

Going Grand

We take this legend, which has dominated the segment for the past decade, to meet another that has also stood the test of time

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I OFTEN WONDER WHY SO MANY OF US DON'T CONSIDER going on a road trip to exotic locales within India instead of spending a fortune travelling to foreign destinations. In fact, with the right approach and research, there are plenty of options within our vast country which are absolutely spectacular. So, we decided to take a road trip to one such lesser known but unbelievably beautiful destinations, Gandikota which is also known as the Grand Canyon of India.

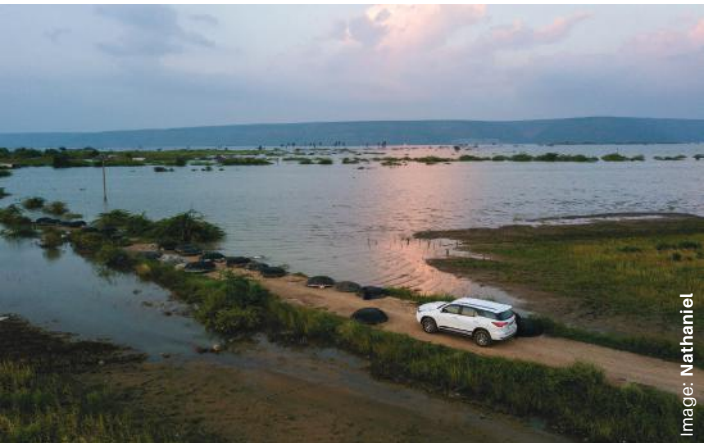
A drive this epic needs a vehicle that can live up to the challenge. And what better car than the Toyota Fortuner, which has been the benchmark for premium SUVs in India? No wonder, in the last 10 years it has sold over one lakh units, making it a conqueror of hearts and varying terrain. We picked up the diesel automatic version from Harsh Toyota, Anantapur, and set off towards our destination which is hidden in a tiny village in the Kadapa district.

I was particularly excited because of two reasons. Firstly, I had heard so much about the beauty and grandeur of the Gandikota region and it was heartening to know that it is still pretty much a virgin territory for

tourism. The area is also known as the Pennu Gorge as, over the centuries, the river Penna has been slicing through the hills to create this unearthly spectacle. The second reason... yes, you guessed it right, was having this mighty SUV as a companion on this adventurous trip.

The Fortuner not just wins your heart with its stylish design but, with its tough body-on-frame underpinning and exceptional torsional rigidity, has also become a household name for those who dare to explore the unknown. We got the impressively refined 2,755-cc diesel version which makes 177 hp and an astounding 450 Nm of torque. Yes, this is the six-speed automatic version which makes 30 Nm more than the manual gearbox variant and we weren't complaining at all. >





(Above) The Toyota at the lesser explored backwaters created quite splendid a sight

(Below) Maneuvering through the narrow gateway of Fort Gandikota was made easy by the Fortuner

Image: Nathaniel



Our destination was about 150 km away and we made most of the powerful engine on the well paved and wide roads of NH 44. After a while, we had to turn off the main highway towards a narrower road leading to Tadipatri. The road was fairly decent, peppered with occasional crowded village crossings, where it narrowed down even further. What you need to keep an eye out for are patches of broken roads and a few unmarked speed-breakers which might take you off-guard. Luckily, we had the Fortuner which brushed it all off without a stress.

We were setting the highway ablaze and soon closed in on the Kadapa region. There are several places of interest in the vicinity that you can explore. Like the Belum cave which is the second longest caves in India or the very serene Buddha statue. It was already late in the afternoon, so we decided to check out the lesser explored backwaters before the sun set. After having our fill of the scenic location, we called it a day and headed to the modest Andhra Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation (APTDC) guest-house. The rooms there were decent and food options limited, but it was good enough for us after a long day of driving and exploring dramatic photoshoot locations.

Next morning, we woke up around four o'clock and, after a quick tea, drove towards the unexplored territory to capture the sunrise in the wild. The good thing of being behind the wheel of an actual SUV is that you can pave your own road. And we did exactly that. I simply turned the knob to Low 4 and, like a pro, the Fortuner with its smart electronics clawed over rocks, crests, and even found traction in slush. While the robust suspension soaked all the beating, we remained cocooned in the comfort of the cabin. The seven-seater offers abundant space, has super supportive seats, and well-sorted driving dynamics; all of which make it perfect for an adventure drive like this.

After an hour's treacherous drive, we reached our location just in time to witness the sun emerge from behind the clouds and its golden hue light up the Gandikota gorge brilliantly. Absolutely surreal. This location reminds >

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you of great American Western classics and movies like *Mackenna's Gold*. Awe-inspiring, bold, and powerful are a few words that can describe Gandikota. And this robust SUV perfectly blended into this scenic landscape.

We were short on time and there was still a lot to discover. So, we got behind the wheel again and headed back to civilization and the tarmac that leads to the ruins of Fort Gandikota. This 12th-century fort is said to be the centre of power for numerous dynasties and its different architectural style adds to its beauty and heritage. For an SUV of this size, it was surprisingly easy to manoeuvre through the winding gateway, with less than an inch between the wing-mirrors and the fort's massive metal gates.

The ancient edifice is beautiful with a Charminar-like structure to greet you at the entrance, an intricately carved temple on one end and the grand Juma mosque on the other. There is even a massive granary which was used to store food for the soldiers and other inhabitants of the fort. There's something for everyone here.

(Left) There intricately carved temple mysteriously doesn't have any idols

(Below Left) There's even a mosque which highlights the diversity of our country

We walked around, soaking it all in and reflected on the splendid journey we had had thus far. The roads weren't forgiving but the Fortuner took everything in its stride. This drive was absolutely worth it. Roads and adventures like this are the natural habitat of this SUV. No wonder, it's been dominating the segment for a decade now.

Later we drove back to the Anantapur dealership, still wondering about the magnificent locales of Gandikota. This hasn't been an ordinary road trip, but a tale of two extraordinary legends coming together. **CAT**

