

AN OASIS OF LUXURY

WE DRIVE THE XC60 TO
NARENDRA BHAWAN, A LUXURIOUS
BOUTIQUE HOTEL IN BIKANER

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The word luxury seems to be losing its charm these days. Anything from a phone to a sofa could be luxurious, and while I understand it may be possible as an exception, I think luxury is going down the 'awesome' or 'brilliant' route where mundane things are also called awesome or brilliant. We could blame it on the laziness of the current generation or just bad language, but I feel it is more since people don't actually get to experience real luxury. And I found just the right place to go to, in the right car.

Rajasthan has been the home of luxury in India I feel. Yes, there were kings and palaces all over India but the

splendour and luxury that you get to see in Rajasthan is unparalleled. The conversion of old palaces into hotels was taking Rajasthan the 'awesome' way, but if you skip the regular hotspots like Jaipur and Udaipur, you can find luxury how the kings meant it to be. My destination, Narendra Bhawan, is the home of the last reigning king of Bikaner HH Narendra Singh. Like all the kings in Rajasthan, HH Narendra Singh had a couple of palaces (Laxmi Niwas Palace, one of them is about two-km from Narendra Bhawan) but Narendra Bhawan was his home. A pretty big difference, then, and now, if you see both the properties,



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The thing that Volvo does oh-so-well nowadays is the balancing act between minimalism and opulence. A solid case in point is this, the XC60

Since we were heading out in search of luxury, the ride for this trip had to be luxurious. Again, luxury not in the sense of faux wood on the dash or quilted leatherette seats but luxury the way it is meant to be. I don't think there is anything better than the XC60 in its segment and the 1000 km return trip only proved me right. The route we took to Bikaner was part NH and part SH, but there was hardly a stretch which I could call bad. The 234 bhp and 48 kgm motor in the XC60 was more than sufficient for our trip and the levels of refinement on the XC60 are pure luxury. Even at higher speeds, you can barely hear anything inside the cabin. There are four driving modes to choose from and even in Dynamic, which lowers the ride height and stiffens the car, the car is calm and composed. It might sound difficult to believe, but we were in Bikaner in time for lunch having left Delhi at 6am amidst considerable fog.

Just like the XC60 transports you from one place to another in luxury, walking in to Narendra Bhawan transports you into a different era. While the building is not too old, it reflects the traditional architecture of the havelis of Rajasthan, complete with red sandstone and *jharokhas*. You are welcomed at the

Gaushala, an al fresco sitting area, to a rather loud trumpet, which is a tribute to the erstwhile king's love for animals. The only animals around are three very well-mannered Golden retrievers and one hyper Golden Retriever puppy, all of whom are unbelievably cute. Walk in and you are bound to be amazed at the eclectic vibe the place has — there is symmetry in everything and yet nothing conforms. Try thinking red piano, antique furniture, mirrors, vases, ornate tables, chandeliers and a billiards table — words don't do justice to the décor but it whispers luxury, in a very dignified manner, like you would expect in the home of a king and not a hotel.

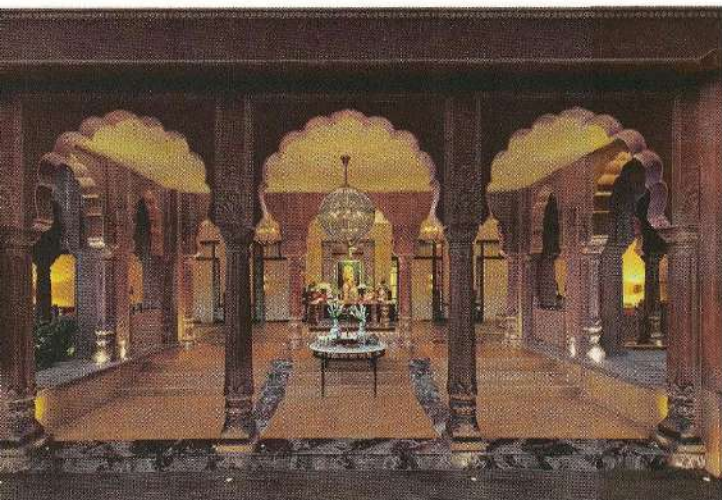
If you are lucky, like we were, to meet Karan Singh Vaid, President-MRS Group (who own and run Narendra Bhawan, Laxmi Niwas Palace and Suryagarh in Jaisalmer) you will understand why Narendra Bhawan is what it is. A thorough gentleman, with the wit and panache fit for a king, Karan is responsible for bringing the life of HH Narendra Singh to, er, life at Narendra Bhawan. Be it the suites like India, Republic or the Diwali Chowk (a huge courtyard on the second floor or the infinity pool at the terrace, everything has been done keeping in mind



B&W will keep you entertained for hours



Large, chunky wheels to fit the car's profile



Narendra Bhawan's main objective is to swathe you in luxury



Question is: does that piano have an invisible player as is fashionable now?

It's the last home of HH Narendra Singh, king of Bikaner

Karan's philosophy of offering guests an unforgettable luxury experience. The newly opened spa, called The Clinic, is one experience you must have while at Narendra Bhawan. Each spa session has a chant playing while your session is on and as Karan explained to me, during the session you hear a different chant playing while in reality it is the same chant. The chant you hear is what your subconscious wants you to hear and is a personal chant; no two people hear the same chant. Now that is what words like amazing and brilliant are meant for.

The interiors of the XC60 are also a place where these two words live up to their meaning. The seats are best in the business, thanks to orthopedically designed contours and high-quality Nappa leather and luxury is pretty much the theme across the cabin. High quality knurled knobs, drift wood inlays with ash finish, chrome and piano black finish are all used to good effect. The front seats are powered and come with an extra cushion that extends to



One of the highlights of Narendra Bhawan is the spa. An absolute must-visit to calm your nerves

The XC60 transports you from one place to another in resplendent luxury



offer more under thigh support. But that would be pretty standard, right, and since we are talking about luxury here, the XC60 front seats are ventilated plus come with a massage function. The rear seats are a good place to be as well, with more than sufficient head room and legroom. Air suspension which is standard on the XC60 takes care of the many speed bumps you meet on

the drive to Bikaner, with total ease. The fantastic Bowers & Wilkins music system adds to the luxury environment and long hours in this cabin don't seem too long.

The three days we spent on this trip were luxury at its finest. Not opulent or over the top, but designed to make you feel special and happy. The XC60 offers everything you want in a luxury car

with a performance you can enjoy without throwing passengers or luggage around and Narendra Bhawan is the destination you would want to come back to again and again. Driving 1000 km, listening to a fantastic music system and not feeling tired when you reach. Staying three days at the home of an erstwhile king, where you are treated like a king. Now, that is real luxury. ■

