

RUN TO THE HILLS

What's it like to go to town where literally everything bears your name? Read on and find out.



Ample grip from the tyres meant I could push the limits a little more.

UNLESS YOUR NAME is Trump, Oberoi or a particularly famous statesperson or philanthropist, you are unlikely to find yourself in a town where everything around you bears your name- and I do mean everything. Yet that is exactly the bizarre experience I had during my latest quest to the hidden hill stations of India. Renuka Ji in Himachal Pradesh initially caught my eye for the obvious reason that it bears my name. However I could scarcely predict the extent to which that quirky fact would dominate my getaway. From temple visits to lakeside walks, everything had a healthy slice of surrealism to it.

To say that the name was the only reason for choosing this sleepy little hamlet though, would be unfair to the long winding roads leading to it that also beckoned me. The route from Chandigarh promised to be thrilling with twists and bends that snaked through the picturesque hills of Himachal. Once again the Jaguar XE and I were ready to venture forth into the chilly Indian hillside for a weekend getaway.

THE DRIVE

The 115 km journey from Chandigarh to Renukaji has multiple routes, we chose the one via Panchkula and Nahani. The highway that goes through Nahani to Renukaji has plenty of sections that are under construction, resulting in patches of broken road with the occasional bottleneck. I was reminded why I enjoyed the Jag XE petrol so much. The punchiness of the engine really came in handy when overtaking commuters on the crowded highway. A slight dab on the throttle was all I needed most times but there is joy in knowing



when you do put your foot down you will be rewarded by a wave of torque that is thoroughly enjoyable.

The nonstop journey was a little over three hours with a beautiful winding section that leads up to Nahani but the thrilling part really is after you turn off to Renukaji. I set the car in dynamic which mode which just lets you feel so connected and makes the winding sections that much more enjoyable. Quick downshifts and loads of grip allowed me to attack the corners with extreme confidence.



The famous Renukaji Temple sits at the base of the Renuka Lake and is a major attraction of town.



Typical of hilly terrain, terraced farms are always a soothing sight.

Some of the sharp corners offered me the opportunity to really lean into them and then feel the shove of torque as I accelerated out reinforcing my opinion that this is truly an enthusiast's car. Though the last 24 km from Nahan to Renukaji is by far the most interesting section, it is also the most challenging. At times the tarmac gives way to broken surfaces, yet none of it was able to strip the smile I had plastered across my face as the XE didn't allow any of it to slow me down. Along

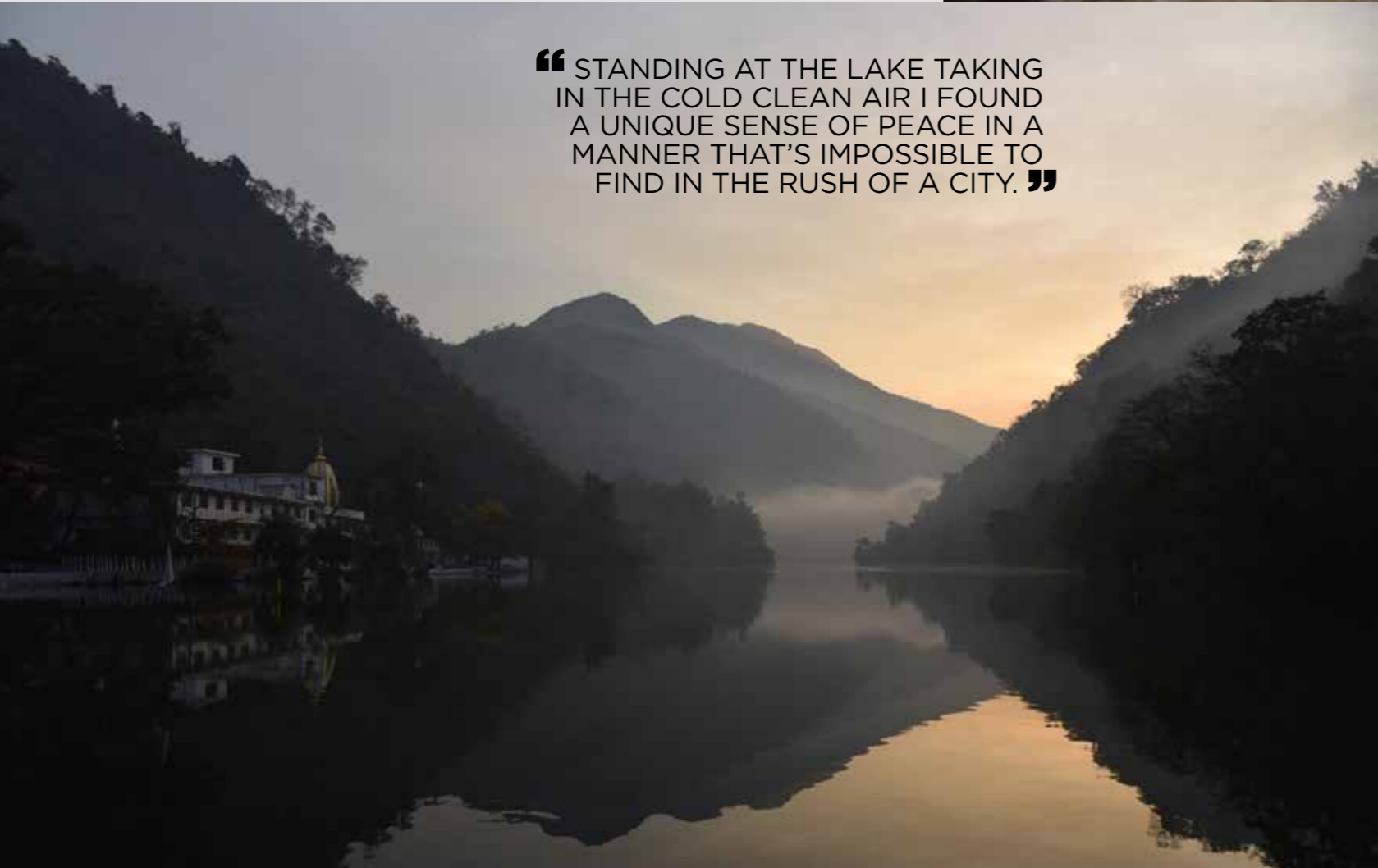
the way it was not uncommon to spot a troop of monkeys in the trees that lined the roads, one can only wonder what thoughts flew through their minds as this car zipped past them leaving rumbling gusts of winds in its wake.

NAME MEETS NAMESAKE

The first thing that struck me upon reaching Renukaji was the immense sense of quiet that blanketed the place. The locals were few and



Its these twisty bits that you really appreciate the Jag's Dynamic mode.



“STANDING AT THE LAKE TAKING IN THE COLD CLEAN AIR I FOUND A UNIQUE SENSE OF PEACE IN A MANNER THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO FIND IN THE RUSH OF A CITY.”



The lake was filled with massive fish, some over three feet long.

mostly kept to themselves. The lack of artificial noise helped bring out the sounds of nature, especially the early morning bird calls that filled the air. Waking up to a chilly morning I hardly had to step out of the hotel I was staying at, the Renuka Hotel, to reach Renuka Lake, the largest lake in Himachal Pradesh; a major attraction of the small town. Walking beside the lake I was able to imbibe the slow pace of the town that really stood in contrast to the hustle of the megacities that I am used to. Peering over the ledge was some sight; the water in the lake was teeming with huge fish, many over three feet in length, this is thanks to the fact that fishing isn't allowed here. The words 'sleepy little hamlet' could not better define Renukaji, or maybe it was our luck to be the only tourists around.

I then made my way to the other striking feature of the town, The Renuka Ji Temple. Speaking with the sadhu I learnt that this brightly colored temple, located at the base of the lake, was dedicated to the immortal Renuka, and is one of the famous Indian temples. Renukaji was the wife of Sage Jamadagini and the mother of Parshurama, one of the ten "Avatars" of Lord Vishnu. The original temple of Renukaji is said to have been built overnight by a contingent of Gurkhas in the early 19th century. There are numerous legends and folklore associated with the temple. One legend states that Renuka, in a bid to escape being kidnapped, jumped into the Lake while asking the gods to save her. The gods blessed her, and the lake became a perpetual embodiment of her form. After admiring the exteriors of the temple I went inside to offer my respects. While receiving prasad I followed the sadhu in prayer and found myself in the odd situation of saying "Renuka mata ke jai". It felt weird!

After the blissful serenity of a town that clearly enjoyed its offbeat status it was good to get my hands on the leather bound steering wheel of the XE and get back into the quicker paced action that is more my speed.

RETURN TO METROPOLIS

The route back down the hillside was pretty much the same as up to Nahan and here in the narrow sections I found the front facing camera more a necessity than luxury. It was after



The front facing camera came in handy tackling narrow roads.

Nahan that we chose to go back a different way, via Kalpa and this is the route I would choose any day. It was the better road with beautifully paved sections along the ghats which made the drive that much more delightful. It was with an oddly wistful heart that I left the sleepy woodlands behind and entered the rush of city bustle again. Visiting a town where literally everything bears your name was quite a surreal experience, but more than the peaceful atmosphere, the teams of fish and the roar of the Jaguar as it tucked into corners are no doubt memories that will stick with me for long.