

Preconceptions

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05/07/2017 Hypothetically, you aren't needed for the school run for at least another week. Would you challenge your Porsche Cayenne S E-Hybrid to an all-seasons adventure? Subject it to river crossings, challenging off-road and high altitude abuse? Would you do it in the remote frontiers of Pakistan? Well, why not?

It is perhaps human nature to have preconceptions about, well, just about any subject you care to mention. But changing commonly held but uninformed, negative or even false views can often be somewhat of a difficult challenge. The American author Jessamyn West succinctly defined this problematic issue as "We want the facts to fit the preconceptions. When they don't it is easier to ignore the facts than to change the preconceptions." Challenging multiple preconceptions simultaneously is therefore an even greater endeavour requiring unwavering determination from the get-go, as even the faintest whiff of failure will compound previous negative beliefs.

Porsche Centre Lahore, however, did not even consider shying away from collaborating with Cynthia

Ritchie - a former Goodwill Ambassador to Pakistan - and local travel management company - Adventure Travel Pakistan - on a mission to capture "the true spirit of Pakistan" with a trip to the northern region of the country. With a decidedly narrow minded, one dimensional view of the region generally presented by the media, Ritchie's intention to highlight Pakistan's beauty, vibrance and devotion to hospitality and capture it in a documentary series would hopefully promote Pakistan's extreme northern areas as tourist friendly and an exciting holiday destination while also helping to provide a softer image of the country.

The vehicles to explore 'the roof of the world': Cayennes

The Porsche connection - and the reason for Porsche Centre Lahore's involvement - would be to provide technical assistance and support, as the chosen vehicles to explore 'the roof of the world' and tackle the last frontiers of Pakistan would be Cayennes. And Ritchie would also be joined by a group of Porsche enthusiasts challenging their own cars to some of the toughest geography, changeable weather conditions and highest traversable altitudes that Pakistan has to offer.

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While it is universally accepted that Porsche imbue all of its models with its race-car DNA, it is perhaps natural that the off-road ability and rugged durability of the Cayenne is often overlooked. For despite the countless hours, days and weeks of demanding off-road testing that is an integral part of the Cayenne's development, it's a fair assumption that the majority of owners will never subject their Porsche to the hardships of serious off-roading.

"What happens if the batteries get wet?"

For the Porsche enthusiasts accompanying Cynthia Ritchie in their own vehicles, this would be the first time they had subjected their luxury SUVs to such a gruelling off-road adventure. With the prospect of the many demanding days that lay ahead, concerns were naturally voiced about the capabilities of their vehicles. Especially since the collected models were in-fact Cayenne S E-Hybrids and many obstacles would need to be navigated, including multiple river crossings. "What happens if the batteries get wet?" was a reasonable sounding concern asked by more than one owner before departure...

It's standard operating procedure in extreme conditions like these to always be ready for any scenario, and Porsche Centre Lahore - in its role as technical support - naturally prepared for a multitude of 'what if?' situations as a precautionary measure. Confidence in the collected vehicles ability to perform - even in such varied and extreme conditions - was high however, and after an inspection, the only modification made to each Cayenne before setting off was to change the standard equipment spark plugs. Again, this was more of a precautionary measure addressing concerns about the lower grade fuel that would be the only option for the team while venturing deeper into the more remote regions.

If any individual member of the team was under an illusion about how challenging the road - and off-road - that lay ahead was, the first two days after departing Lahore must surely have been an eye opener. Lahore, at a lowly altitude of about 210 metres and cooking in its sweaty melt-pot of 46 degree summer heat, was soon exchanged for -12 degrees at an altitude of 4,580 metres. And this, a mere 48 hours into an eight day and 5,000 kilometre adventure, was but a taste of what was to come.

The convoy had to deal with four seasons in one day

Often, the convoy of Cayennes had to deal with four seasons in one day and altitude shifts from valleys, to plains, to mountains. But it is perhaps necessary to emphasise Pakistan's unique geography here to better understand the scale of this undertaking. The enchanting Skardu Valley, situated at the confluence of the River Shagar and River Indus, is indeed picturesque and features a beautiful lake. It also happens to be the main expedition hub and mountaineering base in the region as it is the gateway to four of the world's 14 peaks with an altitude over 8,000 metres and summits in the 'death zone'. It may be a valley, but it is a valley at an altitude of 2,500 metres. Yet even here, in this remote frontier world of Pakistan with a population of probably only 500 people, the Cayennes and their occupants were greeted by children shouting "Porsche! Porsche! Porsche!" reinforcing Ritchie's assertion of the northern region's devotion to hospitality.

The team then travelled on to the Deosai Plains. Again, a slight recalibration of the brain is needed to compute the scale of this terrain. Deosai Plains in Urdu translates as 'The Land of the Giants' and it is the second highest plateau in the world after Chang Thang Plateau in Tibet. With an average elevation of 4,114 metres above sea level and only accessible during a few summer months, its altitude and remoteness has been capitalized on and it is now a National Park and Himalayan Brown Bear reserve. Several of these endangered animals - thought to be the source of the legend of the Yeti - have now witnessed a convoy of Cayenne Hybrids traversing their protected habitat on their way to conquer the Karakoram Mountains...

These majestic mountains - a part of the complex ranges from the Hindu Kush to the Himalayan Range - are the home to K2, the second highest mountain on earth. Here lies the Karakoram Highway, but it is not a road for the faint hearted. Vehicle fatigue here - especially with forced induction engines - is commonplace. This is one of the highest roads in the world, links Pakistan to China and took twenty years to construct yet still gets sections regularly knocked out with landslides. This leads on to the Khunjerab Pass - which is known as "The Edge of Pakistan" - and is the highest paved international border crossing in the world at 4,693 metres and the highest point on the Karakoram Highway. No Porsches would be crossing on this trip, but it was not the end of the adventure.

The cars persevered without incident

Countless other landscapes were explored including the Hunza Valley, along the River Indus on the legendary Silk Route and on to what must have been one of the highlights of the journey, Jaglot.

Geographically, Jaglot is the junction between the three great mountain ranges in the world. It is here that the Himalayas, the Karakorum and Hindu Kush converge. Grand and spectacular scenery to be conquering in the comfort of a luxury SUV, and yet - despite the quite natural trepidations of the owners in subjecting their vehicles to these challenging conditions - the cars persevered without incident.

It may still take many years before the international preconception of Pakistan changes and it becomes an adventure destination in the eyes of travellers looking to explore the beautiful remote landscapes it has to offer. But what is now in no doubt is the ability to traverse its splendid geography in a Porsche. As Alan Alda once said, "Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in a while, or the light won't come in."

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