

GRANDEUR AND GLORY

We head out in Toyota's bestselling Innova Crysta to explore the rich architectural legacy of Hampi, which was once one of the world's great cities

AN EARLY MORNING drive is the right time and right way to appreciate Bangalore's many pluses, and we are not talking about the weather that remains pleasant year round. The city is the world's 4th largest tech cluster, the hub for India's \$150 billion tech sector, and accounts for about 10 percent of the country's GDP. It is also a cosmopolitan metropolis that draws in people from across the country. We are, of course, not just driving around the city in the Toyota Innova Crysta, a car that is the gold standard for MPVs in India, and a car that was specifically made for southeast Asian road conditions. On the infotainment screen is the route map for Hampi, another great city that existed over 500 years ago, and which was as celebrated as Bangalore is today. The road that leads to it is about 350-km long, and passes through sleepy towns and busy highways. We depress the Crysta's accelerator, feel the car surge forward smoothly, and settle down for an involving ride to the capital of the Vijayanagara empire.

BRANDED CONTENT

Sacred water tanks or pushkaranis are among Hampi's many architectural highlights.



Hampi reached its zenith in the early 1500s during the reign of Krishna Deva Raya

THE RISE AND RISE OF HAMPPI

The ruins that we were going to encounter are spread out around thousands of hectares in the Tungabhadra basin, near Bellary. While the history of Hampi goes back all the way to ancient times, the city came into its own with the establishment of the Vijayanagara empire between the mid-1300s to the mid-1500s. As with all dynasties and empires, there are a lot of legends surrounding the rise of the empire, but it is widely believed that the Vijayanagara empire was founded in 1336 by two brothers Harihara and Bukka of the Sangama dynasty. The brothers chose a pilgrimage centre as their capital, and soon enough a grand city came up around it, and by the late 1300s the kings of Vijayanagar ruled the

whole of southern India. The story of Hampi is closely aligned with the struggle for supremacy in the southern part of India in the medieval ages. The initial rulers of Hampi fought several wars against their neighbours, including the Hoysalas and the Madurai sultans, and later with the Bahmani sultans and the rulers of Bijapur. Hampi's heyday was during the reign of Krishna Deva Raya, the third ruler of the Tulava dynasty and the third dynasty to rule over the city. Krishna Deva Raya was not without his flaws - he was known to be prone to extreme bouts of anger - but he is also known as an enlightened king. He was not only a brave ruler who brought his kingdom's troublesome neighbours to heel, but he also had a keen interest in the arts, and during his twenty year reign in the early decades of the

1500s, he not only patronized music, poetry and architects, but also wrote a poetical composition himself. Under him, Hampi, already a mighty city when he ascended the throne, became on the world's largest and richest metropolises. Several travelers, especially the Portuguese Domingo Paes, compared it to Rome.

FIFTEEN GLORIOUS YEARS

We break for lunch at the town of Chitradurga, and feast on an authentic Kannadiga lunch. There's lots of rice, *bisi bele bath*, and *saaru*, *kootu* and *huli* as well. It been over three hours since we left Bangalore, but the hours seem to have flown by and we are in good spirits. The lack of fatigue is possibly a direct consequence of travelling in a car such as the Crysta, which keeps

occupants comfortable regardless of whether you are out on the highway or in the city.

Ever since it took over the mantle from its predecessor, the original Innova, it has built on its success and become the only real, reliable and well-appointed MPV on our roads today. If the first Innova showed the way 15 years ago - yes, that's right it has been a decade and a half since Toyota redrew the MPV paradigm in India - the Crysta's plush cabin that features glossy wood and leather, the instrument panel that sports a harmonious, flowing design, the LED ambient lighting, and that range of refined but robust engines - a 150hp 2.4-litre motor with a five-speed manual gearbox and a 174hp 2.8-litre engine with a six-speed automatic -- has meant that the Innova Crysta's only competitor is itself. As important is the way Toyota has engineered space inside the cabin, which is roomy and seats seven proper adults, and the car's SUV-like stance, both of which have also contributed in making the Innova Crysta the country's bestselling MPV. (In fact, not surprisingly, globally India accounts for the most number of Innovas sold by Toyota.)

We reach Hospet, the town closest to Hampi, by early afternoon, and immediately proceed through the town's narrow, congested streets towards the UNESCO World Heritage

THE CRYSTA HAS BUILT ON THE SUCCESS OF THE ORIGINAL INNOVA AND BECOME THE GOLD STANDARD FOR MPVS ON OUR ROADS TODAY

site. The general perception is that the Innova Crysta is great on highways and long journeys, but, thanks to that light steering at low speeds and a great turning radius, it feels equally at home in small towns and in traffic as well. The sun is shining bright, but it is a kind of golden light.

Ahead of us, and all around us, are the monuments that point to a halcyon past: temples, palaces, halls and gateways. Prime among them are the Virupaksha temple, among the oldest structures in Hampi, and one that still resonates with the prayers of worshippers; the Vittala temple and its ornate pillars and the large, expertly carved main hall; the elephant stables that are inspired by Islamic architecture; and, among others, the bazaar, with arcades of both sides. And where one can still imagine the hubbub of daily trade and clamour of buyers and sellers from all over the world. Hampi is fantastic if you are into history, but its landscape is as compelling.

Hampi is dominated by rust-coloured rocky outcrops, massive boulders, green fields and the serenely flowing Tungabhadra River. Surely, there could have been more practical reasons why Hampi was chosen as the capital of the Vijayanagara empire, but we're sure its beauty, especially at sunrise and sunset, would have played a part. The next day, as we pointed the grace nose of our Innova Crysta in the direction of Bangalore, we realized that Hampi is also about legacy. It might be in ruins now, but over 500 years ago Hampi had set a great example as regards cosmopolitanism, and



The Innova's cabin marries luxury and harmonious design



The Hampi Chariot, inside the Vittala Temple Complex, is a shrine dedicated to Garuda

