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Travelling in Afghanistan on the election trail with General Dostum means getting used to seeing AK-47s, big SUVs and carrying spare cash, just in case the bandits get to you. The tale as told by a survivor.

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Dust. That's the first thing you need to get used to in Afghanistan. It's everywhere.

Churned up by the traffic, it gets into your car and into your hair. You thought the US troops wear suede khaki boots to blend in with the bleak landscape? No siree, it's because polished black boots would look unkempt within minutes, with the thin layer of dust that clings to them.

Then there's the omnipresent AK-47. The world's best-loved assault rifle is also the Afghan male's favourite fashion accessory, though with three years of relative peace, people now carry them more for defense. It's a rare businessman whose driver doesn't nonchalantly place an AK-47 in the front passenger seat, rather like we in India would place a briefcase.

So it was with some trepidation that I agreed to cover the recent Afghan election. It didn't help that my jacket is hardly bulletproof and that my insurance agent laughed when I asked about travel insurance to Afghanistan. When the aging Boeing 727 landed with a shudder at Kabul International Airport, I half-imagined car bombs going off.

Surprisingly, Kabul is a capital teeming with cars and people — traffic jams are the order of the day. They drive on the right, the American way. There are traffic lights at a few key intersections but the hard work of managing the unruly traffic is left to traffic cops who wear gaudy, Soviet-era uniforms. I was surprised to see Tata buses in the city. Donated by the Indian government, these provide much-needed public transport. There is so much goodwill



General Dostum's convoy about to set off on its desert run.



for India that conductors routinely refuse to take money from Indian passengers. Almost all the cars on the roads are imported from Dubai and most are second-hand. The favourite route into the country is via the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, from where cars are brought across the Iranian-Afghan border to Herat.

In every city in Afghanistan, there are car dealers with rows of cars available at dirt-cheap prices. You could buy a Toyota Corolla in good condition for just Rs 2 lakh! In fact, 'Corolla' has almost become the Afghan word for a sedan, given its reliability and cheap running cost. There are so many of them on the road that

you could be forgiven for thinking Japan rules this country.

But the vehicle of choice in Afghanistan is the SUV. Big, expensive and comfortable, it is the macho statement a tank would have made a decade ago and a thoroughbred horse about 50 years ago. The SUV unites the warlord, businessman, NGO worker, politician and UN employee like nothing else. Of all 4x4s, the Land Cruiser is the most popular. I had the opportunity to accompany General Dostum,

the Uzbek warlord who was standing for President on his election trail. While cruising along in his chauffeur-driven Mercedes-Benz SL-500, the armed bodyguard proudly pounded the windows with his fists to show me how well its windows were bulletproofed.

Dostum's rally at his hometown Shibergan was the largest,

with a crowd of thirty thousand. People from across the region drove into the city in several hundred cars, pickups, vans and buses. The next day, we set off at 4am, for Maimana,



Travelling on super-smooth Soviet-built highways is a revelation.

a remote area of northwestern Afghanistan. To get there, we had to traverse a desert with no roads.

The six-hour journey was quite an experience. The convoy of 15 vehicles – including two pickups carrying the General's crack troops – snaked its way through sand dunes and rocky outcrops passing only a few nomadic herdsmen on the way. Clouds of dust obliterated the view and caked our windscreen with thick, white powder. It was sometimes impossible to even see the vehicle in front. But this didn't stop our Afghan friends from racing each other. Their aim: to occupy the spot behind

the General's SUV. But General Dostum seemed oblivious to their frenetic activity as he sat back in his leather-upholstered black Land Cruiser, listening to 'Kaanta Lagaa' on the six-CD changer!

I was startled to see an armed Mujahideen soldier looking down at us silently from his perch on a cliff, above the desert track. There was another a little distance later and this continued at regular intervals of 500 metres or so. I was hardly reassured when told that they were look-outs placed by the local commander, as the area was still not completely safe for the General to travel.

My respect for the Land Cruiser went up a notch after this desert drive. I earlier dismissed it as a rich boy's toy, but the powerful beast climbed up 30-degree sand slopes with ease, leaving even the rugged Russian four-wheel-drive vehicles floundering. The remnants of Soviet occupation and the poor man's 4x4 though, are tough, reliable and easily maintained.

But the ultimate off-roader is a vehicle the Afghan cannot possess. It is the king of the road and standard issue in the US Central Command, the Humvee. Seen in various guises as an open-air troop carrier, armed patrol car and ambulance, it's much in

demand among the British, Italian and German troops in the NATO-led ISAF as well, despite them having access to Land Rovers and G-Wagons.

Imagine my surprise then to discover US soldiers driving our very own Mahindra Bolero! Apparently, India had gifted several Boleros to the new Afghan National Army, and these had found their way into the hands of the US instructors. When quizzed on its performance, a pretty female US Captain at the Kabul Military Training Center told me the Bolero, "isn't bad, but it doesn't have any kick!"

But Bajaj and Hero Honda



Afghans love rugged SUVs like the Toyota Land Cruiser; General Dostum prefers travelling ensconced in style in a Mercedes SL-500.



Scoop! US troops also use Boleros for peace-keeping operations.



Humvee, the Schwarzenegger of offroaders, is standard US issue.



Rusting hulks of T-70 Soviet tanks lie by the roadside – a stark reminder of the hoary past that Afghanistan would like to forget.

should be worried – the local markets were overflowing with cheap, Chinese motorcycles. With Afghans learning to love the freedom of a two-wheeler, Jinhao bikes almost fly off the shelves. Indian motorcycles could offer better quality, mileage and value for money, but I fear it may soon be too late for Indian manufacturers to enter that market.

With no train network in

Afghanistan, almost all long-distance travel is by road. The smooth highways there are a revelation compared to those found at home. Due to the arid climate, Afghan roads need few repairs and it is common to find long stretches of Soviet-built asphalt that are still operational. It is also common to find rusting hulks of Soviet T-70 tanks lying by the roadside – forgotten symbols of a war the Afghans

prefer to forget.

It takes only seven hours to cover the 500km between Kabul and Mazhar-e-Sharief in the north. Hiring a Corolla, one-way, cost me Rs 2,400 after much haggling, gesticulation and punching of numbers on a calculator – not bad for the distance from Delhi to Amritsar. Listening to 'Main Awara Hoon' on the stereo as the taxi zoomed through the mountains in the

twilight – now that's a memory I treasure.

Afghanistan is one of those rare places where the traditional and commercial, familiar and foreign and the friendly and violent, merge seamlessly. The best advice I got? Carry only 200 dollars in your wallet – just in case you are held up on the highway at gunpoint. Apparently, Afghan robbers believe foreigners carry their cash only in wallets! ●



Daily-decorated trucks are a common sight; nomads on camelback wave out; cheap, Chinese Jinhao bikes are popular with locals.



Tata makes its presence felt.

