



## *Gleaming Salt To Shining Sea*

The vast salt flats in the Rann are breathtaking but do not miss the ribs of boats in Mandvi, the tribals' striking jewelry and embroidery, their colourful handicrafts and the gorgeous palaces.

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Sometimes, the best things happen when you least expect them. Somewhat harried after missing the direct flight to Bhuj from Mumbai, I opted to travel to the next nearest airport, which is Kandla. On arrival, I was met by a lad named Hasim, who was to drive me the 55 km to Bhuj. As the journey towards the border district of Kutch began, I learned that Hasim was a survivor of the 2001 earthquake that had flattened the town of Bhuj. He began to narrate harrowing tales of the disaster and the consequent human tragedy and the two hours on the road simply flew past as my ears filled and my heart ached. From his words, it became clear that the people had been left with only that supreme possession, the human soul, and their rich heritage of art and crafts. All else had been wrenched away on that fateful winter morning.

Yet, the melancholia in me was dispelled in one swoop as we reached Bhuj. Like Hasim, Bhuj and its people had risen from the ruins, and rebuilt the houses, the town, and their lives. The town is back to being busy, bustling, colourful and joyful. It welcomes visitors with warmth and variety and is the per-

fect gateway to Kutch—that visitor's delight to which thousands flock to glimpse a culturally and naturally rich land.

Deriving its name from *kachbo*, because it geographically resembles the shape of a tortoise, Kutch is, for all practical purposes, associated with a desert landscape in most people's minds. Its distinctive and best-known features are the Little Rann and the Great Rann, yet the land bordering the coast is immensely fertile and well-cultivated. A large number of indigenous communities have lived here for generations, practising and perpetuating traditions and crafts. The area has a unique heritage of culture and seaside living, along the shore of the Arabian Sea.

#### MAGIC FINGERS

The villages are small, but their inhabitants' skills are immense. These tribals are mostly immersed in creating awe-inspiring handicrafts, using varied art forms. Nirona, on the Bhuj-Kawda road, is a dusty, quaint village where the artisans are skilled in rogan art, copper bell art and lacquer work. Tip-toeing into each artist's home, I had a sense of the men cradling magical creativity in their hands while the women exhibited it through their chunky

(Anti-clockwise from right) Father and daughter show their lacquer work in Nirona village; a potter displays his works at the Kumharan Pottery Town; a woman helps in the making of copper bells in Nirona village

#### NAVIGATOR

##### Reach Bhuj

**By Air** Bhuj has its own airport and has a non-stop flight by Jet Airways from Mumbai which takes 1 hr 20 minutes to reach Bhuj.

**By Rail** The railway station at Bhuj is well-connected and has regular trains from Delhi, Mumbai and Ahmedabad.

**By Road** Bhuj is 333 km from Ahmedabad and has state-run buses.







(Anti-clockwise from above) A folk singer in his little home at the Bharath Embroidery Village; the beautiful Mandvi beach; women of Nirona village making colourful dolls from fabric, and other interesting Bhuj material

jewelry and heavily embroidered clothes.

Rogan art involves *rogan*, the local name for castor globs. Artists deftly control a small glob of boiled castor oil jelly mixed with mineral pigments on the tip of a metal applicator with one hand and hold the cloth with the other. The free-falling glob is laid on the cloth with precision, to match preconceived designs. The cloth is then stretched and folded to make symmetrical and vivid images with floral and Islamic motifs.

Copper bell art was to be plentifully seen in the traditional cow bells, door hangings, masks and sun signs, to name a few. These artists apply copper and a bronze silver mixed in mud paste on the metal cast of the object, which is then baked in the furnace to give it a shine. The emergence of the bells—in many shapes, sizes and forms—from the mud and fire was almost phoenix-like. When rung, the chimes of these bells are as soothing as a sonorous *Om* chant.

An equal, though different, appeal emanated from the brightly coloured lacquer art items. The tribes here, Vadhas, mastered the skills of making colourful toys, utility items and kitchen implements, using lacquer. They

took the lac resin from trees, mixed it with various minerals and pigments to generate an array of colours and shades, and then coated their products with it. The variety is delightfully bewildering!

These village artists also do astonishing hand block printing work like *ajrakh* and *batik*, tie and dye or *bandhani*, embroidery like *aari*, *banni*, *mutwa*, *mashroo* weaving, woollen *nama-da* and silver engraving or Kutch work, as it is called.

#### STUNNING PORT

We set out the next day for Mandvi—a major port town 60 km south of Bhuj on the shore of the Arabian Sea. Known for its beautiful beaches with golden sand and azure sea vistas, it turned out to be as soothing, pristine and memorable as promised.

Looking at the skeletons of boats and listening to stories of boatmen at the boat-building site, I was reminded of Noah's Ark. Huge boats, which are unique artifacts, are built here. Our historian guide told us of how the boat-builders are guided by Sufi beliefs. Climbing into the interior of a boat, I saw the extensive labour and equipment involved





(Clockwise from left) The central building of the Vijay Vilas Palace; rogan art being done by a young artist at the Nirona village; a village resort in Hodka; a living room in the Vijay Vilas Palace

in building these seafaring vessels. Strangely, most boat-builders spend their entire lives working on the early stages of building a boat rather than on boats preparing to set out to sea.

Mandvi is also home to the majestic Vijay Vilas Palace of Maharao Vijayrajji—a glorious summer palace of red sandstone, built in 1929. The carved stone work and coloured glass work seen here showcase the Rajput architecture and leave an indelible impression.

#### MEMORABLE MAHALS

I was reminded of Frank Gehry's words, "Architecture should speak of its time and place, but yearn for timelessness," when I saw the Aina Mahal and the Pragmahal Palace. Not only do they embody the heritage of Kutch, these monuments have also become timeless in a different way by withstanding the 2001 earthquake.

The Aina Mahal or Palace of Mirrors is an 18th century stone mansion, created by Ramsinh and Gaidhar Devshi, renowned artists in their time. The walls are made of white marble and covered with mirrors, separated by gilded ornaments. The palace is lit by elaborate pendant candelabras with Venetian glass, and walking under them is magical. The Royal Palki, the Chinese Armoire, the Hall of Mirrors and the Hira Mahal, decorated with 27 full-length mirrors in rococo style, are some of the exquisite cre-


ations in the palace.

Adjacent to the Aina Mahal is the Pragmahal Palace, a magnificent building in Italian Gothic style built in 1879. Made of Italian marble and sandstone with lovely reddish and brownish shades, this creation of Colonel Henry Saint Wilkins reminded me of Germany's Heidelberg Castle both aesthetically and architecturally.

#### THE RANN & RABARI

When it came time to visit the Great Rann, I was mesmerised. I had seen nothing like it, ever. The play of golden sunlight at dusk on this seasonal salt marsh, the world's largest salt desert, was spellbinding. Its surface, covered with broken salt formations, seemed like that of the moon. Walking on it, I saw a Bollywood movie crew filming while tourists enjoyed a camel ride along the unforgettable Banjni.

Leaving Bhuj without visiting Rabari village is akin to a crime. The people of this village are unique and their lifestyle differs from that of every other tribe. They are among the most photographed tribes of Kutch, with the women bearing traditional tattoos and the famous Nagali spiral earrings, which borrow from the form of a snake.

Sipping tea in this village, aware that my sojourn in Bhuj was winding to an end, I recalled Mahatma Gandhi's insight when he said, "A nation's culture resides in the hearts and souls of people." 

#### NAVIGATOR

##### Reach Kutch

**By Air** The nearest airport is at Bhuj, 77 km away. State-run buses and taxis are available from the airport to Kutch.

**By Rail** Adipur (15 km) is the nearest railway station. The station is directly linked with cities like Mumbai (Kutch Express) and Ahmedabad (Ala Hazrat Express).

**By Road** State-run buses ply from most parts of Gujarat. The nearest town is Bhuj, 77 km away.