

With RFC India's second edition in India, its global founder sees the sport taking off in the country in a big way, with even an Indian team possibly winning the Malaysian event in the coming years



Rough ride

Nitin Sreedhar

“FIVE, FOUR, three, two, one... GO!” Standing in the heavy downpour, as the race marshal finished the countdown, a Force Gurkha vehicle sped down the greasy track to complete a special stage (SS) course, its massive tyres running over anything—mud, marshy land, rapid streams and boulders—that came in the way. Besides the revving engines, the loudest sound was that of the crowd cheering on the participants, as the colossal 4x4 vehicles made their way through rugged terrain.

This wasn't a scene at just another motor race; it was the Force Gurkha Rainforest Challenge (RFC) India, the India chapter of the Malaysian Rainforest Challenge, taking place for the second time in the country.

RFC India's second edition took place this year from August 24-31 in Goa, with other global locations including

Italy, west Russia, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, Vietnam, China and Australia.

As many as 22 teams took part, with Tan Choon Hong and Tan Eng Joo of Force Motors winning and getting direct entry to the mother event in Malaysia. The duo were the winners last year too.

While India has witnessed off-roading events and expeditions such as the Mahindra Great Escape and the Palar Challenge before, the sport has not been undertaken on such a big scale ever before.

And, RFC's founder and creator Luis JA Wee feels the sport can only get bigger in the country, with an Indian team standing a good chance at the global event. Sitting atop a small hill at the event headquarters and keeping a keen eye over the proceedings of the Predator leg in Quepem, Wee says RFC India will help competitors prepare for the mother event in Malaysia. “These courses (special stages) are very similar to what we have in the mother event. The Malaysian event

will be much longer, more demanding and tougher. But this is a good warm-up,” says Wee, adding, “This year, or maybe the next, you could see Indian teams ranked in the top three in the mother event.”

Wee founded RFC in 1997 and has seen the offroading experience evolve over the years. “I talked to a lot of teams here. Some of them have brought their own engineers and are planning to prepare more cars for next year. In fact, they have orders from other people too. So it is a spin-off thing. They come here, get involved in this sport and then expand it further. Offroading will take off soon in India,” he predicts.

Supporting his belief were the wide array of vehicles and participants involved in this year's edition. Apart from teams such as Force Motors and Polaris India, there was competition from offroading clubs like Gerrari Offroaders Chandigarh, the Northern India Offroad Club and Bangalore Offroaders' Development Association, among others. Cars from Mahindra, Maruti, Willys, Toyota and Nissan added to the horsepower at display.

Awareness about the sport is also on the rise, says Ashish Gupta, founder and director, Cougar Motorsport, the company that brought RFC to India. “Somebody told me that offroading is one of the fastest growing urban recreational activities. Just two years of the RFC being in India has changed the fortunes of so many equipment vendors and manufactur-



(From top) Participants at RFC India's second edition that took place this year from August 24-31 in Goa; and (above) winners Tan Choon Hong (second from right) and Tan Eng Joo (third from left) with their trophy



ers,” says Gupta, adding that although offroading events took place in India before, there was no ‘big-budget’ spending. “How many cars ran on Silverstone tyres before? Every car standing here is running on Silverstone now. This year, the company COMEUP has sold blazer winches to RFC participants. And they (COMEUP) have just entered India. So lots of global equipment manufacturers are going to start seeing India as a market that is opening up.”

The event had Goa Tourism, Woodland and Wockhardt Hospitals as sponsors, and there was plenty of support from the government

as well. “When sponsors put in money, they need exposure. We need that too. But more than that, we need a long-term vision. We don't encourage sponsors to join us for just one year. They need to take a look at the bigger picture,” says Wee. “The event is adding to tourism and economy as well. That is fantastic for the Goa government.”

To ensure that the offroading community keeps growing, there are plans next year for some regional RFC rounds as well. “We would like to run our own India series and make Goa the mother event. This would cater to the offroader who is there, but still not at the level where he's ready to come to Goa

for a week and compete. If we go to his market and give him an opportunity and lots of learning, that's when it (offroading) will also grow,” Gupta adds.

One such offroader is Cedrick Jordan Da Silva, who participated in RFC India 2014 with his co-driver Floyd Preston Dias—their vehicle was the Maruti Gypsy. This year, the duo from Goa are back for more. “They have made it a little more difficult this year. The special stages are longer. Some stages are more difficult, some easy, but we are trying to cross all possible hurdles in the shortest time possible. That is what the RFC demands,” says Da Silva.

Preparations for the start months before. A not all. Teams keep firing their vehicles through competition, with the mechanics putting in a lot of hours under the hood sent my Gypsy to Chennai about six months ago. Transportation itself takes a had the same vehicle. We just made some of the suspension,” adds standing close to the (his team does some rep

The team from Goa the only one trying to way to the top. The special stages' location ed different emotions; vers and their navigat “You are not pulling a jeep or a feather. pulling four times the veteran driver advi young navigator, who ing to winch out the Willys CJ3B using a f boo trees during the stage in the Terminat

“Easy buddy, we go our side. Slow and stea the race,” a navigator driver through his mike, as he fixed the v a JCB to pull out thei from a ditch. Well, in t then, the slow and st to Malaysia.



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LUIS JA WEE, founder and creator, RFC