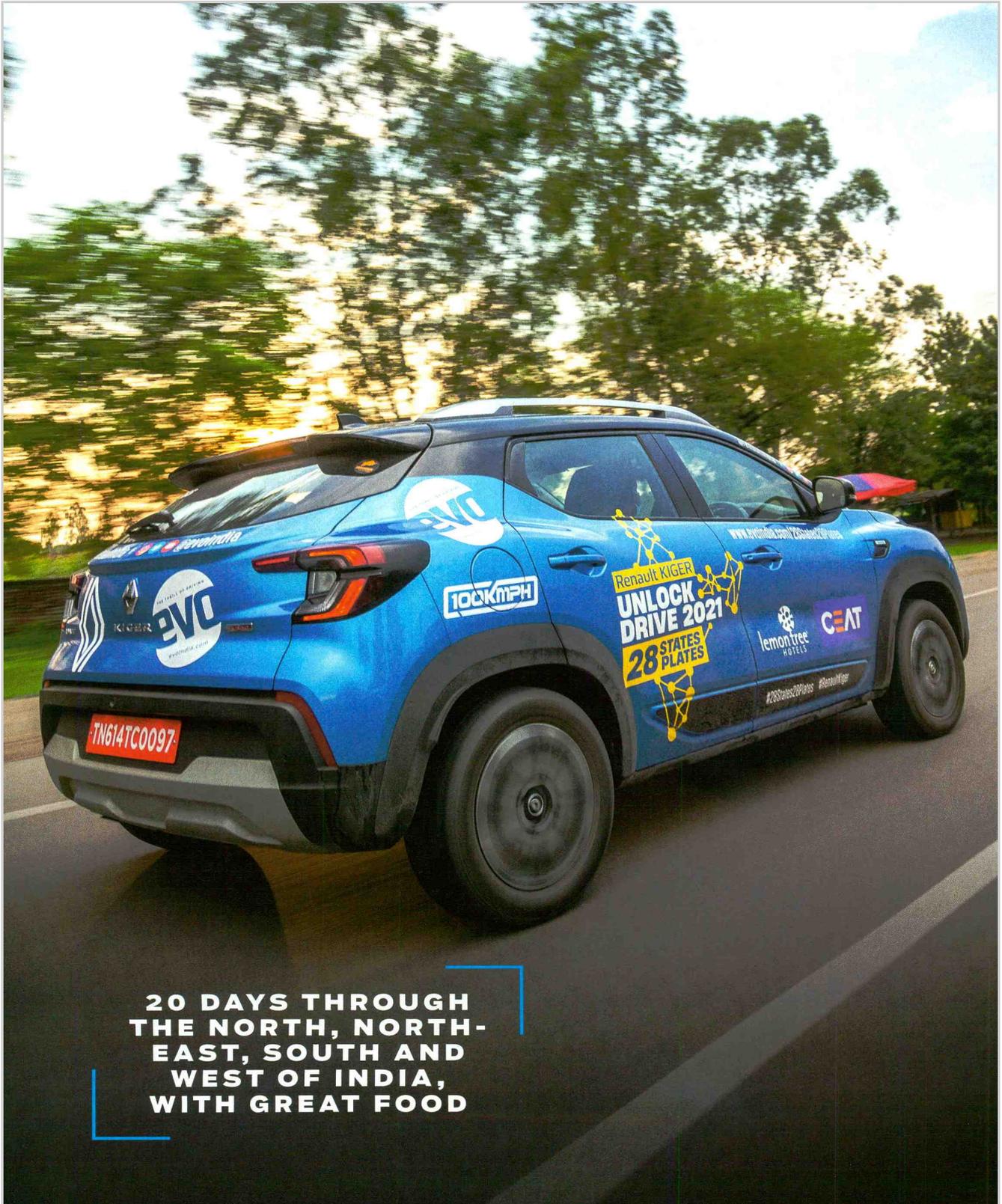


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**20 DAYS THROUGH  
THE NORTH, NORTH-  
EAST, SOUTH AND  
WEST OF INDIA,  
WITH GREAT FOOD**

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WORDS by KARAN SINGH

**LOVE ROAD TRIPS. IN FACT, WE WERE JUST** getting ready to flag-off and depart from Lemon Tree Premier Aerocity in Delhi as I thanked my lucky stars for being there. Over 20 days through the North, North-East, South and West of India, with great food in between — what more could you want? Our first destination was a state known for its food, Punjab. What a way to get started.

Delhi-Chandigarh is a well-travelled route so there are lots of *dhabas* to eat at and Zhilmil was a popular recommendation. But we had a problem. There's more than a few *dhabas* in the area crowned Zhilmil/Jhilmil. We stopped at one with the most reviews, (this one had 'King of the Road' written front and centre) and ordered some *parathas* and *lassis*. There was more butter in the former and more *malai* in the latter, than I had consumed in the last three months. Not that I was complaining.

We arrived at Lemon Tree Chandigarh later that evening, with our stomachs still full. But, being the foodies that we are, we were still excited to dine at the iconic Pal Dhaba. Sure enough, we had another problem. There isn't one 'Pal Dhaba' in Chandigarh's Sector 28 market. There are a handful and they all look the same! Even after ordering at what I thought was the 'right' Pal Dhaba, photographer Abhishek dragged me to another one. "This is the real one bro," he said with the confidence that suggested his name was on the foundation stone. We ordered the famous mutton curry with some *tandoori rotis* to go with. The curry was packed with flavour and managed to vacate a lot of space in my tummy. So, we ordered some more *rotis* and a tall glass of *lassi* each. If you're in Chandigarh, Pal Dhaba (the one with the blingy signboard), is a must visit.

**Top:** We stopped over at quite a few Renault dealerships across India for a cup of tea. We even delivered Bengaluru's 1000th Kiger at Trident Renault



### DRIVING THROUGH INDIA?

We recommend keeping your schedule a little flexible to regularly do RT-PCR tests. There are on-the-spot rapid tests but we don't recommend it due to poor hygiene at some centres. States such as Jammu, Uttarakhand and Goa were very particular about valid negative reports, other states did have guidelines relating to it, but no on-ground enforcement. We found state government websites to be the most reliable sources of info. And, although we set out to visit all 28 states, unrest in the north-east and travel restrictions into Assam forced us to, sadly, skip that part of the country.

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RENAULT KIGER UNLOCK DRIVE 2021

### LEMON TREE HOTELS

All through India, wherever possible, we stayed at a Lemon Tree and two things were consistent – hygiene and hospitality. From decorating an entire hall with elements from the state, to greeting us with flowers and welcome drinks, Lemon Tree Hotels made us feel like kings. And we haven't even spoken about the food yet. From lavish *thalis* packed with local flavours to healthy, packed breakfasts prepared even before the sun was up – the chefs went out of their way to pamper us. Add to this the Rest Assured program in association with Diversey which uses the best hygiene practices to keep us assured of our safety. What more do you need? And you can go Trippin' With Lemon Tree too! **Use the code 'TWLT' to get a flat 20 per cent discount** on the best available rates at any Lemon Tree Hotel across India.



**Top:** Lemon Tree Hotels president Vikramjit Singh, seeing us off from Aerocity. **Above:** Common Ground cafe in McLeod Ganj serves up brilliantly authentic Tibetan food. **Left:** You just cannot miss the *aloo* and *paneer parathas* on a drive up north

## THE FIRST DAY AND MY BELLY WAS ON THE VERGE OF EXPLODING

My first day on the drive and my belly was on the verge of exploding as I tucked myself into bed. 20 more days of this, my internals shrivelled in fear. The next day, we headed to Jammu — the northern most point on the drive. A point to remember if you're heading into Jammu, get your RT-PCR test done beforehand. You need to show a negative report (not older than 72 hours) at the border and if, like us, you don't have one — you have to get a rapid test done at the centre located at the border. The less I speak about that test centre, the better. Social distancing, masks and sanitisers seemed like mere suggestions that were being ignored. We got the test done nevertheless, passed through the border and drove right on until our halt for the night. We'd already made a list of food places we wanted to cover in Jammu but, sure enough, there was a problem. Jammu had a 7pm curfew. The clock behind the

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**Below:** While entering or leaving Jammu, stop at the border town of Lakhanpur and try the *dal vadas* from roadside vendors, it's a great snack you can munch on all day

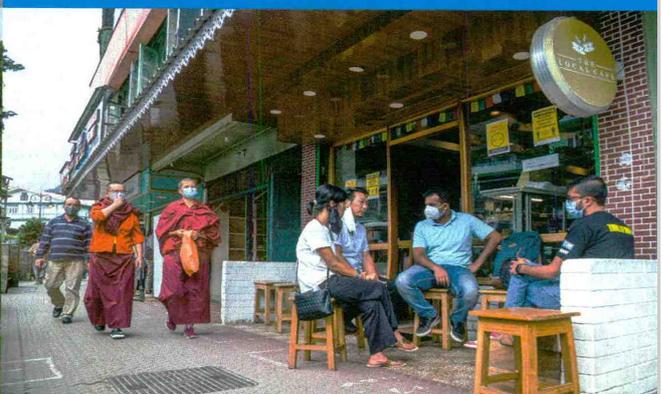


check-in counter ticked past 7:03pm as we walked into the hotel. We made the most of it by dining at the in-house Bazaar restaurant, where we'd requested the chef to make us some local food. While I have tried food from this region before, I hadn't tried *kaladi kulcha*. '*Kaladi*' is a local cottage cheese, not too different from *paneer* and is traditionally paired with a *kulcha* and dipped in some *chutney*. It makes for a great snack. The *khatta* meat and the *rogan josh* were good too, but the star of the night had to be the *rajma*. It was perfectly cooked and had a rich, smoky flavour; unlike any *rajma chawal* I had previously had. The confusion in my taste buds was almost audible.

The next couple of days went by quickly. We drove to Palampur from Jammu and stopped for lunch at the Common Ground Cafe in Dharamshala, where we scooped up delicious fried pork and potato with *tingmo* (soft buns) — a proper Tibetan meal. From Palampur we headed to the Red Fox Hotel in Dehradun, where chef Surender had prepared a local *thali* for us with dishes from each region of Uttarakhand. There was lots of non-veg goodness in it but the vegetarian stuff, especially the *arbi* (taro root), had us licking our fingers.

The next day we drove a mammoth 750-odd kilometres to get to Lucknow. The Kigers were really put through their paces so we make it in time for dinner, which we did thanks to the turbo-petrol engine. But as soon as we checked into the

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## RENAULT KIGER UNLOCK DRIVE 2021

hotel, we got a call from the reception about two people (Abhinav and Pranjal) who'd come to meet us. Puzzling, since we hadn't organised a meet-up or even posted that we'd reached Lucknow. But it turns out that a friend of theirs had tipped them off when he saw our cars parked up, so they drove down (from the other end of the city) to meet us. They were perhaps two of the sweetest people I met on the drive, really hospitable, and they came along with us to try the iconic *galouti kabab* from Tunday Kababi. Hands down, it was my favourite meal of the trip. Just as you snap through the crispy crust, the rest of it just melts away. We ate two more helpings before retiring for the night. 28 States 28 Plates? More like 28 States 280 Plates.

We headed to Muzaffarpur the next day, which is one of the most densely populated cities in Bihar and if you can avoid stopping here, we strongly recommend doing so. The traffic is off the charts, as is the general chaos and it was here that we were thankful for the Kiger's compact dimensions. We did get some lip-smacking *litti* and *chokha* for dinner though. From the mess that was Muzaffarpur we went right to one of the most beautiful stops on the trip — Sikkim. We were in Gangtok, where we ate some interesting fusion food at The Local Cafe. The dish of the day was yellow *laphing*, think of it as flat noodles with an almost jelly-like consistency, wrapped around spicy (and crispy) chicken. For us, it being gluten free and low on fat was just encouragement to keep eating more. At night, we tried out *chhurpi* — a yak cheese that was a bit too err... smelly for us. We also gave the Renault Kigers their first bit of TLC in Sikkim, with a general check-up at Renault Gangtok. While the cars were running smooth, we wanted to make sure all the essentials were A-OK, before we hit some of the worst roads in the country.

**Below:** Readers Abhinav and Pranjal gave us a tour of the old markets of Lucknow, and fed us at Tunday Kababi (**facing page, centre**) which serves some of the most amazing *kebabs* we've ever tasted. **Facing page, bottom:** Gangtok is blessed with some great cafes to chill at and watch the world go by



### NOVAERUS PROTECT 200

Doing a cross-country drive like 28 States 28 Plates during the pandemic meant we had to be sure of our safety. Masks and sanitisers definitely help but we wanted to go the extra mile, which is why we took along the Novaerus Protect 200. The Protect 200 has been brought to India by Trivector Biomed LLP and continuously disinfects the air in small indoor spaces by using a patented (and NASA-validated) cold plasma technology called Nano Strike. In simple words, the Protect 200 pulls in air from a fan on top and sends it to a plasma coil. This plasma coil has a very destructive electromagnetic field that damages the cell structures of virus and bacteria to the DNA/RNA level. The disinfected air is then sent out via a vent in the lower half of the device. The fact that the Protect 200 device is portable, and requires only a single cable to power it, allowed us to carry it with us everywhere. When we were on the move, we plugged it into an in-car inverter which has a household socket to keep us safe in the Renault Kiger. Of course, we are assured of our safety whenever we are staying at a Lemon Tree Hotel, but when we landed up in a place without a Lemon Tree Hotel, we carried the Protect 200 with us to our hotel room to ensure that we remain shielded from the coronavirus – inside the car and out. If you're looking for a more powerful air steriliser, Trivector Biomed LLP has also brought the Protect 800 to India. The Protect 800 has a two-speed fan and can disinfect the air in medium indoor spaces. There is also the Defend 1050 which is made for rapid remediation in large spaces as well as places where there is a high risk of infection.

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#### CEAT SECURADRIVE TYRES

As much as the 28 States 28 Plates drive was a test for the Renault Kiger, it was also a test for the tyres. The Renault Kiger comes fitted with 195/60 R16 Ceat SecuraDrive tyres from the factory and we put them through the ultimate endurance test. The SecuraDrive tyres handled heavy rainfall, hot afternoons, cold mornings, high-speed cruising, crater-sized potholes, rocky trails, and everything in between — for over 30 days straight. And even as we clocked over 9500km through ever-changing conditions all across India, we didn't encounter even a single puncture or even loss of pressure. A proper testament to the relevance of made in India, for India.

## AMAZINGLY THERE WASN'T AS MUCH AS A RATTLE AFTER THESE ROADS

Yep. The next day we halted in Siliguri before making our way to Kolkata a day later, and the Siliguri-Kolkata route was a nightmare. You go through villages where the clock seems to be running a few decades behind, cross towns more congested than Mumbai's local train on a Monday morning and then the last hour is a (seemingly endless) minefield of really bad potholes. I was worried for the Kiger after a few gnarly whacks, but to our surprise, both the Kigers took it in their stride. The fact that there wasn't as much as a rattle after this was nothing short of remarkable. Lemon Tree Premier Kolkata made us forget all the troubles of the day by handing us keys to the Presidential Suite and preparing an array of Bengali food for dinner, topped off by *rasgulla*. All's well that ends well, eh?

After Kolkata, we began our journey down south. We ate a local mutton and potato curry, known as '*Khasa Manso Aloo Jhol*' at the Odisha Hotel in Bhubaneswar, then tried *punugulu* — a deep fried snack, in Vijayawada before heading to Chennai.

#### Facing page, top:

The Kigers were driven through roads that had further deteriorated in the monsoon which was in full swing. Facing

#### page, below:

The yellow Amby, an iconic sight of Kolkata; sport mode on the Kiger selected via the drive mode switch; the Lemon Tree at Bengaluru served us a mean South Indian *thali*



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In Chennai, we were given a warm welcome at the Lemon Tree Premier and the good folk there went out of their way to give us the proper Andhra experience — folk music, banana leaves for plates and a lavish spread which included fried fish, biryani and *payasam*, my new favourite dessert.

The next day, we set out for Bengaluru where we first stopped at Trident Renault who were delivering the 1000th Kiger in the city on the very same day. And before we arrived at Lemon Tree Premier in Bengaluru, we'd already instructed the chef to give us small portions. I'm not sure about the others, but I was still digesting the *lassi* from Punjab. Of course, at our dinner table was a king-sized *thali* with everything from prawns *rava* fry, to chicken *ghee* roast, Mangalorean-style fish curry and *ragi mudde*.

From Bengaluru, we started to cut across the map, on our way back home. Our first stop was Coorg. We ate at the unbelievably charming Bungalow 1934 where Amrith, who heads the place, prepared a traditional Kodava meal for us with produce from his



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## THE KIGER HAS TAKEN EVERYTHING INDIA HAS THROWN AT IT

farm. I was still dreaming of the *pandi* curry we ate there as we made our way to Udupi the next day. Our route was a bit unusual as we went to Chittarikkal in Kerala first, to visit Abhishek's home. And what a day to visit, it was Onam! Abhishek hadn't been home for Onam in four years and now, thanks to lady luck, he was back. His mother cooked traditional Onam *sadhya* for us, and I personally gulped half their stock of *payasam* before we left for Udupi.

Udupi was just a night halt before the final destination on the drive, Goa. We were pretty hungry as we reached Mum's Kitchen where we met Ronnie and Suzie, who own the place. The table was crowded with authentic Goan fish curry, chicken *xacuti*, Goan rice and *camarao panado*. It was the ideal meal to end the trip. Simple, light and packed with flavour.

Later that day, we checked into the Heritage Villa at the Lemon Tree Amarante and as I finally got some rest, I wondered: "Can I sum up this almost month-long road trip in a few pages?" The short answer is no. India is a country so diverse, with cultures erupting from every nook and cranny, that it would be impossible to do so even if I had a hundred more pages. What I can tell you is that if there's anything that unites this country it's our passion for food. We may all have different styles of cooking but at the core of it all is a whole lotta love. Tougher for me to fathom though was how well the Renault Kiger performed on this journey. It is a compact SUV that's been made in India, for India and over the last 9500-odd kilometres, it has taken everything that India has thrown at it — torrential rain, terrible roads, long hours of highway cruising, traffic jams, all while being brimmed with people and luggage — and it has come out without a fault. It may not be the most luxurious compact SUV around, but with a long feature list, plenty of cabin space, great pricing and a never-say-die attitude, it has to be one of the hardiest. And when you've got a hunger for adventure, that's what counts. ✕

**Top left:** The doggos at Bungalow 1934 are called Sparco and Evo; another reason to visit is the mind-blowing Kodava cuisine. **Left:** Onam *sadhya* at photographer Abhishek's home. **Facing page:** We wrapped up our drive with the most delicious Goan fare at the famous Mum's Kitchen in Panjim

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