

F R O M D A W N

What makes the Toyota Innova Crysta
one of the highest selling MPVs in India? We
take it to the mountains to find out

T I L L D U S K

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THERE'S SOMETHING EXTREMELY SOOTHING about a roadtrip. Especially when you hit the road before daybreak and your journey is free from agonising traffic snarls. Be it through seamless highways or enigmatic mountain roads, the entire experience of driving towards a destination, feeling every bit of the car's behaviour while gazing at picturesque landscapes, is purely magical. That's what keeps us auto journalists going. For us, it's the only form of meditation. When we're not behind the wheel of a car, we're either caught up in a state of disarray trying to meet deadlines or planning our next journey. But the irony is such that even a fun roadtrip in India can be chaotic due to a number of reasons. No matter where you're headed, the essence of the journey is often spoilt by dreadful roads, unattended cattle and high decibel honking. If there's one place where you can hope for true calmness and joy while being on the road, is in your car's cabin. In fact, joy

is guaranteed if your steed for a roadtrip is something like the Toyota Innova Crysta. It has been India's go-to family car for almost 15 years and is one of the best long distance touring cars in our country.

With most parts of the country now engulfed in winter, it's a brilliant time for families to take time off their mundane schedules and head for a short vacation. We had the Toyota Innova Crysta at our disposal for a couple of days, and it was our chance too, to enjoy a rejuvenating roadtrip. Our destination this time was one of the most famous winter retreats in Maharashtra – the hill town of Mahabaleshwar. It's nestled amidst the densely forested parts of the Western Ghats and is one of the most sought after weekend getaways in Maharashtra – thanks to the splendid views it offers of majestic peaks and magnificent cascades, from its numerous viewing points. It's well-known for its strawberry farms too. The Mahabaleshwar-



Above: Picking aphrodisiacs is fun.
Right: The spacious middle-row is enjoyable.
Below: 17-inch rims on top spec ZX AT trim.

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Panchgani belt produces 85 per cent of the country's strawberries thanks to the cool climate and red soil of the region – making it suitable for growing the fruit.

So, without any further delay, we headed towards strawberry-land right before dawn in the Innova Crysta. We've done road trips in the Innova Crysta in the past and knowing that it's a great touring car, we were all looking forward to this road trip. Its cabin is welcoming and the neatly flowing lines surrounding the dashboard along with top notch fit and finish all around, render it an upmarket feel. The quality of materials is top-notch.

Mahabaleshwar is a short two-hour drive from Pune via the NH48, which is in poor condition in the aftermath of the incessant rainfall during this year's monsoon. But the Innova Crysta's tough body on frame construction and a suspension that's tuned for comfort gobbled up our pothole



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ridden roads easily. Its high ground clearance protects the underbody from any damage and a long wheelbase (2750mm) makes it more stable thanks to a larger footprint on the road. We reached Mahabaleshwar in less than two hours, with shutter-bug Sachin and film-maker Aditya asleep in the Innova Crysta's premium leather seats that provide lounge like comfort. The ambient lighting and the plush captain seats too make the Innova's cabin feel like a luxurious lounge.

Being a hill town, there's only a single-laned winding road leading to Mahabaleshwar that's often choked with commercial traffic. You really need to weave through slalom-like conditions to get past. Despite being over 4.7 metres long, the Innova Crysta felt easy to manoeuvre through crowded streets thanks to its short 5.4-metre turning radius, avoiding the need for three-point turns. In fact, the short turning radius is almost comparable to any regular B-segment sedan. I slotted the Innova into a tight parking space, outside the famous Bagicha Corner and before we savoured its famed strawberry with cream, we headed to a few strawberry farms nearby to ogle at the first fresh batch of the season being picked.

Every year, farmers start planting the saplings between June to September in the nurseries and land is prepared for harvest after the monsoons by fumigation, covering the fields with plastic sheets. The strawberry plants are then grown in rows or vertical stacks. During the harvest season, (December-March), the pickers store the fruits in boxes



From top: It's a long MPV, yet it handles like a car; A strawberry farm bed; 6-speed AT with sequential shift.
Facing page: Jaw-dropping sight of the Koyna backwaters.

and segregate them according to the quality of the fruit. You can try your hand at strawberry picking, with farmers giving you a bit of an education on cultivation techniques. It's a refreshing activity and definitely recommended for those who savour delicious strawberries, fresh off the farm.

After satiating our hunger with a luscious and sumptuous serving of strawberry with cream at Bagicha Corner we drove the Innova Crysta to some of the famous viewing points that this region is widely known for. With this, the Innova Crysta's ability to commute from point A to B in a hassle-free manner came to the fore. Its 2.8-litre diesel engine has proper punch – 172bhp and 360Nm of torque which is enough to hustle it eagerly, even while carrying seven to eight adults (and their baggage). Mated to a six-speed torque converter gearbox, the engine delivers power linearly and jerk-free gearshifts better the driving experience. We then climbed to Table Land, a plateau situated 4,500 feet above sea level that marks the highest point in Panchgani. Its dizzying height offers majestic views of the hills and valleys around. There's plenty to do here from horse riding to trekking to arcade games and at the end of it all you can crunch in to roasted corn as you enjoy the vistas.

But if you want to get away from madding crowds, head to Wilson's point. It's even higher and at over 4,700 feet offers magical views of the sunrise and sunset. The sky bursting into a myriad colours is a sight to behold. Getting to these viewing points can be a tricky affair though, as you have to drive past steep gravel and pothole ridden inclines. However, with solid low and mid-range torque always available on tap, the Innova Crysta was equipped to get us out of tricky situations. The hill start assist function worked wonders here, as it holds the brake for a few seconds longer after releasing the brake pedal, avoiding backward rolling. The top-end variant also gets as many as seven airbags, something that completes the equation for a buyer looking for a large, comfortable and feature laden family car.

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Left: Love snacking on the go? No problem.
Right: Infotainment system is intuitive.
Facing page top: Innova mastering the hill-climbs. **Facing page bottom:** Irresistible strawberries

Our short winter retreat was over at dusk and as I drove the Innova Crysta back to Pune, I realised how perfect it is for a country like India. We're a country where our family's needs are prioritised while buying a vehicle and the Innova Crysta fulfils all those needs and still pampers you with a host of creature comforts. That's precisely why the Innova has been ubiquitous around the country. You will spot even the older models frequently, having clocked lakhs of kilometres, doing duty in the harshest of terrain, in the remotest regions. Moreover, the Toyota Innova Crysta's SUV-like stance gives it great on-road presence and its practicality blended with premium features is simply unparalleled. It caters to the Indian buyer rather well by offering bulletproof long-term reliability and a high resale value. Few customers have even bought and sold the Toyota Innova Crysta at the same price after five years of ownership! No wonder Toyota has sold close to a staggering 2.5 lakh units since its launch in India in 2006. ☒

