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FREEWHEELING

Top billing for safety

There's no leap of faith required for driving a Volvo XC60



:: MERAJ SHAH

"Oh, you came in a Volvo?" asks the hotel manager, and nods approvingly. "It's the most comfortable and convenient way to get here." The gentleman assumed we had ridden in on the popular buses, but I couldn't agree more: over the 10 hours we took to drive from Delhi to Kangra Valley in Himachal Pradesh, the weather turned quite turbulent. Outside the cocooned cabin of the Volvo XC60 – the heavens issued thunderous proclamations; the drizzle snowballed into pelting rain. It all seemed very grand, a spectacle to mar-

vel at, when ensconced in the XC60's plush seats – our tired backs being gently kneaded by the in-built masseuse, and the perforated leather sending warm air trickling up our shirts. By the time the weather cleared, we'd made it through the plains and climbed to Bir near Billing – within striking distance of the 'Lesser Himalayas'.

That unflattering moniker only makes the Dhauladhar Range even more astonishing to behold. Gobs-macked, you crane your neck to look at this wall of ice that appears to rise out of thin air as you enter Kangra Valley. From most corners of the valley, including the Pong Dam, these guardians of the galaxy are omnipresent. It gets warm enough to swim in the dam – a surreal experience with snow-covered peaks dominating the horizon.

In the upper reaches lies a cluster of villages – collectively referred to as Bir, Billing – one of the world's premier pa-

ragliding sites. In the news for a spate of accidents in the last two years, the skies above Bir are perpetually aflutter with colourful gliders taking visitors on joyrides. I decide to take a preliminary lesson instead of taking a 'tandem' flight yoked to a pilot. After the lesson, I'm told a fortnight-long course is all it takes to become a pilot and that after a bit of practice, I can apply for a tandem licence – I thank my instinct for not entrusting my life to someone else.

But I have no such qualms when it comes to the XC60: this mid-sized SUV from the Swedish manufacturer with a reputation for safety takes responsibility when it comes to keeping occupants out of harm's way. And that means taking decisions, whether it's adding a coffee shop to the mapped route or sounding out alarms when the car's sensors detect stationary vehicles or pedestrians who might suddenly walk in front of the car. Just in case you're not paying attention, or, worse

still, have fallen asleep at the wheel, then the XC60 will brake itself to avoid what it senses might be an imminent collision.

On a subliminal level, the car adds braking in case it senses the amount applied by you is inadequate.

If it sounds like I'm gushing, then that's because I am – in our country, we drive on the world's most dangerous roads and we may need all the help we can get. The XC60 certainly makes a fine case for itself, but perhaps not all of us can afford one. But let's not dither about spending a bit more if it means more air bags, better headlamps and more technology in a new car. Wouldn't that would be the wrong compromise to make?

The author makes a living chronicling his experiences on the road, shooting videos and writing on auto, travel and golf. When not roving the globe, he lives in Delhi with a motorcycle named Blue