

SOUTHERN SOJOURN

The Audi A6 was our car of choice for a highly relaxing getaway to Karnataka, Kerala and, on the way back, Goa

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LAST MONTH DURING THE Diwali week I decided to take a break and go down south over the long weekend. Even though I drive and test cars day in and day out I like to drive to the destination rather than fly and then get driven in some stinky cab driven by somebody who can't drive to save his own life. But there is one condition to my driving: the car has to be very good. Like most of the time the press department at Audi came to my rescue and lent me an Audi A6 for the drive.

Whenever I do a long drive I like to leave home very early to avoid the local traffic that one encounters up to Kolhapur. After setting the alarm for 2.00 am it was exactly 3.00 am when we drove out of the gate. Driving in the dark is not a problem thanks to the brilliant Matrix headlamps of the A6. The condition of the road up to Satara leaves much to be desired because there are a number of diversions. I had to take it easy but still I managed to make it to Kolhapur in less than three hours. Once you enter Karnataka the road gets much better and the quantum of traffic drops. This is where the A6 comes into her own as she stretches her legs and starts cruising between 160 and 180 km/h with the tachometer reading between 2,000 and 2,300 rpm in seventh gear.

The A6 is such a voracious mile-muncher that before >



A rather isolated reception and dining area at Jungle Hut, Masinagudi



Spotted deer or chittal grazing by the road in Bandipur; this picture and, in fact, all the pictures here, except for the tigress, have been clicked from the A6



A tigress cools off fresh from a mud bath

A curious denizen of the mongoose family

A mother elephant and her young casually grazing

A stork on the lookout for breakfast

A rare sighting of a pair of sloth-bears, again, shot from the A6 while on the main road



My personal Jungle Hut in the middle of the wilderness



Through the tea plantations between Masinagudi and Wayanad

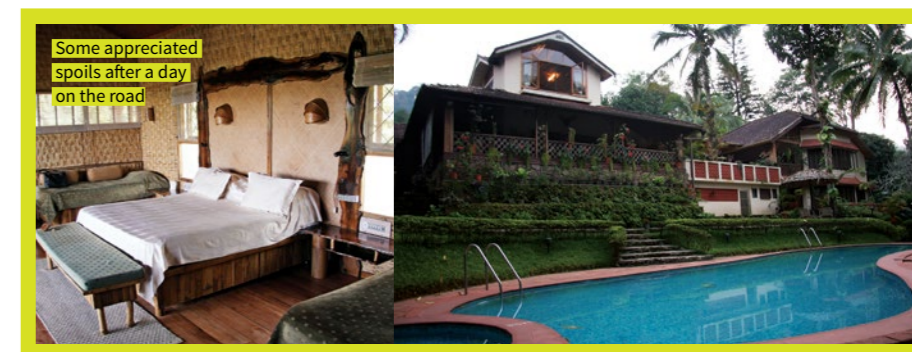


Tranquility in every sense: out of the A6 and into Tranquil Resort

I realised we were on the Hubli bypass at 7.15 am. The car continued gobbling up kilometre after kilometre and the next thing I knew was that the navigation system was asking me to get off the highway at Sira and head towards Mysuru. Instead of doing that I ignored the navigation and headed towards Bengaluru. Later on I realised that it was a mistake. The road from Sira to Mysuru is a single-lane one but 80 km shorter than the one I had taken. The drive was good till I got off the nice road as I had covered 850 km in eight hours and 15 minutes. The moment I got

on to the Bengaluru-Mysuru highway there was heavy traffic for the next 40 to 45 km. The Mysuru bypass is ready so you don't get the city traffic as the ring road joins up near the airport. The drive from Mysuru to Masinagudi is very relaxing as you drive through the Bandipur and Madumalai forest reserves. As we were driving through, we spotted bison, a mother elephant and her calf, herds of spotted deer and a pair of sloth bears. All the wildlife pictures were taken from the A6 except the tiger's, which was photographed from a

Gypsy during the jungle safari. After driving non-stop for 12 and a half hours, I reached Jungle Hut in Masinagudi at 3.30 in the afternoon. This was my third visit to Masinagudi and Jungle Hut. I love this place because you can drive up and down through the forest reserve up to 8.30 in the evening and get to see a lot of fauna along the road. The Jungle Hut resort is a fabulous place to stay. There is a personal touch to it because the owners, Anushree and Vikram, personally take care of the day-to-day running of the resort. The rooms are very nice, clean and comfortable and the atmosphere is warm. The best part is that the quality of the food is very good: everything is home-made from their pickles to preserves and they even bake their own bread. The second stop was Tranquil Resort at Wayanad, a distance of 110 km from Jungle Hut and seven km from Sultan Battery. This 110-km drive from Masinagudi is very picturesque as you drive through the bamboo >



Some appreciated spoils after a day on the road



St Thomas Cathedral at Sultan Battery



The Tree Villa: a more exclusive and secluded homestay in the heart of it all

forest and then take a right turn at Gudalur. Once you exit Gudalur, the landscape changes. Now you see the hilly terraces of tea plantations and the winding road through the mountains is just breathtaking. The drive was very relaxing as I was just trundling along and enjoying the scenery. After the 1,100-km-long non-stop drive from Pune to Masinagudi this 110-km two-hour drive felt like just going round the corner.

The Tranquil Resort is located on a 400-acre coffee plantation. They say it is a home stay but, frankly, it is as good as any five-star resort. The Tree Villa that I stayed at was beautiful; in fact, the whole property is in pristine shape right from the rooms, the manicured gardens, the swimming pool to the dining area. They have quite a few walking trails that you can trek up to on the property. One needs to take these walks after the amount of food one consumes as the quality and taste is to die for. The spread is so vast that by the time you have tasted most of the dishes you have overeaten. What makes Tranquil Resort that extra special is the fact that Nisha and Ajay look after it like their own home and literally



A choice of a clean ocean, or a clear-water pool



Arriving at Neelashwar Hermitage



The Audi A6 takes a breather by the Arabian Sea



Old-school cottage accommodation at Neelashwar Hermitage, complete with the thatched straw roof



One of the houseboats from Neelashwar Hermitage is a luxury abode in itself



A Brahmini Eagle assesses the new entrants

welcome you like a family member. The staff is very polite. If you are looking for a relaxing getaway then Tranquil Resort is a must on your bucket list.

After visiting a wildlife resort and a coffee estate it was now time for some relaxation on the beach and houseboat at the Neelashwar Hermitage in north Kerala. After a nice breakfast of bacon and eggs I loaded up the A6 for the 220-km journey from Tranquil Resort to Neelashwar. The A6 was ready for the drive as I had tanked her up in Mandya just before Mysuru. A small tip: whenever you are driving make sure that you fill up the tank when you see a big petrol pump. The quality of fuel tends to be better when you are close to a big town or city rather than a small shady pump in the wilderness where you can end up getting kerosene instead of diesel.

They said that it would take anywhere from >

five-and-a-half to six hours to complete the 220-km journey. The A6 is equal to its task whether it is a four-lane highway or a single-lane state highway. Overtaking on the single roads was a breeze as the two-litre TDI engine has more than enough grunt to overtake other traffic on the road. The drive from Tranquil to Neelashwar is quite pleasant as you have greenery all round; indeed, most of Kerala is green. Contrary to earlier estimates, I was in Neelashwar in four and a half hours.


The Neelashwar Hermitage is a bespoke resort right on the beach. It has 18 rooms and you also have the option of spending a couple of nights on the houseboat. After checking in I was taken to my room which had all the luxuries. Again the quality of food was excellent. In fact, there is an option of two restaurants to choose from. The bedroom on the houseboat was as good as any five-star room. The cruise along the river and backwaters is extremely relaxing and is a fantastic way to spend the day. These backwaters are not as crowded as those in Allepy. If you want to relax, take a dip in the sea or spend a couple of nights floating on the backwaters in a houseboat, then you have to visit the Neelashwar Hermitage which is located 80 km south of Mangaluru.

I had the option of driving back to Pune or spend the night in Goa. I chose the latter as I did not want to miss out on two meals at Martin's Corner. The distance from Neelashwar to Martin's is 440 km on the NH 17. After

two days of relaxation it was time to hit the road. To make life easy I set the navigation for Martin's. After calculating the route it said it would take close to nine hours but I knew that it could be done in six and a half hours. It was 5.45 in the morning when I get the wheels of the A6 rolling to make it in time for lunch at Martin's. Within an hour and 15 minutes I had covered more than 80 km and was past Mangaluru before the local traffic took to the road. Given the A6's ability to consume miles rapidly, it was time to tank her up and it so happened there was a petrol pump with a Café Coffee Day. Some diesel for the car and some coffee in my tank and we were on our way again.

Most part of this road is a dual carriageway though very shortly it will become a four-lane highway. Even with a few diversions the road surface was quite good. It was 12.45 when I checked in at the Allila Diva; the total driving time being slightly over six and a half hours.

After a couple of good meals at Martin's Corner and a good night's rest the A6 and I were back on the road at 6.15 am the next day for the final dash to Pune. The road from south Goa up to the Amboli Ghat was very good except for some small patches in the mountain section. The stretch between Amboli and Ajra was quite bad, once past Ajra it is very good up to Satara. From

Satara all the way to Pune there are a number of diversions and that slows you down. Nevertheless, I still managed to make it home in seven hours from south Goa. As I turned in at the gate the trip meter reading was 2,398 km and the A6 had returned 11 km/l during this drive. The drive was very enjoyable as it was completely trouble-free. All that I did was fill diesel and clean the car. If you own cars like the A6, take them on long drives and enjoy them. 



Overtaking on the single roads was a breeze as the two-litre TDI engine has more than enough grunt



A fisherman on his way home after a day out on the backwaters