

CABIN FEVER

WBB: HIMALAYAN WINTER DRIVE

WRITTEN IN COLD STONE

Musings from a frigid and introspective drive into a Himalayan winter

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NOTES:

13TH JAN

It's 2:07 PM, and I've just taken off from Bombay for the first time in over a year. It feels strange leaving the safety of home, but I don't think I've looked forward to anything as much as this in a very long time. Based on past experience with Wander Beyond Boundaries (WBB), the Himalayan Winter Drive won't be easy or luxurious. But it will be an adventure like no other. A drive into the depths of what the Himalayas have to offer.

14TH JAN

Today was spent in orientation. Participants arrived; we got a crash course in first aid, our schedule, and what to expect on the drive. I met some familiar faces like Dr Vani and Vimal Parmar, and saw the nine Scorpions and two Thars that made up our convoy. Each car was kitted out with essentials, toiletries, water and snacks.

We leave at 6:30 AM tomorrow.

15TH JAN

It was a long, uneventful highway stint from Noida to Chakrata, Uttarakhand. After the 1962 Sino-Indian war, India saw a huge influx of Tibetan refugees into this town. At the time, the RAW and the CIA got together and set up the SSF Regiment consisting entirely of these refugees, and we were staying a mere 5 km from its headquarters. A roaring bonfire welcomed us on this chilly night. I think I'm going to sleep really well.

16TH JAN

It's 7:30 PM and we've just made it to our homestay in the tiny town of Larot, a few kilometres before Chanshal Pass. Above, the sky is flooded with stars. It's not as cold as I expected, but the anticipation for tomorrow is killing me (we're finally driving through snow). We sleep in a huge room filled with beds and mattresses reminiscent

of a dormitory. But what began as trepidation at the thought of people discovering whether you snore or not has quickly evolved into a bonding session unlike any other. I think there's a point to choosing an accommodation like this, and it's more than being close to our destination for tomorrow. Sleeping and snoring in the presence of others makes me feel extremely vulnerable and a little insecure. But once you do it, you have nothing left to hide, as you realise it's merely human. And that has led to a much higher level of comfort amongst the group.

17TH JAN

Today, we attempted to make it up to Chanshal Pass. Snow chains were deployed, winches were used to recover stuck vehicles and while the progress was arduous and slow, it was thoroughly enjoyable. It was quite an experience, frolicking

around in the white powder, and I took a tonne of photos to document it, most of which already reside online. But it also got me thinking that photos can't possibly do justice to all of it. They are incapable of capturing experience (or maybe it's just you — Kartik).

A picture can't communicate what it feels like to lose sensation in your fingers in the cold. Or what it truly feels like when you round a corner and hit your first patch of snow amidst tall trees with the blazing orange sun peeking through. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but none of those manage to convey having to trust your vehicle to take you through, as you feather the throttle and pray to whatever god you believe in, rapidly cycling between feelings of uncertainty, fear and celebration.

Perhaps we need to rely less on digital memories and try to ramp up the memory retention we were born

with. As I write this, I can almost feel the snow, the exhaustion and the elation that awaited us at every turn. And I am unlikely to forget it.

18TH JAN

WBB spends each post-drive evening in a 'meeting', and part of that is what I like to call 'forced appreciation', where everyone is compelled to appreciate something about the day. And while our drive to Kalpa was vastly uneventful, it was the just-concluded evening meeting that intrigued me. 'Family' is a word that's thrown around easily, and I feel it's often used synonymously with 'group'. But I think family is more personal, more emotional. And that's what I just witnessed. People truly opened up and spoke their truth, vulnerable and naked to judgement, with the sort of faith only a family can instil.

I believe this insistence on meetings every evening — which



Few terrains are as tricky to drive on as snow and ice

“Snow chains were deployed, winches were used...”



WBB takes their name quite literally



Walking might be quicker than driving



You don't sweat, but you do get tired



Mankind's champion elect for snow fights



With fur like that, he sure looks comfortable



Has the water stopped to stare? Has the car?



This is not your average drive in the snow



The Mahindra Scorpios survived a heavy pummelling



Deceptively calm, just a day after stormy weather

seems unnecessary and very HR-esque at first — is a major life lesson for me. When you're forced to find something to appreciate, you realise that life really isn't bad, and the good is all around us if we chose to see it. I realise I can do this for more than just this drive; I can do this for daily life. And that's an epiphany for someone as pessimistic as me.

20TH JAN

It's 8 PM, and we're sitting around a bonfire at Khanag, a few kilometres short of Jalori Pass in Himachal Pradesh. The temperature is about



The locals and their attitude to life is as bright and admirable as their homes amidst snow.

4 degrees Celsius, and we've lost electricity, with the flames our only comfort. But it's also a time for introspection and revelation. WBB stresses on expeditions being more than entertainment, but rather insightful opportunities for individual growth. As its tagline states, it is a journey 'within and outside'. Sushma realised her fear was misplaced, and that she did indeed have the strength to take on the challenges of driving through snow. Satish broke his own rule of not driving at night, and excelled. But it was Manjunath's statement that I related to most: 'I only drive hard and fast, as that's my definition of a good time. But we've driven super slow, and it's been great fun. If this is possible with cars, it can be with life, too, no?' Perhaps it's time we broadened our horizons and gave alternate solutions the respect they deserve.

22ND JAN

There's something to be said about contentment in small mountain towns. As urban dwellers, most of us have come to assume our lives are desirable, and the modest villager wants nothing more than to be where we are. But I was wrong. The locals I've encountered lead

incredibly hard and remote lives, lacking a lot of things we take for granted. But they don't seem discontent. They remain far more positive and satisfied with the little they have, as opposed to what the average city dweller is with so much more. And that's saying something for spending winters in this harsh and unforgiving landscape. Temperature drops to well below zero, with villages getting cut off for weeks at times. And yet, they do not despair. How? Why? And what must I do to attain what I can only term 'nirvana'? That's what all our efforts, luxuries and religions seek to bring us, right? Bliss and contentment like this?

23RD JAN:

It's 7 PM, the sun has set and we are still an hour from our destination, Killar. We left Manali early, and 'conquered' a completely empty Atal Tunnel. And once we crossed Udaipur (yes, there's one in Himachal), it started snowing heavily. It was all stunningly beautiful and dramatic, with everyone in high spirits — until cars started sliding and a morbid silence fell over the group. Finally, we've stopped and are putting on snow chains. The sun has just set,

visibility is getting worse and it isn't going to get easier. For the first time on this trip, I am a little worried. May all our collective gods keep us safe.

24TH JAN:

Yesterday was a nightmare come true. What started as a minor challenge quickly turned into a harrowing ordeal. The snowfall got steadily worse, with the flakes swirling around violently and reducing visibility in addition to



traction. We struggled and toiled away before finally accepting nature's judgement. It won, and I felt no shame. The only relief was that it chose to spare us. We slid and physically pushed our vehicles back to the closest 'village' (a term I use liberally), where we got two stone rooms, two wooden tables to sleep on, and one measly fire, all thanks to the grace of the Border Roads Organisation (BRO). We pulled on our sleeping bags, and as many clothes as we could, as the white fury continued to rage around us. Unsure, uncertain and visibly shaken, we shivered our way to exhausted sleep in the sub-zero night as 10 inches of snow piled up outside. It was 2.30 AM.

It's times like these where an adventurer realises that it's all pleasurable until nature decides to check you. And then it becomes



Always good to have a winch to extricate helplessly stuck comrades

We shivered our way to exhausted sleep in the sub-zero night



'But why is it so cold, yaar?'



Snow chains are hard work. Worth it, though.



Is nature man's best friend, or a dog? Both?





The snow needed a place to rest, and the Thar was around



Dogs are almost as warm as blankets.



It's essential to stay well equipped



There is so much to see in the far and desolate corners of the world



Nothing like a good frolic in the snow



Slippery roads ahead, a sharp drop into a frozen river on the left, and shooting stones on the right. Adventure, anyone?

a journey into the unknown. An inward struggle to convince yourself to not despair when a car's 4WD stops functioning, another breaks a snow chain, and a third has its window shattered by falling stones, as you see your windshield start to freeze before your very eyes, and Scorpios spin 90 degrees next to a straight drop into a frozen river below.

You feel alone and scared, because you realise man has only achieved as much as nature has allowed. And then you dig deep to find the resilience that has set humans apart, the ability to find hope and positivity where none exists, the ability to struggle and survive. And survive, we did. Because today is a new day, and while yesterday will never be forgotten, I feel positive and hopeful.

My brother once commented,

'Perhaps man's greatest strength is his ability to forget', and I'm thinking a lot about that. It's been less than six hours, and already the horrors are starting to fade. Seeing little eight-year-old Deepti run around in the snow has put a smile on my face. And the view outside is unbelievably beautiful, blanketed in pure untouched white.

25TH JAN:

'They plan and plot, and then God plans and plots. Verily, God is the best of planners.' — **The Quran (8:30)**

It's easy to let hubris creep in, and let man believe he's responsible for his destiny. That his success is purely of his own doing. It's not. It never has been. There is so much beyond our control, and the last three days have been a stoic reminder of that. Everything that could go wrong, did. We got snowed in. Yesterday, the

BRO and RCC cleared the road to Shore, a further 22 km, but one car broke down as soon as we started, and had to be left behind. Another needed to have its entire front axle replaced at 7 PM in the bitter cold. And all the preparedness from WBB didn't prevent it — it merely enabled a timely reaction to ensure we made it to the rest stop for the night.

But then we got word that the road ahead was still blocked and would take another day to clear. So we've been compelled to stay here another 24 hours, and our final return to Delhi is now delayed. Flights will have to be cancelled and phone calls will have to be made. And that has left people a little disconcerted. But it's a reminder, too, of the difference between us urban animals and the vast majority of locals here. I've come to believe that they seem more content and satisfied with life

because they don't bother battling fate. They accept it as gospel truth, every single time. Snowed in? No problem, they'll wait it out. Lost electricity? A fire will be lit.

It's an attitude bred out of harsh unforgiving weather, but it extends to every facet of their lives, which ensures nothing seems to disappoint them. On the other hand, people like me keep hankering over what we could've done to avoid the weather, and how to ensure I had electricity all the time. Ours is an enervating attitude, honestly. But I think it's time we accepted what fate has for us. It would make us more peaceful. I'm going to try to do that, henceforth.

26TH JAN:

'There's more in you than you really think.' — **Kurt Hahn**

We turned back today, abandoning our original route and heading back to Manali. Till last night, we were all set to get to Kishtwar, when we received news that the equipment that was clearing the snow broke down, and won't be repaired for a few days. Strangely, I'm not disappointed or heartbroken. Sure, the cliffhanger section of the Kishtwar route is a dream, but this trip has taught me to be more accepting of fate. It is what it is, and I still revel in the fact we made it through all we did and for as long as we did. So as we turned back, I

focused on all we had already done, instead of all we wouldn't.

The drive back to Manali was long, but it was a time to ponder on all the non-driving lessons on this journey. And with a complete dearth of phone connectivity, I could cogitate without distraction. I thought a lot about the dichotomy of snow. It covers man's shortcomings and destruction to nature, hiding the plastic and garbage, engulfing it with purity and a blank canvas. But it forces man to question his mettle and to introspect. When it batters, it unravels his core character and personality. The stuff he's really made of. And it is these hidden traits, personalities and abilities that WBB expeditions excel at covertly unearthing through hardship and exploration. A real journey within and outside.

So when we crossed Atal Tunnel and saw the lights of Manali, for the first time at the end of a trip, I felt peaceful and content with all that had transpired. Already the memories are starting to feel distant, but it's the feelings and emotions that remain. And while the physical journey had concluded, the internal one had just commenced. As any true journey should. ■



So long as a group works as one, all challenges are temporary