

Karma Enduro 2008

Contributed by Joy Rainey
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KARMA ENDURO

Arriving in Goa, India, before the start of the first Karma Enduro was to be a non-competitive event driving the iconic Indian manufactured Hindustan Ambassador, supplied by the organisers. Trevor and I are used to driving in events where competitors use their own cars so it was an unusual site to see sixty brand new, diesel powered, white Ambassadors lined up in the Hotel car park awaiting their drivers for the following ten day challenge. A short run of 51 kms round trip was the first test to familiarise the 60 participating teams with the unique characteristics of the Ambassador, Indian road conditions and driving techniques of the locals before the official start the following day. After every team returned safely to the Hotel there were sighs of relief that the first hurdle had been completed without mishap and there was a sense of excitement and anticipation for the adventure ahead. Trevor, started cautiously up the narrow road that was lined with tall palm trees and lush tropical greenery, through a village with dogs, cows and the occasional person strolling across the road without looking. Before long he was in his stride but wasn't overly impressed with the throttle response but at least the brakes seemed to be efficient. After an early briefing before the official start the sixty teams were individually waved off from Sernabatim Beach by the Minister for Goa Tourism; every Ambassador decorated with a garland of local tropical flowers. The sight of 60 white garlanded Ambassadors passing through towns in a relatively short space of time turned many local heads in this former Portuguese colony. The road-book had the distances set out in tenths of a kilometre but as the Ambassador's odometers read only in whole kilometres a certain amount of guess-work was required. Before long the odometer calibration disagreed by an ever increasing amount with the road-book putting more stress on the navigator. The travelling marshals riding on Royal Enfields ensured that participants kept to the route. Every day we faced a new challenge particularly climbing up the roads of the Western Ghat Mountains. Just like rally stages the roads were a combination of potholes, broken tarmac and washaways and very narrow. The gradient and loose surface on the hairpin bends required spirited driving and concentration to get the moderately diesel powered cars up the mountain. At times first gear was too low and second too high making constant gear-changing necessary to avoid over stressing the engine. As we started to descend the roads were more open with sweeping corners but not without the usual deep potholes that were difficult to avoid. As we passed through small hamlets the locals waved and smiled and when we stopped offered hospitality. At one point I was aroused from my day-dreaming with a start, as an object, at windscreen height swung across in our path. It was a large monkey practising dare-devil antics flying across from a tree on one side of the road to a tree on the other side. Fortunately he managed to reach the swinging branch but one monkey's timing was less accurate as he collided with one of our Ambies.

Day 4 became the most taxing on the cars and the teams. After a dawn start from Shimoga to avoid the early morning traffic chaos we travelled through open countryside and small towns for about 80 kilometres. We climbed an extremely narrow, cratered road through villages and hamlets until we entered into the forest region of Mutthodi Sanctuary. The signs showed tigers and elephants resident in the park but as we climbed higher the wild life must have been sheltering from the damp conditions and chose not to make their presence known to the occupants of the sixty Ambassadors. Rain had started to fall and filled the potholes with water making it difficult to judge their severity. The Ambie was at times bottoming and with its sump in a vulnerable position we stopped several times to check whether the sump was still intact. Suddenly we noticed an oil trail in the middle of the road and before long a white Ambassador was parked on the side of the road with the bonnet up and the Hindustan mechanics hard at work. That was the first of five cars that knocked out the sump plugs emptying the supply of oil. Miraculously, not one of the Ambassadors suffered any internal engine damage and were soon back on the trail. It was a long day and we were trying to reach Mangalore before dark but dusk descended just as we approached the city. The rough road didn't improve and the traffic built up to a convincing display of chaos. The main highway into Mangalore was in the process of being widened into a dual carriageway with both the unmade lanes used in both directions. This wasn't indicated by any signs - it just happened! As the gloom descended we were confronted with unlit vehicles of all sorts coming from all sides. The buses as always blasted away with their airhorns and ploughed through. As we tried to avoid having an accident it became clear that the directions in the road book were anything but clear but we eventually found the hotel to sighs of relief and a sense of achievement. Despite the adverse road conditions at times there was always a reward waiting with some of the most diverse and amazing scenery as we progressed through animal sanctuaries, mountain villages, tea and coffee plantations and tropical forests. Every evening as we congregated for our night's stop there were stories to exchange of near misses, spectacular scenery, Indian hospitality and considering the road conditions we encountered, a growing respect for the Ambie. The youngest team member Tom Allen, age 13, navigating for his father Martin said that it is his greatest ambition to own an Ambassador when he is old enough. A team of mechanics, medical staff from the UK and India and two Ambulances to look after the needs of the teams and the Ambassadors followed us for the entire trip. The organiser's promise that it would be an adventure of a lifetime was well and truly fulfilled. Every team was grateful for the opportunity to participate in the first Karma Enduro both for the adventure of driving a new 'classic' car, designed over fifty years ago, through southern India and the challenge of raising over £300,000 for the two chosen charities, The Rainbow Trust and Adventure Ashram. Now I can admit that I found just as much excitement and achievement participating in the well-organised Karma Enduro as in any competitive event and best of all, we do not have a car rebuild to endure after the gruelling conditions encountered.