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EXPLORE



GUJARAT

Chasing Shadows

The sheer magnitude of the white salt desert of the Great Rann of Kutch hides many an elusive tribes, amazing artisans and much more within its mysterious folds. **TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY RITA SAWHNEY**





HIS SUN BURNT face smiles at me as I step out of the airport. I feel immediate relief and all set to hit the tribe trail. "Contact a guy called Devi Singh in Ahmedabad," a Gujarati friend had instructed. "He is an expert driver and guide who will take you into the very heart of Kutch to track the elusive tribes of the region," I was told.

The Rann of Kutch had always held a sense of awe and fascination for me... bedecked Rabari tribal women, escorted by macho turbaned men in headgear and costume, free to roam and set camp in the arid desert with their camels and belongings, high on opium, secretly crossing the 80 km of hot white blinding salt terrain to reach their relatives across the border... The images in my head were vivid and exciting enough to make me set out to discover this spectacular landscape shrouded in mystery.

Driving through verdant fields of cotton, cumin, wheat and aniseed, I arrive at the Rann Riders Resort in the small village of Dasada bordering the little Rann of Kutch which is home to a variety of flora and fauna that delights at every step. Constant birdsong shatters the silence of the still night and acts as a natural morning alarm for forays and safaris into the marshland and the salt Rann of the little Kutch. This is an arid scrub area but the wild ass that came from Multan in the 17th century thrives on this vegetation and is found grazing here solitary or on some occasions in herds. I come close to a bold one who looks me in the eye, but when I approach him, he bolts away. Others, feeding with families on the arid salt Rann give me a group photograph.

The lesser flamingo and the common crane too thrive in these arid and salty wetlands. Condominiums of sand castle like wetlands stretch out into the horizon that support and harbor bird life that includes migratory birds like the pelican and flamingoes. Back at the resort I notice flower and leaf potpourri are plastered on mud and natural fertilizer mixed walls of quaint huts called *bunga* that are decorated with Gujarati style mirrorwork and have thatched roofs. The water boilers are heated with wood pruned from *ber* trees and the waste water is pumped into the garden and into a moat that supports fish and prawn life. Muslim and Hindu communities live side by side in harmony since ages in the nearby village.

In the evening we visit Modhera (45 km away), where, as luck would have it, a festival is taking place at the 11th century sun temple. Bharatnatyam is performed; the graceful figures of the

dancers with the backdrop of the 11th century sun temple which is all lit up, makes for a fabulous show. Devi Singh informs us of an underground secret passage that leads from the temple out to somewhere, but no one really knows where. I peer into the murky depths of the temple and notice a billion bats that are hanging head downwards and step out in alarm as one flutters past me. The 11th-century step well Rani-ki-Vav, one of the largest in the world, is located here. Intricate statuettes line the steep

walls as we descend the stairs that lead down to the water below.

Next morning we resume our journey towards the greater Rann of Kutch. It's mandatory to get travel permits from the DSP's office before proceeding further into the Rann of Kutch as a few villages fall near the border between India and Pakistan. After it was razed to the ground in the infamous earthquake, the run through from Bhuj to Kutch is through a wind swept dust laden wilderness. But treasures lie beyond the eye when one traverses onto unmetalled roads into Meghwal tribal villages where smiles reach the eyes and innocence reflects from the faces of its inhabitants. They unravel all secrets of their art and still smile as we leave without making any purchase. This is a world that is still enveloped in a delightful time warp, but the march

of so called progress is licking at their heels and how long will they be able to ward it off is a question we mull over as we move on.

Positive progress is seen at Hodka village where the Harijan community and the endogenous effort by the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan has made an effort to attract visitors by offering stays in artistically made *bungas* encrusted with Kutchi mirrorwork and figures of the various tribes like the Muslim Halepotras and Hindu Meghwal herders. We opt to stay at the Sham-e-Sarhad, one such resort that is conceptualised and run by the villagers themselves, an ideal reflection of the simple

village life of the Banni grasslands. Salaam Bhai, the manager, tells us scary stories that his elders used to tell him when he was a child, as we sit by the fire at night—about *jinns* with vertical eyes that roam the desert at night and are found around places of burial! I figure that before the border



FYI

BIRD FEED

The Rann of Kutch is the only place in Pakistan and India where flamingoes come to breed. There are 13 species of lark in the Rann of Kutch. There are several wildlife sanctuaries and protected reserves on the Indian side in the Rann of Kutch region: Indian Wild Ass Sanctuary, Kutch Desert Wildlife Sanctuary, Narayan Sarovar Sanctuary, Kutch Bustard Sanctuary, Banni Grasslands Reserve and Chari-Dhand Wetland Conservation Reserve.

ABOVE A Rabari woman with her infectious smile FACING PAGE
CLOCKWISE Gujarat's version of the sun temple; wild ass at the little Rann of Kutch; inside a *bunga*; intricate architecture of the region OPENING PAGE At Sham-e-Sarhad





was sealed smugglers used to frequent the Rann and spread the stories to keep people from discovering them.

The deep silence of the still night envelopes me as I recline on cots laid around the fire and watch the stars, the plaintive sounds of the cicadas in the Rann magnified by the night. Sleep comes after a long interval as I listen, in fear and awe, to the distant howls of the desert foxes.

A morning foray into the Mutwa tribe village of Dhordo reveals intricate embroidery and the highlight of the trip is watching a Maulvi teaching the holy Quran to inattentive demure little girls with heads covered, they are utterly cute and easily distracted, like all children. The saltpan Rann is a short distance from the village and after the necessary permissions I venture into a white wonderland that shimmers in the strong sun, one mirage fading into another into infinity and I promise myself to return at sunset to indulge myself once more in this incredulous sight.

I discover some of the other villages... Nirona for instance, where Ahirs, Muslims and Dalits co-exist peacefully, one can discover by foot. The village artisans are scattered around like jewels in the dust, some who excel in pottery, bell makers, wood carvers—but one has to wade through discarded plastic and heaps of dirt to reach them. The state of the highways may be excellent but the villages are in a state of utter neglect. Yet we find treasures like the Rogan painters in Nirona who are still carrying on the dying art of painting with a castor oil base (called rogan) and natural pigments. Abdul Gaffoor the middle aged patriarch of the family elucidates, "We are one family of six left who are carrying on this tradition which stems from Persia. It takes a couple of months to

Quirky local experiences are a real joy on this journey

finish one job and the painting cost runs into thousands, but where are the buyers who appreciate this now?" His face shines with a glow that can only come from deep satisfaction that he derives from his work. "We have been in this business since seven generations, now I am contemplating opening a school so this art does not die with me," he says.

Devi Singh is keen to make us sight one elusive tribe called the Jatrani, that are apparently very difficult to find and photograph. "Madam maybe you can see them at the bus stand in the village. They wear a large nose ring with a thick black rope attached to the head to hold it up. But if they see you they will cover their faces. You have to be quick with your camera," he informs me. Luck is certainly with me on this trip. There they were as he had predicted, and in a moment I could capture their beauty and originality before they fade into the small passages of hidden gateways. Devi Singh tells us, "The tribes of the Jatranis and Rabaris are forever on the move. They wander and move from place to place in search of fodder for their animals, one is lucky to see them at all".

Charged by my stroke of luck, camera in hand I hit the village road on another trail to discover more elusive tribes of Kutch, following a glimpse of a black tie dye veil or a glint of sunshine on a gold nose ring... ●

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE

Ahmedabad is the nearest airport. Ballarpur railway station, which is about 197 km from Bhamragarh is the nearest. The Kutch Express is a very convenient option from Mumbai. Call Ashok at 098250-95514 for a reliable taxi driver, Devi Singh.

WHEN TO GO

October to May is best. Avoid July-September particularly.

PLUS SAYS

STAY

- Rann Riders at Dasada; tel: 098797 86006
- Shaam-e-Sarhad at Hodka; tel: 096625 49610
- Village Hodka Zeel at Harijan; tel: 094298 10379
- Mandavi private tents on a private beach; tel: 098790 13118

EAT

Prince restaurant at Station Road, Bhuj, serves as one of the best Gujarati thalis, which at Rs. 150 is a steal.

SHOP

You can buy stylised garments at elegant shops like Kasab, Khamir and Shrutjan. Contact A.A. Wazir (094274 39671), a great collector of textiles and a walking guide in Bhuj. Contact Arjun at Bhirandiara village (094280 84902) for silver artefacts.