

70 ON 70

As the Toyota Fortuner celebrates 10 years of dominance in India, we drive it to Kufri and Narkanda to check out the view from the top.

PHOTOGRAPHY ASHLEY BAXTER



SINCE ITS LAUNCH A DECADE AGO, THE TOYOTA FORTUNER HAS SET THE BENCHMARK FOR SUVs IN ITS SEGMENT.

can get the car to eat through continents. And that is what it is doing right now - consuming the NH7 kilometre by kilometre, and getting us closer to the quaint town of Renukaji.

The roads around Renukaji are a driver's delight, so we switch to Power mode, get pedal to meet metal, and enjoy the punch and throttle response that the refined motor delivers. If you ever find yourself en route Chandigarh from Auli, we'd recommend you spend some time at Renukaji and take in the endearing charm of the village where most places and establishments - from hotels to a lake - are named after its patron deity. As the road winds further up, we also reconfirm our earlier observation about the Fortuner being an agile customer; a car that feels pretty light on its feet and more willing to change direction than most SUVs. At the back, our companions are relaxed. The seats offer great shoulder, back and thigh support and the bolstering is especially good. The tall backrest in the second row deserves a special mention, and is among the reasons why the Fortuner is so good on long journeys. The Fortuner's on-road behavior has been impressive and its supple suspension has been able to dismiss several bad patches that have appeared ever so often on the road to Kufri.

Now, in 2WD, the Fortuner is a capable car, but what happens if we activate its 4x4 capabilities? That's what we did en route Kufri, as we safely moved off the highway towards a barren, rocky outcrop, homed in on a steepish incline and engaged L4 (or 4x4 Low). The next half an hour we spent in the Fortuner served to reinforce the view we have always had regarding it: should you ever have to take it to places that you normally wouldn't, you'd find that this Toyota is an accomplished off-roader as well. The Fortuner is equipped with a lot of off-road firepower such as Active Traction Control (A-TRC), Hill Assist Control (HAC) and its equally capable sibling Downhill Assist Control (DAC). A-TRC delivers extra traction to prevent wheels from spinning on slippery surfaces, while the HAC and DAC (as the names imply) assist the driver to tame steep slopes and relentlessly go up inclines.

Our off-roading jaunt means we drive into Kufri later than expected. It is evening, and a magical one. Golden sunlight bounces off the peaks, there is a chill in the air, and town's market is bustling. Kufri is famous as a skiing destination, but there are other delights too. The little village of Fagu, a quick drive away from Kufri, is one of them. Located off the Hindustan-Tibet Road, it



The Fortuner can swallow continents and keep going.

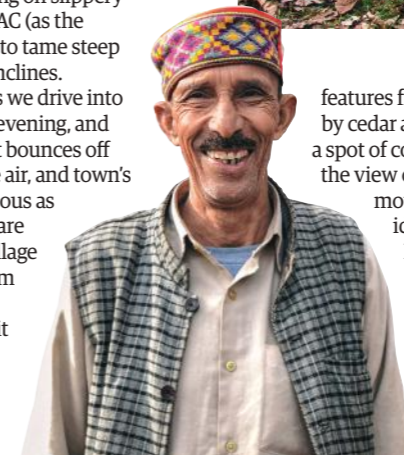


The Toyota Fortuner is an accomplished off-roader; switching modes is easy with the electronic 4x4.



features fruit gardens and is surrounded by cedar and spruce - just perfect for a spot of contemplation. Then, there is the view of the Mahasu Peak and other mountains nearby, which is the ideal salve for stressed souls. However, if you have a car as formidable as the Fortuner, you go further up from Kufri, to Narkanda.

Narkanda is a lot less touristy compared to Shimla, and the banks of the Tanu Jubbar Lake is an ideal place to while away time. But the best thing about Narkanda is the view it affords of the Pir Panjal range. One drives up to a good vantage point and surveys the scene; and there they are, majestic mountains all. Up there, unconquered, impregnable. Just like the Toyota Fortuner.



YOU'VE HEARD THE saying, it's lonely at the top. But we beg to differ. Being at the top - literally or figuratively - provides time for contemplation, to survey the lay of the land, and see how far one has come and how much farther one has to go. We are on one such journey right now, to Kufri and beyond that to Narkanda in Himachal Pradesh - places that have all the right ingredients to create such moments of clarity. And it is fitting that the car we are in is a Toyota Fortuner. Since its launch 10 years ago, the Fortuner has set the benchmark for SUVs in its segment and, not surprisingly, it has become one the most soughtafter and admired cars in India.

Driving up from Chandigarh, early in the morning towards Kufri in brilliant sunlight, it is clear why the Fortuner appeals to individuals and families alike. The SUV rides nice and high, the interiors exude quality, and the engine - in our car's case, the 2.8-litre diesel - feels like it



Making a splash in the Giri River, near Renukaji.

