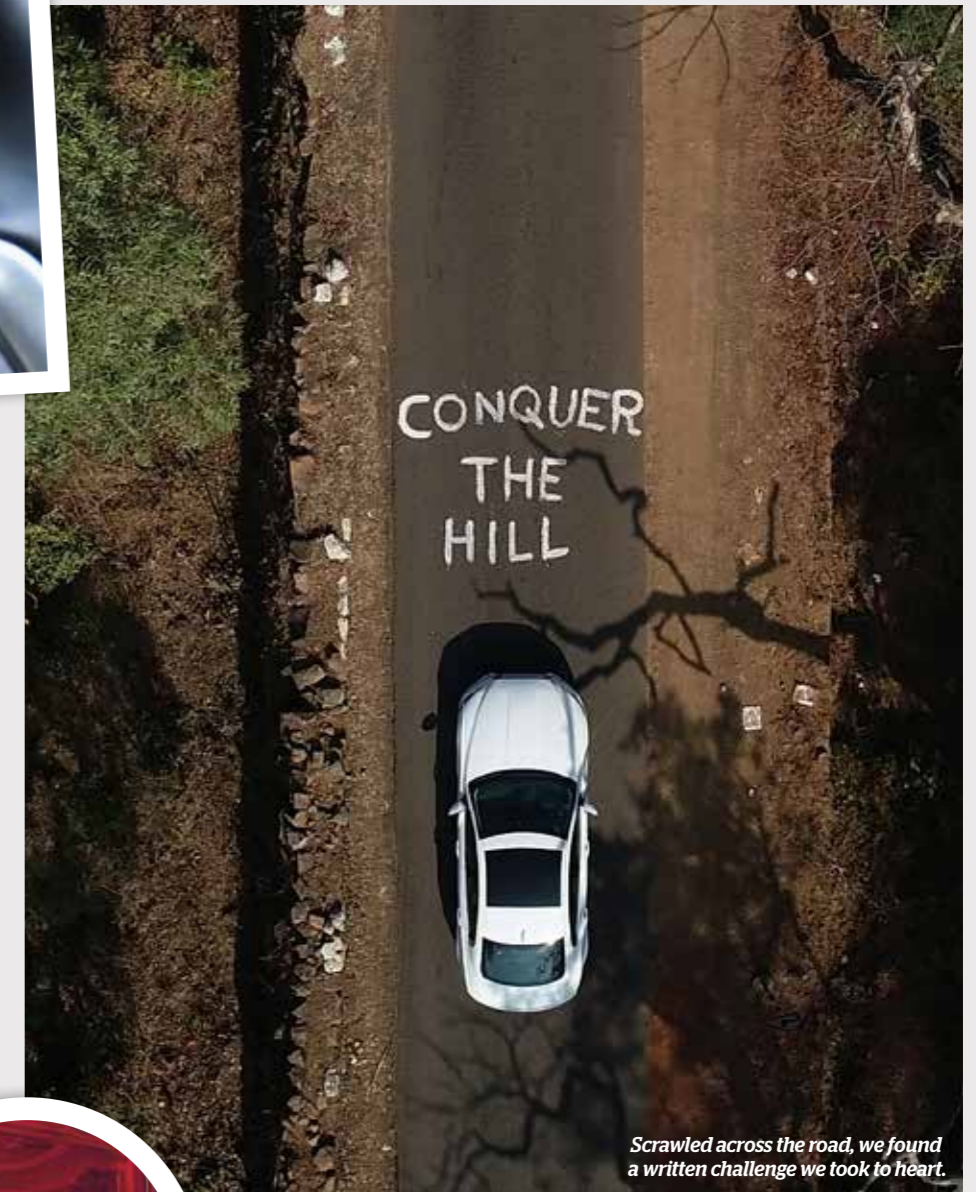
One thing I had to keep an eye out for was passing wildlife. It was not entirely uncommon to see a bunch of monkeys crossing the road - or in one case, a small puppy that had made up his mind to cross a busy road. After stopping the car to help the little guy on his way, we headed to the famous Sunrise and Sunset points at Dhoopgarh.

The drive up to Dhoopgarh is just spectacular with scenic backdrops and the Jag made it up steep, slippery inclines without a flutter. With its peak at 4,429ft, it has earned Pachmarhi the title of 'Satpura Ki Rani'. Taking in the beautiful sunset was an experience best left to one's imagination, as it's only in there that one can do it justice.

What can be spoken about at length however, was the bone-chilling drop in temperature that was evident the moment the sun crossed the horizon. The warm, welcoming interior of the Jaguar was a comfort we had not fully appreciated until we experienced freezing cold at the hill station.

Making our way back to our hotel, we decided to partake of what had become a favourite meal on the trip - *aloo parantha* with curd - regaining our energy for the activity-packed day ahead. With night temperatures hitting almost zero degrees at night, we found ourselves yearning for the warm comfort of the XE more than once.

With morning upon us we made our way to the



*Scrawled across the road, we found a written challenge we took to heart.*

“ THE STEEP SLOPE LEADING UP TO DHOOPGARH WAS SLIPPERY AND NOT RECOMMENDED FOR ALL VEHICLES, BUT THE XE TOOK IT IN STRIDE. ”



Pandav Caves from which Pachmarhi takes its name. According to legend, the Pandavas spent part of their exile here in these caves. Strolling leisurely through this most ancient of habitats, we inhaled the fragrance of the flower gardens below while we enjoyed the view of the town way off, in the distance. It would be hard not to admit that this trip had something to excite each of our senses.

#### **THE JAGUAR ROARS**

Chatting with the locals led us to an empty airstrip with a helipad, which became our racetrack. Foot to the floor, I cut the Jaguar loose. When the engine roared - what an exhilarating thrill. We even indulged in some doughnuts

right after; and the car was an absolute delight, kicking up dust clouds that brought visibility to near-zero. We darted right through them to the other end of the airfield. At no point during this joyride did the XE feel anything other than sure-footed and safe. Encapsulated in luxury, we enjoyed the rugged terrain even more.

It was after this exercise that we noticed that all the usual aches and pains associated with long road trips were completely absent. The comfortable seat bolstered us, providing just the right amount of support to keep us fresh and comfortable throughout our journey. As we made our descent, the XE's nose dove beautifully into corners once again, always yearning for more.

All in all, the trip was a great success, satiating our wanderlust even as it whet our appetite for more. While Pachmarhi lived up to its reputation as an inviting hill station with much to experience, it was the roads and our driving companion that really made the trip worthwhile.

