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OU ARE ABOUT to drive the worst car you've ever driven in your life. And by the end of this trip, I guarantee that you will have fallen in love with it.'

He wasn't wrong about the first part. The Hindustan Ambassador, which would be our living room on wheels for the next week or so, is probably the least sophisticated car you can still buy new, anywhere in the world. Hardly surprising: it was designed in the 1950s as the Morris Oxford Series III. Still made in India, it boasts quality control that would have Lord Nuffield reaching for the smelling salts. This is one Ambassador that definitely *wouldn't* be spoiling us.

But our cheery host doing the pre-Agincourt speech, Steve McCullagh, organiser of the Classic India tour, was equally right in claiming that we would learn to love it. The Ambassador is still a perfect vehicle for India's roads. Tough, roomy, and – thanks to diesel power – amazingly economical, it is a car you would trust with your life. Which is something you end up doing quite a lot in Indian traffic.

How to describe driving in India? Unlike anywhere else in the world, is the short answer. I've driven in some pretty hairy places, including Iraq during the Saddam Hussein years, but India is something else. It is a giant free-for-all, like taking part in an enormous Mille Miglia in which you're driving the equivalent of a Fiat Topolino and the lorries and coaches are the

4-litre Ferraris and Maseratis that are all out to get you – often quite literally, it seems.

One of the Brits on our trip put it best, when we were having a few beers and discussing how you could improve driving standards in India. 'You'd just have to kill everybody and start again,' he said.

Most of us were still in a state of blissful ignorance when we arrived at our resort-hotel in India's south-western state of Kerala, at the start of an 11-day tour. There were about 50 of us, mostly retired couples with at least one classic car tucked away at home. Among the old car 'aristocracy' was Jaguar collector and racer Nigel Webb, who'd flown in straight from the Goodwood Revival, swapping his C-type and D-type for a back-to-basics Ambassador. He was clearly still in race driver mode when he took on a bus – and lost. His 'Ambi', as the cars are affectionately known, wore a long battle scar for the rest of the trip.

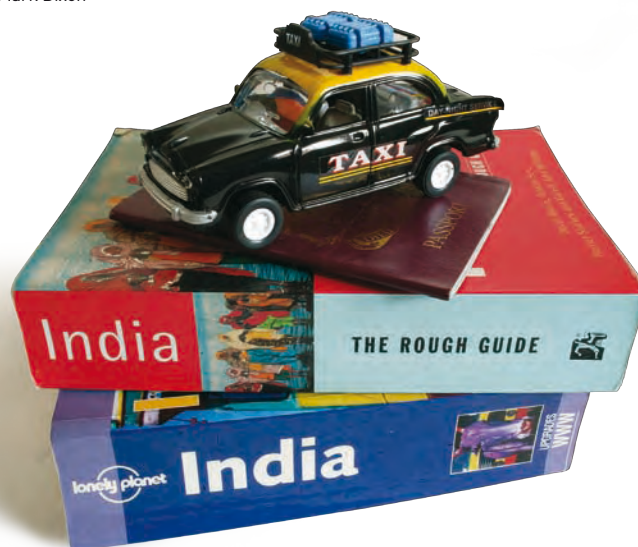
That's one of the first rules you learn about driving in India: the bus driver is king. We might occasionally tut-tut about being carved up by a double-decker in London, but Indian bus drivers make their British counterparts look like monks on a diet of Valium. Indian buses are no-frills, usually no-windows boxes of steel straight off the set of *Mad Max*, and driven with rather less restraint. Low fares and rampant competition mean that every second counts for their

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Roving Ambassadors

For the cost of entering a good UK historic rally you could spend 11 days driving old cars around India. *Octane's* deputy editor did, and was impressed

Words & photography: Mark Dixon







'IT'S AMAZING HOW MUCH INTEREST A WHITE FACE STILL GENERATES IN RURAL INDIA'



drivers; often they will slow down but not actually stop for passengers, so overtaking manoeuvres have to be finely judged. Get it wrong and you will find a few tons of Ashok Leyland remodelling your nearside.

It's because of this, shall we say, enthusiastic approach to driving that Indian cars are built around one key component. The horn. Brakes, steering, suspension are all optional, but if you don't have a working horn you are a dead man driving – and if someone pulls straight out into you without looking, it's entirely your fault, because you didn't warn them you were there. The writers of the Lonely Planet guide to India have calculated that the average Indian driver uses their horn 10 to 20 times every kilometre, which is a lot of button pushing.

Oh, and I'm not kidding about the optional brakes. In the first Ambassador I try, I look in vain for the handbrake. The mountings are there, but it's not actually fitted. Rocks picked up from the roadside are the accepted substitute.

'Our' Ambassadors are privately owned cars that have been rented for a couple of weeks by Steve and his Indian right-hand man Prem, who employs a full complement of Indian mechanics to act as support crews during the tour. They do a fantastic job, replacing the odd broken halfshaft and even doing a gearbox change at the side of the road. The Ambis are actually incredibly robust, their biggest weakness being what Steve describes as 'clutches made from recycled cereal packets', which get a hard life due to the optional-fit handbrakes.

Our first day sees a gentle acclimatisation run up the coast, taking in the sights, sounds and, yes, smells of India. I'd imagined that the Ambassador might be a dying breed but that's far from the case. Yes, the majority of cars are cheap Japanese hatches, or their Indian equivalents, but there are still plenty of Ambis around. They are



Clockwise from left

Smart station master; Citroën Traction spotted in Ooty is a UK-built example; hotels on the Classic India are the best available; beware elephants crossing!; typically vibrant street scene in Kerala.



certainly much more numerous than India's other 'classic' car, the Padmini Premier, which is a licence-built version of the pretty three-box Fiat 1100 of the 1950s. And I spot only a couple of examples of the Vauxhall FE Victor-clone Hindustan Contessa... I'll stop now.

Ambis are still popular as official Government cars. At one point we're passed by an Ambassador police car, looking as if it's straight out of *Tales from Scotland Yard*, and I see another official Ambassador with the legend 'JUDGE' on its radiator grille. I'd like to think that its owner wears a white powdered wig when he's sitting on the bench; 60 years after independence, the British Raj lives on in Indian bureaucracy.

In truth, I'd been hoping to see more old relics from the days when India was coloured red on maps of the Empire, but they are few and far between. Sometimes they manifest themselves in unexpected ways: highway workers still use traditional road rollers that are dead ringers for the Aveling-Barfords of Olde England, for example. More significantly, India drives on the left, like the UK – although it would be more accurate to say it drives in the middle, only veering to the left when oncoming traffic looks as if it will come off better in a head-on.

The Classic India tour starts and finishes in Kerala, on the south-west coastline of India, before heading inland and into Tamil Nadu. It then loops up into neighbouring Karnataka before retracing its steps south and completing the circle back to Kerala. It's a wonderfully varied route, from the manic bustle of the big coastal ports to the manicured tea plantations in the hills, passing through dense jungle and across arid plains inbetween. Some of the places visited are on the tourist trail, like the former British hill station of Ootacamund, known universally as Ooty, but most are not: in this age of cheap global travel, it's amazing how much interest a white face still generates in rural India. Interest but



'IT'S A WONDERFULLY VARIED ROUTE, FROM THE BUSTLE OF THE PORTS TO THE MANICURED TEA PLANTATIONS IN THE HILLS'

not hostility, for what strikes you is the overwhelming friendliness of the locals.

Even more impressive, for those of us familiar with the Vicky Pollards of British youth, is how well dressed and well behaved Indian school children are. Kerala has a literacy rate of better than 95%, and despite widespread poverty the children always seem immaculately turned out. They also seem genuinely happy, smiling and waving whenever they catch sight of an Ambassador being driven by these strange white folk. If only we could organise some kind of mass school exchange, to show British kids how lucky they are... (Sorry, slipped into Grumpy Old Man mode for a moment there.)

Our tour is a cunning mix of the challenging and the civilised. Some of the days involve quite long drives, in what are effectively 1950s saloon cars. But the accommodation each night is the best available locally, and rather than default to the nearest Holiday Inn (surprisingly, there *is* one at Ooty) Steve goes out of his way to choose interesting places. They range from chalet-style lodges that fringe an inland lake, to an amazing eco-hotel built on the side of a mountain, where the access roads were plotted by donkeys – the paths were laid wherever the donkeys made a trail – and where you have to beware of monkeys sneaking in through an open window. One couple on the tour came back to find a monkey riffling through the wife's underwear; he's now known to his monkey mates as St Michael.

Steve likes to spring the odd surprise on his visitors, too. Towards the end of the tour, he apologises in advance for the slightly shabby lodgings he's been forced to book for the forthcoming night's stay. Then you arrive at the destination in the route book and find it's a former maharajah's palace, complete with ball room and framed photos of 1920s pith-helmeted Brits taking tea on the lawns. (This palace is now in the suburban sprawl of its one-time neighbouring city. The week before we arrived, on a roundabout on the main road, a leopard caught and killed a child. Wild cats in the busy suburbs – welcome to India.)

He's an interesting character, this Steve McCullagh. He worked in the car leasing

Above
Ambis thread their way
through the carefully
cultivated tea plantations
of the interior.



Top tips for the Indian virgin

1 Bring lots of tee-shirts – it takes a while to adjust to the humidity and you'll need a couple every day.

2 Forget your mobile phone. Instead, look for booths offering direct-dial international telephones. Every town has them and they're incredibly cheap – about £1 for a five-minute call to the UK.

3 Drink only bottled water, and lots of it, more than you think is necessary. Otherwise you'll dehydrate without noticing.

4 Sandals are more comfortable than shoes, but remember to take off all footwear before entering holy places such as churches or temples – and some posh shops.

5 Malaria can be a problem in some parts of India, but not in the areas traversed by the Classic India. Injections and/or tablets aren't necessary. That said, it pays to cover up in the evenings when there are mosquitos about.

6 You can't obtain Indian currency before your trip, at least in the UK. Instead, get rupees at the airport or your hotel – the bigger hotels will all change sterling for rupees.

7 Don't drive at night. The dangers posed by unlit vehicles, ox carts, pedestrians etc are just too great.

8 What we know as 'tuk tuks' (Indians call them auto rickshaws) – three-wheeled taxis – are a great way of getting around cities. They're relatively cheap and found everywhere. Agree a price before setting off.

9 Most Indians have at least a few words of English, and many people speak it fluently, so you should have no fears about making yourself understood when you go off to explore the local shops.

10 'Delhi belly' is a bit of a myth. While you'll often find curry on the menu for breakfast as well as dinner, if you're sensible about where you choose to eat, and don't drink tap water, you'll have no problems. It's not as if Brits are unused to curries, after all...



business in London for many years, before quitting the rat race and moving out to rural Somerset. He dresses as if he's on his way to Glastonbury, looks a bit like the actor Pete Postlethwaite, chain-smokes roll-ups, has a penchant for terrible magic tricks, and isn't afraid to bawl out a client if they do something stupid – but the other side of the coin is that he genuinely does care about giving his paying customers the very best experience he can manage. No surprise that the women adore him and the men hide their cigarette packets whenever he approaches.

An example of Steve's ingenuity: the eco-hotel is only a short drive away from a steam railway that climbs the mountain up to Ooty. It still runs rack-and-pinion locomotives that were built in Switzerland in the 1920s, and is now a popular heritage line. Only problem is, the tickets are all sold out well in advance. But Steve makes a generous donation to the railway company, and an extra carriage miraculously appears from nowhere. Welcome to India.

For many of us on the trip, the highlight is motoring through the tea plantations that gave the British our national drink. For one thing, it's cooler up here in the hills, away from the oppressive humidity found nearer the coast. It's also strangely reminiscent of the Scottish glens, with tin-roofed bungalows dotted across close-cropped grassy valleys. It's a setting that's just right for the Ambi's 1950s style; you half expect to see Kenneth More being chased across the scenery by a Ford Zephyr full of fake policemen out of *The 39 Steps*.

India is rarely so comfortably familiar to western eyes, however. One of the couples on our tour, Jim and Carole Jackson – they rally a



'YOU HAVE TO BEWARE OF MONKEYS SNEAKING IN THROUGH AN OPEN WINDOW'




Clockwise from top of page

Inquisitive monkeys;
multi-storey shops in Ooty;
'blessing' Ambis; happy
kids; lightly loaded bicycle;
mountain steam railway;
Steve McCullagh briefs crews;
verdant valley of tea bushes.



Lotus Elan back home – get a nasty surprise when they're flagged down by a man who's engulfed in a cloud of angry bees. The man is clearly in great pain and begging for help; Jim stops a passing jeep and he's whisked away, presumably to hospital, leaving a slightly traumatised pair of Brits in his wake. Another crew has a motorbike drive into the back of their Ambassador, flinging its rider into the air and into the road. Fortunately he gets up with an embarrassed smile, dusts himself down and rides off uninjured – just a routine traffic accident in a country that suffers more than twice as many road deaths as the USA every year, despite having about one-quarter the number of vehicles.

But don't let this put you off. Driving in India is one of the most exciting, challenging, liberating things I've ever done. India is an amazing place, with wonderful people – and it's still a relatively cheap place to visit. I reckon I spent barely £100 on fuel and beers during the 11 days I was there, making the Classic India a very viable alternative to a typical European rally. And while you're unlikely to go home with a burning desire to own an Ambassador, you'll certainly come away with a grudging respect for this piece of living history. Its name was well chosen. 

For information about the 2009 Classic India and the other tours organised by Steve McCullagh and his team, visit www.classicarjourneys.co.uk. Next year's Classic India will cost £1695 per person, plus flights – about £500 per person from the UK. Steve is also planning a road trip through Vietnam for 2010.