

MARUTI SUZUKI RAID DE HIMALAYA

Going beyond the limits

The Maruti Suzuki Raid de Himalaya is a battle of attrition in which only a minority of the competitors finish. Stephen Cunliffe went along to find out why anyone would want to subject themselves and their vehicles to such an extreme event

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Even if the ice, snow, sub-zero temperatures, biting cold winds, dangerously narrow mountain tracks, and oxygen-depleted high altitude Himalayan passes don't terrify you, then the brutal pounding that your vehicle takes might still thwart your best efforts just to reach the finish line.

The Maruti Suzuki Raid de Himalaya is as much about endurance as it is about driving ability. The terrain is tough, weather conditions can be horrendous and the route is downright brutal, so why would anyone want to sign up for this seemingly insane event?

I grappled with this conundrum for much of the second week of October as I accompanied around 180 participants on the 11th edition of Asia's toughest

motorsport event.

To describe the Raid as brutal is the ultimate understatement. It tests drivers and their vehicles to well beyond their limits. Vehicles are jolted, bashed and rattled to within an inch of the scrap yard. Driver cunning and stamina are essential if you are to survive the hardships of the Raid de Himalaya and claim a much-coveted finisher's medal.

To illustrate just how vicious this event is, only eight of the 33 vehicles entered in the "Extreme" racing category were able to cross the finish line! So, again, I wondered why anyone would voluntarily suffer this ordeal?

After the race got underway from the city of Shimla on Wednesday 7 October it



Top: The "Adventure" category lets drivers enjoy the same routes with less stress. Above: It's not only the participants who enjoy the spectacle. Below: Only eight out of 33 "Extreme" entrants finished. So what makes them do it?





Above: 2000km through the rugged Himalayas make for an extreme and spectacular rally.

travelled along the mountainous routes of northern India. Driving conditions became steadily tougher, culminating on day three with a crossing of the notorious Baralacha Pass to gain entry into the remote Buddhist stronghold of Ladakh. At dawn, as we tried to negotiate a series of iced-up high-altitude passes, the mercury stood at minus eight degrees Celsius.

After overcoming the snow and ice on Baralacha, our next hurdle was the world's second-highest drivable road over Tanglang La Pass, en route to Leh. From Leh the race detoured into the idyllic Zaskar Valley before returning to Kargil and a final leg to Srinagar in the volatile region of Kashmir. Himalayan Motorsport spokesman, Manjeev Bhalla, jovially described this as "an opportunity to have some fun racing right under the noses of the Pakistanis!"

As the race wore on, more and more competitors dropped out, yet, surprisingly, I began to better understand the attraction of such an event. There is the undeniable lure of genuine adventure, while the challenge of pitting yourself against extreme Himalayan elements has a primordial appeal. Everyone is plagued by the same question: can I last the distance? It is not only human stamina that is tested but also vehicle endurance, as the terrain and weather gods dish out innumerable challenges on a daily basis. It is life at its most simple and survival becomes paramount.

There is, however, much more to this event than torturous terrain and racing hardships. The route takes participants

into some of India's most beautiful and unexplored regions. Competitors are treated to the finest Himalayan views, along with the breathtaking beauty of the Zaskar valley, surely one of the most stunning regions in all of India. The bluest skies are set off against snow-capped peaks, glaciers and crystal clear streams.

The rally traverses over 2000km of India's finest wilderness areas. Largely uninhabited due to extreme weather conditions, these regions offer a never-ending kaleidoscope of jaw-dropping vistas to keep even the dourest competitors in awe.

The Raid organisers have recognised that the event lures not only professional motorsport aficionados but also normal everyday adventurous souls, so they created an "Adventure" category to accommodate these spirited amateur enthusiasts. The 2009 event included husband/wife teams, mother/daughter duos and even a disabled competitor! The "Adventure" category follows the same challenging route that the "Extreme" vehicles race. This allows amateurs to take on the best of the Himalaya without the competitive stress and racing dangers inherent to the extreme category. With over a hundred participants involved in this more social category, it is by far the most popular option. These people compete simply for the challenge and thrill of being part of such a momentous adventure.

So, are you brave enough to take on the challenges of the Raid de Himalaya in 2010?

THREE RALLIES NOT TO BE MISSED

1. Maruti Suzuki's Raid de Himalaya: Organised under the auspices of Himalayan Motorsport, this rally encompasses over 2000km of rugged mountainous terrain in what is widely acknowledged to be India's toughest and most prestigious motorsport event. It takes place in sub-zero temperatures during October. For more information visit: www.raid-de-himalaya.com.

2. Maruti Suzuki's Desert Storm: Northern Motorsport coordinate a rally around mid-February that takes participants on a 2500km journey across the length and breadth of arid Rajasthan, northern India. Competitors' endurance and navigation skills are severely tested in the frequently featureless terrain. To find out more about this great desert rally go to: www.desertstorm.motorsport.in.

3. The Dakar Rally: Previously known as the Paris-Dakar Rally, the Sahara-dominated route across north Africa challenged the world's best rally drivers. However, for the second year running, the January 2010 event will take place in Argentina and Chile, as organisers cannot guarantee competitors' safety in strife-torn African countries. Check out www.dakar.com for more on what is arguably the world's most well-known off-road motorsport event.

SHARE YOUR ADVENTURES... AND WIN!

Send us an account of your off-road adventure and a couple of nice pics, and stand a chance of winning an attractive prize!

You don't have to be a journalist, and the article can be written in the language of your choice. We will translate, and rewrite if necessary, as long as the necessary details are there.

This month a Baseline portable DVD player goes to Stephen Cunliffe for his story on the incredible Maruti Suzuki Raid de Himalaya in India.

The Baseline DVD player is fully portable, with a seven-inch screen, and can play movies from DVD, CD or USB. The system can also be used to view jpeg pictures, or to listen to MP3 music.

The player comes with rechargeable batteries, a mains adaptor and a 12V car cigarette charger. It also features a remote control, and even a "parental control" function.

The Baseline portable DVD player is available from Autostyle Motorsport and is valued at R950.

For more information call 011 837-3506 or go to www.autostyle.co.za

