

TEST YOUR NERVES

The high altitude, brutal weather conditions, and imposing Himalayas only add to the thrill of being a part of Raid de Himalaya, says **Stephen Cunliffe**

Even if the snow, ice, sub-zero temperatures, biting cold winds, dangerously narrow winding 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 cross the finish line. The Maruti Suzuki Raid de Himalaya is as much about endurance as it is about driving ability. The terrain is rough, weather conditions can be horrendous and the route is often downright brutal. So, this begs the question, what possesses people 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 the Raid de Himalaya (in 2009): a motorsport event that is widely acknowledged to be the longest, highest and most strenuous race in India.

To describe the Raid as brutal is the ultimate understatement. It tests drivers and their vehicles to well beyond the 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 and challenges of the Raid de Himalaya



PHOTOGRAPHS: STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

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 in last year's event!

So, again, I wonder why would anyone want to pay good money to voluntarily subject themselves and their precious vehicles to this ordeal?

The 2009 race flagged off from Shimla on October 7, before moving north across Himachal Pradesh over the notorious Baralacha Pass and into Ladakh. When we attempted to cross this icy high altitude pass before dawn, the mercury hovered around minus eight. This was just the beginning.

After overcoming the snow and black ice on Baralacha, the world's second highest motorable road over Tanglang La followed. After successfully crossing these mountainous barriers, we gained entry into the remote Buddhist enclave of Ladakh and overnighed in Leh. The final stages detoured into the idyllic Zaskar Valley before returning via Kargil for the final leg to Srinagar. 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, with the passing of each day I began to better comprehend the attraction of such an event. There was the almost primordial appeal of pitting yourself against the extreme Himalayan elements coupled with the irresistible allure of embarking on a genuine adventure.

ADVENTURE CATEGORY

The vehicles in the more social and popular 'Adventure' section follow the same challenging route as the Extreme category, but without the racing dangers and competitive pressures. Adventure participants are given an optimum average speed to maintain over an unspecified distance and they're marked on the accuracy of their arrival at checkpoints. Arriving either early or late incurs penalties; however, the optimum speeds and timings are challenging enough to keep drivers on their toes!

TOUGH CHALLENGES: (Facing page) The spellbinding scenery of the Zaskar Valley; the overnight camp at Rangdum, Ladakh

En route to the finish line, 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 obstacles and challenges on a daily basis. It is life at its most simple; survival becomes paramount.

There is, however, much more to this event than torturous terrain and racing hardships. Each year, the route takes participants into some of India's most beautiful, pristine and unexplored regions spread over 2,000 km. Competitors are treated to the breathtaking beauty of north India's landscapes, along with some of the finest Himalayan views imaginable. Largely uninhabited due to extreme weather conditions, these areas offer a never-ending kaleidoscope of jaw-dropping vistas to keep even the dourest competitors in awe.

The Raid organisers recognised that the event lures not only professional motorsport aficionados but also adventurous souls, so they created an Adventure category to accommodate these spirited amateur enthusiasts. Last year's event included husband-wife teams, mother-daughter duos and even a disabled competitor in this grouping! Most participants compete simply for the fun, challenge and thrill of taking part in such an exciting adventure. So, this begs one final question... What was your excuse for not signing up for the 12th edition of the Raid de Himalaya?

The 12th edition of RDH will take place from October 8-17. For more information, log on to www.raid-de-himalaya.com.