



EXPLORING THE WORLD ON WHEELS!

A photograph of two women in a mountainous landscape. One woman is sitting on the hood of a dark SUV, and the other is standing next to it. The background shows a large, rocky mountain under a blue sky with white clouds. The SUV has a license plate that reads '33222'.

When it comes to interesting history, Uzbekistan takes the lead. The way they have preserved the caravanserais, tombs and other heritage is phenomenal. A walk in Bukhara, an old town, can literally take you back into the trading days when this silk route was fully functional - Sujal



Road-tripping on an unknown land can take you places filled with great memories, scenic locations, lip-smacking food and make you find a friend in a stranger. Most importantly, road trips make you a better version of what you are—agree the duo Medha Joseph and Sujal Patwardhan, founders of Embarq, an overland touring company. In a tête-à-tête with **Corporate Citizen**, Medha and Sujal spoke about the myths and the rising trends of road-tripping, border-crossing trips, they focused on how their respective corporate backgrounds pushed them to start their venture and much more

BY EKTA KATTI

What prompted you to start Embarq?

Medha: Travelling to any place should be a life-time experience and of course hassle-free. A road trip should be enjoyed as there is no tomorrow without bothering or worrying about any of the logistics. This thought, put together with our love for travelling gave, birth to Embarq. Sujal and I love to explore, especially by roads. Both of us with four other friends did an overland road trip from India to Morocco in 2015. We drove across 16 countries in 57 days covering a distance of 23,000 km. We had to do a lot of research and planning to make this trip happen.

We realised that there are many Indians who want to do such road trips but they either don't have the time or resources to research and plan for such trips. The lack of knowledge, right-hand driving, traffic rules, navigation, and language issues among other things bog them down.

Embarq gives these travellers an opportunity to enjoy the drive and the overall experience of travelling by road without worrying out anything else.

How has the experience been so far?

Sujal: Simply wonderful! The best aspect of our work is it gives us an opportunity to meet unique people with varied backgrounds. All these people are great achievers in their own fields, their special stories are our source of motivation. We learn a lot from them.

Medha: For us, every sunrise comes with a new experience. The dusk has indeed made us stronger. Starting on your own is a real test of your mettle. We have had a roller coaster ride so far and we both have enjoyed it. It has taught us to be more patient.

The two of you have been together since long, friends first and then Embarq. How has your bond evolved?

Medha: What strengthens our bond is our trust in each other. We have known each other since our college days. However, we never worked together in the past. Hence, we both were a little skeptical in the beginning. Still, we took the leap and see how it worked out for us. We both just hit it off so well at the professional level that we thoroughly enjoy working with each other.

I think our bond has become stronger and the one reason we are able to do what we want to do at Embarq is because of our common value system. That forms the foundation for us to take decisions and keep the show running with all the challenges coming our way.

Both of you have a corporate background. How has working in that field shaped your career?

Medha: I had a fantastic stint in my corporate career. If it was not for this, I would not have taken the step to start on my own. I have worked with renowned companies like Daimler Chrysler, GE and Infosys. The work culture, professionalism and team spirit teach you a lot. The confidence of working with people from different countries and culture, the leadership roles and the experience you gain in dealing with ambiguity shape your personality. This has made it easy for us to deal with all the different challenges we face at Embarq.

Sujal: I owe my career to the corporate field. Before starting Embarq I was working as the HR head for Ambit Holdings, an investment banking firm based in Mumbai. Most of all it teaches you to take decisions in the most uncertain scenarios. This has helped us tremendously in how we are shaping up Embarq. We know what our priorities are and it helps us stay focused.

Can you throw some light on border crossings and the dos and don'ts?

Sujal: Border crossings can be tricky at times. Ensure all the documentation, required permits, permissions for your car—everything is in place. Usually these border crossings are at remote locations where people do not know English. One

Sujal Patwardhan and Medha Joseph

THE BEGINNING

In the early 2000s, Medha and Sujal met during their Master's course in Pune. As their wavelengths matched, the two along with a couple of others became a tight-knit group. As they grew older, they parted ways due to work and family but still managed to keep in touch. Until recently, when their calling for their mutual admiration for travelling got them together, a road trip from India to Morocco and a brainstorming session took them to start Embarq. The bug of travelling, driving cars on a foreign land and meeting new people is what prompted them to quit their corporate jobs and embark on this beautiful journey.

THE PERFECT TEAM

Merely two-years old in this business, the duo is quite content with exponential growth of the company. Medha and Sujal owe most of the success of Embarq to their corporate background. Sujal and Medha have driven a car from India to Africa across 15 countries, apart from several other road trips over the last 10 years. Equipped with a keen financial acumen and an astute sense of route planning, Medha is pivotal in bringing all the travel ideas to life. While the multi-tasker, troubleshooter and a people person, Sujal is an expert in organising events and managing teams.

UPCOMING ROAD TRIP

Elated with people's perception about road-tripping, the duo is also happy that more and more women are coming forward to take road trips. Hence, to serve such a crowd, Embarq is organising an all-India women's drive from India to Thailand during mid-October this year. This road trip can be done by both car and motorcycle. The road trip will be starting from Guwahati, India and ending in Bangkok, Thailand, covering a total distance of 2,800 kms. This will be a pioneering trip as it is the first all-women trip, conceptualized and planned by women.



Off-roading and driving through the beautiful and varied landscapes of Kyrgyzstan, a sovereign state in Central Asia

needs to be very patient. Be prepared as it can take several hours for the officials to finish the process. Plan to reach early morning and ensure you've had enough to eat. The best thing to do is answer only what is asked for. Do not volunteer extra information. Keep your cameras and cell phones away.

Medha: The International Driving Permit that you get in India is valid everywhere. Make sure you get one issued before you leave. Check all stamps put by immigration and customs officials before you leave the border—especially on the car documents and permits. The paperwork required for Indians is a lot. That is where Embarq comes into the picture. In the overland journeys, we take care of absolutely all the paperwork and permissions. Whether it's a fixed departure, overland or bespoke-designed specifically for a group, we manage everything.

Undoubtedly, you both have travelled a lot so far. What has it taught you?

Medha: It has taught us to trust strangers and more importantly, it has taught us humility. We've learnt managing contingencies, and above all, it has taught us that this world is full of wonderful people. The most misunderstood are the South American countries. But both of us have been exploring Peru for the past month, and it has been an eye-opener. The people here are lovely and moreover, we felt secure while travelling.

The most memorable road trip ever...

Medha: It definitely has to be Kyrgyzstan, a sovereign state in Central Asia. Rustic, untouched, and absolutely stunning scenery. What you witness through your drive is a beautiful mountain range, a stunning river, a mesmerising scene of horses running on the road and the nomadic life of the local people! Quite a picture, right? It's an amazing feeling to live it. We think, overland journeys are truly life-changing. They shatter all perceptions and myths that we may have. When you cross borders by land, the locals you meet, the food you get, it cannot be compared to any other drive. Every country border you will witness the cultures melting and the border towns display a beautiful blend of all adjoining country cultures and even physical appearances.

Sujal: When it comes to interesting history, Uzbekistan takes the lead. The way they have preserved the caravanserais, tombs and other heritage is phenomenal. A walk



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Medha Joseph

safety and comfort of being in a convoy with like-minded people. This encourages them to explore new routes, new experiences, different cuisines and soak in the culture of that country in its entirety. Overland road trips are the ones where the clients drive in their own car from India to Thailand or Russia or Spain and various other countries. Overland road trips are truly life-changing experiences.

Medha: Lastly, there is the bespoke drives for all those who cannot sign up on our classic fixed departure and overland road trips due to various reasons. We customise all these trips to suit their needs like dates, itinerary, budget, type of car, stay options, need for local guide or support vehicles, etc.

What are the problems faced while taking a road trip? How to overcome them?

Medha: In a well-planned single country road trip, the possible issues are limited – language problem, losing GPS signal mid-way, weather etc. These can be overcome by having the right tools handy such as offline maps, Google Translate, ensuring you are aware of the driving rules in that country before starting the drive helps. Also, having a strong local partner to support helps overcome all contingencies.

Was it difficult to choose being an entrepreneur or working in the corporate field?

Sujal: It's difficult to choose one. If it wasn't for our corporate career, we would not have the courage to take such a huge step of starting Embark. And the satisfaction to do what you love and see it being appreciated gives a different high.

Medha: I agree with Sujal! It is difficult to choose one over the other. We both had great corporate jobs and now we are equally enjoying being entrepreneurs.

Are Indians open for the concept of road trips?

Sujal: Yes, absolutely! In fact, Indians love road-tripping especially outside India. There is a steady increase in the number of people who are wanting to do overland road trips. That is driving in your own vehicle from India to different countries. There is also an increase in the number of women who are into road trips. The current scene in India is quite intriguing.

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in the Bukhara, an old town, can literally take you back into the trading days when this silk route was fully functional. The trader domes are still intact.

And why one should take a road trip?

Sujal: The best way to understand a country is through soaking in its culture. And driving around the town will make you fall in love with the country. One cannot argue with the commercialisation in these big cities. They certainly have their pros. However, the magic lies in the small cities, and quaint little towns which are still untouched and unexplored. You can witness these only when you drive through them—interacting with the locals, sipping a cup of coffee in a small local café, understanding their culture will enable a better understanding of the country. You may even lose your way to find a lovely hidden lake somewhere. Words do not do justice to the experience, one must try it to understand this lovely feeling.

What are the different types of road trips a traveller can go for?

Sujal: There are road trips for every kind of person. Firstly, the fixed departures are country or region-specific road trips where the clients can fly in and out of a country like Spain, Scotland, New Zealand, Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia, Northern Europe, Baltic countries, etc. Clients enjoy the privacy of travelling with their family and friends in their individual cars as well as the





Walmart acquisition means big bucks for Flipkart

Talk about a deal to beat all deals. Even after four back-to-back markdowns by Morgan Stanley, Walmart went ahead and acquired it, thereby generating one of the largest pools of wealth for employees in India's corporate history. The deal has lifted the total worth of Flipkart's employee stock ownership plans, including unvested shares, to \$2 billion (about ₹13,455 crore); Esops held by about 100 employees of Flipkart are now said to be over than \$1 million. What's more, Walmart would offer a 100 per cent buyback of vested shares by Flipkart employees.