

BEYOND THE WHITE HORIZON

Beyond the shimmering salt flats lie migratory wetlands, ancient stepwells, centuries-old crafts, traditional shipyards, and communities keeping Gujarat's rich cultural heritage alive.

Photographs and text by Hema Narayanan



Thousands of migratory flamingos gather in the seasonal wetlands of the Little Rann of Kutch, transforming the landscape into a sea of pink.



Clockwise from top left: The endangered Indian wild ass survives only in the Little Rann of Kutch, where the species has made a remarkable recovery; wind and water have sculpted the dramatic sandstone formations of Kadiya Dhro over millions of years; sunset over the White Rann, where light constantly transforms the endless salt desert; a mobile school ensures children of salt-pan workers continue their education despite the migratory nature of their families





Clockwise from left: The beautifully illuminated Sun Temple at Modhera is one of Gujarat's greatest architectural masterpieces; Rani ki Vav, Patan's UNESCO-listed stepwell, is celebrated on India's 100-rupee banknote; descending through seven sculpted levels, Rani ki Vav is often regarded as one of the world's finest stepwells.





Clockwise from above: Mandvi's traditional shipyards continue to build large wooden vessels almost entirely by hand; in Nirona village, artisans continue the centuries-old tradition of lacquered wood turning using simple hand-operated techniques; folk musicians keep the musical traditions of Kutch alive during the Rann Utsav and community gatherings; ornately carved merchant houses in Mandvi reflect the town's prosperous maritime trading past.



THE RANN IS NOT EMPTY. Most imagine it as an endless white desert, but that is only one chapter of its story. I've returned to Kutch several times, yet this year's journey revealed how much lies beyond its iconic salt flats.

My journey began in the Little Rann of Kutch, where the last population of the endangered Indian wild ass roams across salt flats and scrubland. Seasonal wetlands attract thousands of migratory birds, including vast flocks of flamingos that transform the muted earth into pink and white.

During salt-making season, families spend months living among the salt pans. We drove past geometric fields of white when, almost unexpectedly, a brightly painted mobile school appeared in the middle of the expanse, bringing education to the children of the salt workers.

As we went further west, the landscape changed dramatically. Reaching Kadiya Dhro requires a bumpy off-road ride before the landscape suddenly opens into a striking sandstone gorge, often called the "mini Grand Canyon of India." Sculpted by wind and water over millions of years, its layered formations, colours, and textures seemed almost unreal, inviting me to pause, marvel at the quiet artistry of nature, and frame them through my lens.

The Great Rann offers a different spectacle, transforming with the seasons. During the monsoon, much of it lies submerged; as the waters evaporate, an endless white carpet of salt emerges. During the annual Rann Utsav, the landscape becomes a celebration of Kutch's music, dance, crafts and traditions. At sunset, the salt reflects shades of gold, amber, and blue.

These traditions continue in villages such as Nirona, where generations of artisans preserve remarkable crafts found almost nowhere else—Rogan art, copper bell making, and lacquered woodwork. These are living traditions, sustained by families who continue to practise and pass them from one generation to the next.

The journey continued to Mandvi, near the Arabian Sea, where master craftsmen still build massive wooden ships by hand. Weathered merchant houses recall the town's once-thriving maritime trade. Sipping *kulhad chai* beside its blue wooden doors became one of those quiet travel memories that will linger.

In the neighbouring district of Patan, Rani ki Vav, a UNESCO World Heritage Site immortalised on India's 100-rupee banknote, descends through seven sculpted levels lined with hundreds of intricate figures. Built in the 11th century by Queen Udayamati in memory of King Bhimdev I, the stepwell is as much an underground temple as a source of water. I found its grandeur impossible to capture in my frames.

Near Patan, the Modhera Sun Temple stands as one of India's finest examples of Solanki architecture. Dedicated to Surya Dev, the Sun God, the temple was designed so that the first rays of the rising sun would illuminate the sanctum on the equinoxes. Its stepped tank, sculpted pillars and precise geometry remain extraordinary. I especially cherished the late-evening light and sound show.

The salt may be what first draws travellers to the Rann, but it is the stories, people, and traditions across Kutch and nearby regions in Gujarat that stay with me. Long after the white desert fades from memory, these are what remain etched in my mind. ☾