

# WHEELS



An 1850 French print depicting various modes of transport in India

## Flashback

A Delhi hotelier's passion for cars results in a project for the country's first ever transport museum. BY JAIDEEP DAVE

Indians will be able to travel back in time when the Heritage Transportation Museum (HTM), the first of its kind in the country, goes live next year. The HTM, which will open in March next year, will be located on the outskirts of Gurgaon, on the Bilaspur Taoru Road, off the Delhi-Jaipur highway. It will span an area of 81,000 sq ft, says 46-year old Tarun Thakral, the brain behind the museum and founder of the Heritage Transportation Trust (HTT), which will manage the museum.

The HTM will take you on a tour of transportation history, from the domestication of the horse and other

animals represented in rock murals at Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh in 5500 BC, to the role of the wheel in ancient India, to the use of caravans as nomadic homes and much more. With audio visual presentations, and actual bullock cart rides, this one promises to be a bumpy though enjoyable journey.

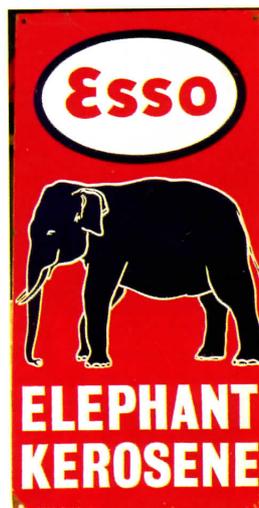
Thakral, the chief operating officer of Le Meridien, Delhi, started out as a collector of gramophones and antique lamps before moving on to vintage cars. "I really started after I returned after completing my MBA studies from France. I guess I started appreciating India's heritage after I was out of

the country for two years," says Thakral. He bought his first vintage car, a Chevrolet Phaeton, from a ramshackle hotel in Rajasthan in 1994. "I bought it for less than Rs 5,000 and it took me a lot of effort to restore it with original parts." The Phaeton and his other models of motorised and non-motorised modes of transport, 75 in all, have been donated to the museum. Initially, the HTM will display 100 physical models of transportation vehicles — including a 1930 Royal Rail saloon and a 1935 Buick Series 90 Limousine, to a 1900 horse carriage and a 1946 Salsbury. (The oldest model is an 1850 bullock cart.) Lithographs, photographs, postcards, maps, original enamel advertising signs and transportation books, amongst others, will also feature in the museum.

Thakral got the idea for a transport museum after visiting museums such as the Petersen Automotive Museum and San Diego Museum in



Thakral alongside a 1938 Ford V8 Phaeton



the United States and London Transport Museum and National Motor Museum in the UK. He was struck by the fact that India did not have a transportation museum though it did have rail and air museums. And he wondered whether a museum, apart from being the best place for him to put his collection to use, would also be a workable standalone idea. So he wrote to the government to convert his own 3.4 acre agricultural land into a museum property, and appointed architects and a curator for the project.

A Rs 12 crore project, the HTM is funded by the ministry of culture and individual and corporate sponsorships. The museum will be run by the HTT, which comprises five members. The HTM, says Thakral, will be a self-sustaining body and will follow global practices for revenue generation. Apart from souvenir shops, corporates will be allowed to sponsor walls and dedicated concrete panels (Rs 1 crore has already been raised through the latter) and citizens can dedicate a plaque to their loved ones. The building will have also two rooms of 2,500 square feet with 7,000 square feet open terraces, where car makers and auto component firms can conduct meetings and seminars. The HTM will also have a restaurant.

Thakral says various collectors from all across India have indicated an interest in donating some of their cars to the HTM. "The basic premise on which we are working is that the Heritage Transport Museum will not be a static display of objects, there will be a constant change at regular intervals so that every time a visitor comes he finds something new."