

'DRIVING WITH WHISKEY VERY RISKY'

Road signs that litter the Himalayan range in the Garhwal region in Uttarakhand provide much comic relief to tourists

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'Peep. Peep. Don't Sleep! No, that wasn't a wake-up call. But then again it could well have been one.

'Love is like the mountains: hard to conquer but once you get there the feeling is wonderful.'

'Still struggling to figure out what this is all about?'

'Be gentle on my curves'

'This is a highway, not a runway'

Yes, we are talking about the road signs that stud the mountain roads that snake through the Himalayan ranges of the Garhwal region in Uttarakhand. These little punctuations, quirky, brilliant, amusing and at times tortured, served as a pleasant distraction as we drove through some of the most spectacular terrain that comes with the holy Char Dham yatra of Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath in the far reaches of the state.

Indeed, the pilgrim trail, considered one of the most holy by Hindus, took us through an ever-changing tapestry of stunning vistas: deep river gorges, rocky cliffs, dense and mysterious pine forests, green meadows, terraced farmlands rippling like waves up mountain slopes, flowering valleys, silvery waterfalls... Ever so often we would pull up on the side of the road and admire nature's grand canvas... unvarnished and unspoilt with not a dhaba or even a makeshift toilet. The cloud-shrouded mountain scape of intersecting green valleys, terraced fields and the occasional village seemed to teeter on a thrusting ridge.

To quote one of the road signs: "The mountains are a pleasure only if you drive at leisure." And another sign invited us to "find peace in the hills of Garhwal." But the one we loved was: "No race, no rally. Enjoy the beauty of the valley."

Others were more direct and dire. "Speed thrills, but kills." While yet another advised: "Drive. Don't fly." One warned: "Driving with whiskey very risky." One argued: "Better to be late than Mr late," while one even appealed to our emotions with: "I like you but not when you speed." There were also the odd obscure rhyme. It read: "Avoid hurry, curry and worry. No heart attacks." Where exactly does the curry fit in, we wondered?

Apparently the landscape of heart-stopping beauty also inspired a few ecological appeals that were aimed at preserving the environment. These included one that read: "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now."

Most of these little gems were put up by the Border Road Organisation (BRO) that had carved out these roads through some of the most treacherous terrain imaginable. Indeed, some of them were endearingly self-laudatory like: "We go where angels dare" and "Natural calamities are no more a challenge for the BRO." The latter, of course, referred to the frequent landslides that plague this region.

We suspect some of the signs, especially those close to the pilgrim sites, were the result of those stirred by a spiritual high. For how else do you explain a sign that reads: "May God shower his blessings on you."

Some of the signs in this genre unfortunately were so lengthy that there was no way we could read them through as our vehicle cruised by. As a result 'The true secret of happiness...' remains a secret.

That aside, we suspect the BRO and others responsible for these delightful signs were just having a little fun while dreaming up these cautionary warnings. And the strategy apparently worked for it had us moving at the languid pace of mountain time, looking out to see what the next bend had to offer. Yes, the BRO had succeeded in getting their message across, couched in humour.

TRAVEL

Going off track

Those who go off the beaten track, write for us.



(Below) The magnificent view of the Char-dham temple spier at sunrise

