

To the top of the world

Where mountain
meets cloud and
snow meets road.
We go on a very
TopGear holiday

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TopGear





WE'RE AT THE MCDONALDS; YOU'LL FIND it on the left" blurted a voice on the phone. We were making our way to Shimla from Delhi in a Mitsubishi Montero and were looking for our second car – a Mercedes R350. Some two hours later, we finally saw the McDonalds on the left.

Only this wasn't the one we were looking for. We were in Ludhiana, nowhere close to our intended direction of travel! Just the previous night we had been joking about how only an idiot could get lost from Delhi to Shimla. Little did we know it would come back to bite us in the derriere the very next day.

Here's a bit of background. After months and months of being stuck in Mumbai, we couldn't wait to get away. And when the opportunity came in the guise of Cougar Motorsport's Himalayan Dash, we didn't need to be asked twice. Cougar organises luxury driving holidays.

You may remember The Desert Dash from last year. This time it was the Himalayas. The expedition took us through the most picturesque locales with all the details taken care of.

Now, there's something about the Himalayas you can't resist. For some, it's about the picture postcard vistas, for others it's the snow. For us, it was the challenge. What challenge, you ask? One, we were going to pass one of the highest motorable roads in the world. And two, we were going to drive an R-Class through there and survive the thin air at 18000ft. Unforgiving rocky roads would challenge the cars to their limit. And the highest passes would put our bodies to the test. The 11-day drive started at Delhi and went through Shimla-Manali-Jispa-Sarchu-Leh-Hundar-Pangong-Leh-Mulbeg-Srinagar. We covered the expedition as a daily journal to give you a sunrise-to-sunrise account. ☺

DAY 1 Delhi to Shimla

Four states, six hours

Highest Elevation: 7,234ft

Altitude Sickness: None

Signboard of the day: Welcome to Ludhiana

So there we were at the hotel, waiting for our Mercedes GL to arrive. Our Mitsubishi Montero had arrived the day before. We got a call that the GL had a technical glitch so they were sending over the R-Class instead. So as soon as the R350 arrived, we hit the road. This day was a free run to Shimla, the convoy driving would only start the next day. But since the others had left early in the morning, we were comparatively late.

Delhi to Shimla is a fairly simple route. You take the GT Road to Chandigarh and start climbing towards Shimla from Panchkula. The R350 had zoomed ahead while we were fuelling up the Montero. We were to regroup at "the McDonalds". Only we never made it to the same one.

The first sign of trouble was when we saw an Audi showroom with a Ludhiana address. Google maps confirmed we were indeed in Ludhiana, some 70km from where we should have been. We turned the Montero around and started towards Chandigarh for the second time, only this time we paid attention.

In six hours, we had visited four states – New Delhi, Haryana, Punjab and Himachal. And it was well past 8pm when we entered Himachal. So much for the "specially organised wine tasting session" at the WildFlower Hall, Shimla. In fact, we missed dinner too. The R350 rolled in at a civilised 10.30pm. We on the other hand woke up the security guys at 1.45am. We wasted no time hitting the sack: we had to get on the road again at 9.00 the next morning.

DAY 2 Shimla to Manali

Lessons in driving etiquette

Highest Elevation: 11,500ft

Altitude Sickness: Mild headache

Signboard of the day: Hurry leads to worry

By 9.00am, lunches had been packed and luggage had been stowed away. We'd soon warmed up the cars too. We were heading to Manali. The drive would help get everyone accustomed to driving in a convoy and handling traffic on the hills. Some roads were not wide enough for even two cars. So

'In six hours, we had visited four states - New Delhi, Haryana, Punjab and Himachal.'

yielding, and sometimes even reversing for traffic was the order of the day; driving around the hills is all about mutual understanding. Uphill traffic usually has right of way. You get it. You've heard about 'live and let live', right? As long as you understand that, you're good. And don't forget to honk around the bends. The roads are narrow but mostly good.

Of course, the Montero was totally at ease whenever we had to take two wheels off the road to let a lumbering lorry pass. This was necessary to save the side-view-mirrors from scrapes. The R350 was doing well enough too, although you did have to watch out for the bigger rocks.

Every now and then, the lead car, C1, would stop for the convoy to regroup. This gave everyone a chance to take in the views and get some photos. The sweep car, C2, which travelled at the end of the convoy along with a service car and an ambulance, made sure everybody was on the correct road and also helped any car that needed assistance.

After one particular regroup, we encountered our first real hill descent. Signboards reminded drivers to check brakes and use only first gear. Both cars were put in manual and first gear was used all the way down. The roads became worse as we drove on and the rain added to our woes.

Acclimatisation is the key to surviving in the hills and everyone takes their own time to get used to the thinner air. In Mumbai, we're at sea level. Being suddenly subjected to the thin air of the hills had our bodies complaining immediately. It was nothing serious but some of us experienced mild headaches. We made it to Manali well in time at 7.00pm for a round of drinks and dinner.

DAY 3 Manali to Jispa

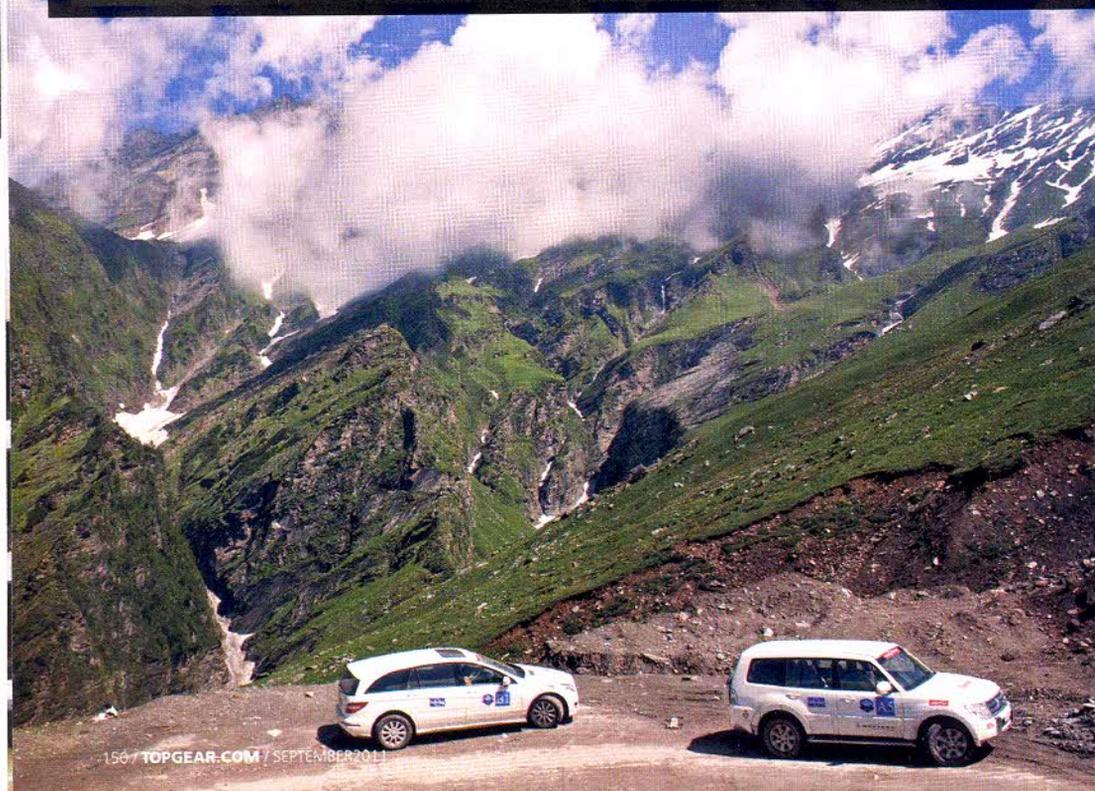
Time to make friends with the doctor

Highest Elevation: 13,050ft

Altitude Sickness: First symptoms of mountain sickness

Signboard of the day: Peep peep, don't sleep

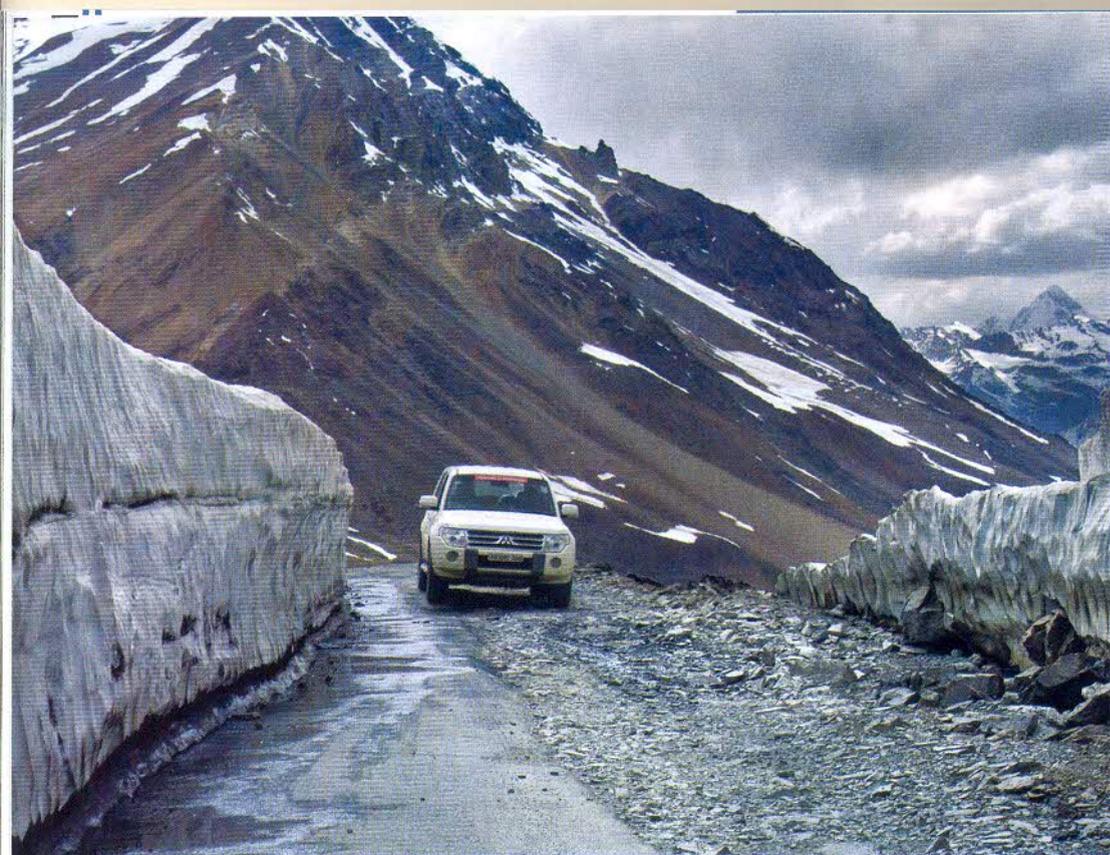
On day three, we were to take on the Rohtang Pass (13,050ft). If you came by yourself, you'd have to take one of those rickety Sumo cabs up to the pass. But Cougar Motorsport had organised permits for us so we could drive through it ourselves. We pulled out of the hotel driveway a little behind schedule. As we exited the commercial environs of Manali, we could see the snow-capped hills in the distance. The sight of white and black mountains and bright blue skies mesmerises you and makes you blank out about city life. Some of us are seriously considering



Near Rohtang what you can't see are the sick staffers



Nice and dirty, now that's how a Montero should always look



becoming monks. As the narrow road snaked through the sides of the mountains, traffic started piling up. And as luck would have it, traffic soon came to a standstill. We waited and waited but nothing seemed to move. Rohtang, by the way, means 'a pile of corpses'. Serving as a reminder to travellers about the many who have lost their lives here in the past. That's not what you want to hear

Rohtang means 'pile of corpses'. Not nice to hear when you're inching towards the edge of a cliff'

when you're inching towards the edge of a cliff trying to make way for a truck.

Even though traffic was not moving at all, my stomach had seen plenty of action. Until an important question hit me – where the hell do you find a toilet on the side of a mountain? You don't! When nature calls, it doesn't wait. And as it turns out, I'm nobody to question nature.

Some five hours later, we started crawling forward. But we were stopped again, this time by a 100 metre pit of slush. People weren't ready to cross it. But since our convoy was on a schedule, we had no choice. The Pajeros and other bigger vehicles crossed easily. The Montero made the slush look like a piece of cake. The R-Class was next. Suspension raised, we coaxed it into the pit. Wheels

spinning and continuous corrections at the steering wheel, the R-Class finally made it out of the pit. Who would've thought a posh Merc could get down and dirty? Sadly, I sat on meds in the C2 Pajero with the doctor through all this.

The roads were mostly bad but not unmotorable. Our next stop was Tandi, which had the last filling station for the next 365km. With the likes of the thirsty Range Rover and Landcruiser Prado in the convoy, this was an important stop. We made our way to Jispa and stayed at the Ibx hotel where most expeditions stop for the night.

DAY 4 Jispa to Sarchu

Sideways at 15,000ft...are ya scared?

Highest Elevation: 14,500ft

Altitude Sickness: Acute mountain sickness

Signboard of the day: Don't gossip, let him drive

The morning at Jispa started with a medical briefing. We were heading to Sarchu, a place famous for messing with travellers' bodies. We were told about the symptoms of altitude sickness and certain dos and don'ts for surviving at these high altitudes. Briefing over, we had some time to kill. So we decided to take the Montero down to the river to get some shots. The white waters and the dirty Montero made for some brilliant shots.

Pretty soon we were followed by a Pajero. But hidden silt in the riverbed caught it unawares and it started sinking. The Montero tried in vain to pull it out. The attitude indicator on the Pajero showed a massive 35-degree bank. We hurried up to a JCB digger for help. As he pulled the Pajero out like a little toy, the JCB driver boasted, "Yeh plastic ki gaadiyan pahado ke liye nahi hain (these plastic cars are not made for the mountains)". Of course, you don't argue with a man who has a JCB.

Starting towards Sarchu around 10.00am, driving through Baralacha La, our eyes popped when we saw





We just couldn't find a service station, so we took the Montero to the river for a wash.

cyclists going from Leh to Manali. We could barely walk and these guys were riding bicycles!

As with everything in the Himalayas, this drive was awesome. The beauty of this place is hard to explain in words. Rivulets with crystal clear water flowed across the road at regular intervals. Some were difficult to cross, and almost all the cars made it through without assistance.

As we neared Sarchu, the mountains opened up to meadows! Meadows at 14,500ft! We stayed at the Goldrop campsite. This high in the mountains, daylight can last almost up to 8 pm. So we made full use of the extra light for photography. The Montero drifting in the grass at this altitude and the biting cold made it quite a task for the photographers. After dinner, we lay down to admire the Milky Way in all its glory.

I have never seen a sky as clear as this, or as gloriously star-studded. By now, mountain sickness and insomnia were taking their toll on a lot of people. Some of us were really sick and had to be put on supplementary oxygen through the night. It was one of the most trying nights of the trip. Nobody said challenging Mother Nature was going to be easy. But thankfully, we were all well acclimatised by morning. Sarchu shocks your body, but eventually, your body learns to cope.

DAY 5 Sarchu to Leh

Altitude? What altitude...we're finally acclimatised

Highest Elevation: 17,582ft

Altitude Sickness: None

Signboard of the day: Be gentle on my curves

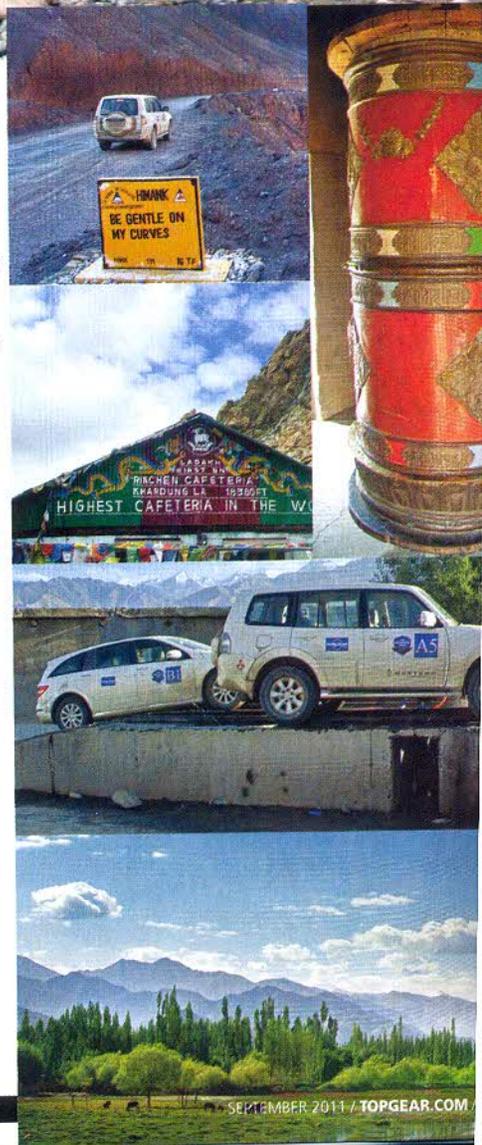
Leh is at around 9,000ft, so it was going to be a rest stop for our bodies once we got there. But before that we had to pass Nakeela Pass (15,547ft) and

Lachang La (16,600ft) and Tanglang La (17,582ft). These are some of the highest motorable passes in the world. Accuracy of the altitudes with respect to the highest motorable roads in the world is still being debated, though. The mountains mess with the scale in your head. Everything is huge here. The expanse that stretches out before your eyes reminds you how tiny you are in the scheme of things. You feel humbled and the sense of detachment from the world hits home. Rarely did we feel homesick in the mountains.

We passed multiple military convoys and were amazed by the work the Army does in these parts. They are the lifeline of the people here. Not only do they protect us, they really look after the locals. The Army runs schools, clears roads and provides help wherever they can. Without them, these places would be a lot more inhospitable. Leh is pretty much a military town; defence personnel are everywhere.

We woke up to a military transport aircraft roaring down the runway not far from our hotel. Leh thrives on tourism and after the devastating floods of last year, tourism has helped Leh get back on its feet. There are tourists everywhere. A bunch of them from Britain asked what *TopGear* was doing in the Himalayas.

There was a rest day scheduled at Leh. This meant we could unwind and explore the town. Since it happened to be the Dalai Lama's birthday, most of the markets were shut. Tibetan architecture is prominent here and there are lots



of places to see. Shanti Stupa, Thikse Gumpa and Shey palace are the major attractions. The next day was to be a short drive through the Nubra valley to Hunder.

DAY 6 Leh to Hunder

World's highest motorable road

Highest Elevation: 18,380ft

Altitude Sickness: Mild headache

Signboard of the day: It is not a rally, enjoy the valley

Hunder is like a desert with white sand and is known for its Bactrian camels. It is the only place in India where these double-humped camels can be found. These camels are said to have been introduced here by traders who travelled this route between Tibet and Turkistan.

Hunder isn't located at a very high altitude, but to get there we had to pass the mighty Khardung La, which at 18,380ft is said to be the highest motorable road in the world.

The roads are narrow and rocky; we traversed up the side of the mountains leaving peaceful Leh behind. Out in the distance, I spotted an Indian Airforce Antonov going about its business around the snow-clad mountains. Man, machine and nature in glorious harmony. As we made our way towards Khardung La, the roads turned narrower and rockier. And because of the military trucks coming down, this drive made for a very interesting experience. Once we reached Khardung La, we posed for customary photographs at the board announcing the achievement of being at the highest motorable pass in the world. Some of us went to the restaurant aptly named World's Highest Cafeteria for tea and a bowl of Maggie. There's also a souvenir shop that stocks Khardung La merchandise, if you're into that sort of thing.

By the time we were on our way down, I'd had enough; it was time to drive the Mercedes. I slipped into the driver's seat, put the car in Lift mode and rushed downhill. The R350 in the right hands is quite capable, and shamed quite a few of the SUVs on this drive. Slowly, the mountains opened up to the plains, with sand in the distance as we neared Hunder. At Hunder was another campsite. Camping in the middle of nowhere is huge fun. With the arrangements taken care of, we just needed to get there and enjoy the night.

DAY 7 Hunder to Pangong

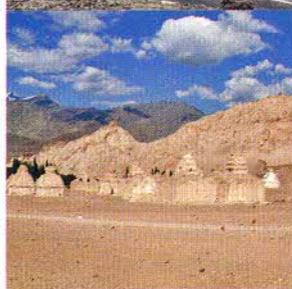
Have you ever seen something so beautiful?

Highest Elevation: 17,586ft

Altitude Sickness: None

Signboard of the day: Driving risky after whisky

The last time I saw Pangong was on television when I watched the film, *3 Idiots*, which featured a red Volvo XC90 V8 and Kareena Kapoor. This time, we were going there for real. Our Montero and R-Class, both under a nice layer of Himalayan dust, were itching to get to the Pangong Tso – Tso means lake. Pangong Lake is shared between India and China. It stretches for as far as the eye can see and the tranquillity and sheer combination of colours makes this one of the most beautiful places you've seen. Standing at the water's edge, gazing



'In the right hands, the R350 is quite capable and it shamed quite a few of the SUVs'

into the glass-like surface of the lake, the beauty of the whole thing takes your breath away. If you want to do some soul searching, come here. Most tourists do Leh-Pangong-Leh in a single day.

The previous night at Hunder, we voted on whether we should go through the Wari La Pass or come back through Leh and towards Pangong. We decided to do Hunder-Leh-Pangong, since we were sure of the road conditions. Our route through Leh would take us through Chang La (17,586ft). The roads are horrible, the Mercedes does scrape the underbody, but the 4matic helps the R350 grip and make its way up to Chang La. The Indian Army, which has a post there, serves complimentary tea to

travellers and also has a souvenir shop.

The road as it nears Pangong becomes a treat to drive on – just watch out for those unmarked dips designed to let water flow as the snow melts; they pop out of nowhere. We made the most of the lovely weather with drinks and sumptuous food as we retired for the night.

DAY 8 Pangong to Leh

Back under the eye of the armed forces

Highest Elevation: 17,586ft

Altitude Sickness: None

Signboard of the day: Drive on horsepower, not rum power

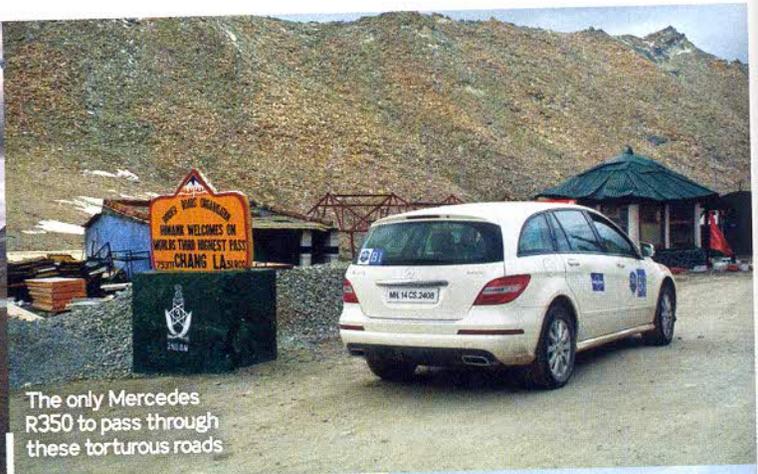
This day, we were driving back to Leh for our night stopover. Since it wasn't a very long drive, we decided to stick around at the campsite for a while longer and bask in the sun. We finally drove out at 12pm. As we drove on the now familiar road, we spotted many yaks grazing lazily. Some of them even posed for photographs. If you're feeling touristy, you can even pay the caretakers to ride a yak. As we started climbing back towards Chang La, the weather started closing in. And the overcast skies opened up. As the altitude rises, the rain drops

Important for the mountains

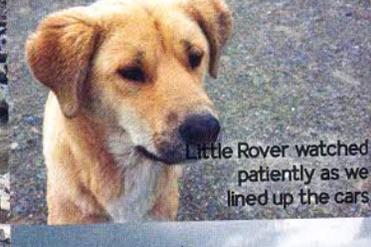
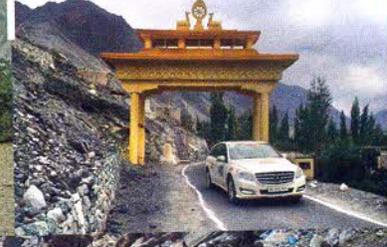
Mountain sickness is an illness that affects mountain climbers, hikers, skiers, and travelers at high altitude (typically above 8,000 feet or 2,400 meters). It is due to a combination of reduced air pressure and lower oxygen levels at high altitudes. The faster you ascend to a high altitude, the more likely you are to get acute mountain sickness. The symptoms generally associated with moderate acute mountain sickness include fatigue, dizziness, headaches, nausea, shortness of breath and rapid pulse. Early diagnosis is important. Acute mountain sickness is easier to treat in the early stages. The main treatment for all forms of mountain sickness is to climb down (descend) to lower altitude as rapidly and safely as possible. You should not continue climbing until symptoms develop. Take the doctor's advice before any further ascent.

Himalayan Dash





The only Mercedes R350 to pass through these torturous roads



Little Rover watched patiently as we lined up the cars



This is for the JCB driver who mocked us at Jispa

