



Backbreaking though it might be, the Rickshaw Challenge is an adventurous way to see India, finds out DIANA FERNANDES

Come April, and don't be surprised at the sight of sudden explosion of garish and cheery-looking rickshaws when the tut-tuts take over the roads in Goa for the fun 'race' the Rickshaw Challenge.

Each year, participants have to take on five different challenges through the year. Each challenge can range from three to nine days. The first of this year's challenges is the seven days 'Malabar Rampage' that covers the Malabar coast passing through Kerala, Karnataka and Goa. The total distance the crazy rickshaw riders will cover is 1,100 km. But organisers say the pleasant weather this time of year will make the ride very, very enjoyable.

Organised by the Chennai Events Management Services (CEMS), the novel adventure filled race was started in 2006 to get foreigners to experience all that coastal India has to offer.

"Most ideas of travel in India for Westerners centres around Taj Mahal tours and the Himalayas. While those are also dynamic destinations, few realise just how incredible and vastly unique South India is, especially when viewed from the driver's seat of an autoricksha," says Aravind Bermanandam who conceived the unique challenge of a ride one day. The NRI runs an internet marketing company in Budapest.

But why a rickshaw? Guy Zucker, challenge manager says "the rickshaw is a unique mode of transportation, especially with foreigners. Back home, they would never get the opportunity to ride in one found here in India." The 'Pimp my Shaw' lets participants get creative on their three wheel drives.

Speed is another factor that weighed in for the tuk-tuks that can touch a maximum of 60 kilometres per hour. So "racing" a rickshaw becomes practically impossible. This way, says Zucker, you're forced to enjoy the adventure, from the awesome views to the local people and the camaraderie of fellow racers.

To make the challenge even tougher and more adventurous, participants are urged to ditch their GPS (Global Positioning System) devices and settle for asking locals for directions. So far CEMS has managed to rope in around 30 people to take on the challenge.

"Though it is a mostly foreign crowd, they love it. It is a different way of experiencing India from the back seat of an auto rickshaw. The social initiative of the challenge is popular with our participants as well. They get a chance to visit our charity partner and the schools along the way and contribute," says Bermanandam.

If they want to, participants even get to take home an autorickshaw they're allowed to decorate.

The race sticks to the basics of a trek with a list of hotels for riders to take a break along planned routes. Their belongings follow on in a vehicle that tracks the challengers.

Some of the other challenges set for later in the year includes a seven-stage course of almost 1,000 km called the 'Classic Run' from Chennai to Trivandrum. The 'Deccan Odyssey' challenge is a nine-day Panjim to Mumbai ride which will happen in June. The September run, 'Mumbai Xpress' is a 13-stage course that runs through Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The 'Tamilnadu Run' explores the heritage and culture of Tamil Nadu starting and ending in Chennai.

The Rickshaw Challenge promotes adventure tourism, but it also has another side to it with its tie-up to Round Table India through which donations to schools and other charitable work is routed.