

# Across the SALT DESERT

Baroque palaces meet the bare beauty of the White Rann in Bhuj | By Anita Rao Kashi

4+  
DAYS



**Before I left for Bhuj**, I could only conjure images of rubble and heaped ruins. It had been 13 years since the devastating Gujarat earthquake struck this area one tragic January morning. So it was with a sense of trepidation that I entered this western Gujarat town.

The road shimmered as though covered with water, optical illusions perplexing my mind even in winter. A plateau-like hill ran along the road on the right, topped by a fort wall that was broken in parts. A short while later, the 18th-century Bhujia Fort came into view, standing on a high ridge just outside city limits. The fort has been militarily significant for years and even now it is controlled by the Indian army. Civilian entry is only permitted on Nag Panchami, when devotees converge at the temple inside, which is dedicated to Bhujanga Naga.

The ramparts of the fort that had escaped destruction in the earthquake, continued for nearly a kilometre before suddenly falling away and opening up a panoramic view of the city. There appeared to be no vestiges of the disaster; instead, only a bustling, sprawling city greeted us.

## EXPLORE

**ROYAL ROUTE** The Old City area of Bhuj is full of beautiful castles, including **Prag Mahal Palace**, hidden behind towering stone walls and accessible through a narrow road. The palace, once the seat of Kutch rulers, has several aesthetic and architectural influences but is predominantly Gothic in style. A square clock tower rises over it, topped with an imposing gabled roof. The inside is sparsely furnished but that allows the exquisite carvings on the palace's window panels, elegant columns, and arched doorways to stand out. The durbar hall especially, with its chandeliers, gold-skirted classical statues, and ceilings with relief work, is a sight to behold. A board outside informed us that the palace dates back 450 years, but no other details were available (*daily 9.30 a.m.-12 p.m. and 3-5.45 p.m.; entry ₹20 for adults, ₹10 for children*).

Adjacent to Prag Mahal is the **Aaina Mahal Palace** or the palace of mirrors. It was built in the 18th century by Kutchi ruler Maharao Lakhpatiji, renowned for his flamboyance and patronage of

Signs of the destruction wreaked by the earthquake in 2001 are still visible in Bhuj's Old City area, though the rest of the city has shrugged off all reminders. Prag Mahal is one of better-preserved old palaces.

HEMA NARAYANAN/MOMENT OPEN/GETTY IMAGES



the arts. In fact, the artefacts and paintings inside the palace are from around the world. The most eye-catching piece is a 47-foot-long paper scroll depicting a Kutch state procession (*Fri-Wed 9 a.m.-12 p.m. and 3-6 p.m.; entry ₹10*).

Less than a kilometre away is the **Sharad Bagh Palace**, set amidst a thick cover of trees, shrubs, and flowering plants. The comparatively modest structure was the residence of the last ruler of Kutch, Maharao Madansinji, who served as the ambassador to Norway from 1957-60. On display are an eclectic collection of gold coins, stuffed toys, paintings, and mementos from his career in the Indian Foreign Services (*Sat-Thur 9 a.m.-12 p.m. and 3-6 p.m.; entry ₹10*).

**LAKESIDE LOUNGE** A bit overwhelmed by these grand structures, I sought refuge at **Hamirsar Lake**, near the centre of town. In the evening light, a cool breeze blew gentle ripples on the water which took on a golden hue. Flocks of birds flew across, speckling the light-blue sky, before settling on the wide-canopied trees lining the banks of the lake. In that dappled hour, the white, marble **Swaminarayan Temple** shone in the distance. I could hear faint strains of music—possibly from the temple or elsewhere—interspersed with snatches of conversation that ebbed and flowed around me. It became even more magical as it grew dark and the lights came on, reflections undulating on the water and providing a soothing end to a hectic day.

**DRESS TO THE NINES** Gujarat's textile and handicraft traditions are renowned the world over, and the narrow streets of **Old Saraf Bazaar**, close to the entrance of Prag Mahal, are just the



place to get them. Shops sit cheek-by-jowl and the displays are a riot of colour. They sell intricately embroidered men's jackets, saris, bandhini dupattas, cloth dolls, and mobile covers. Jewellery lovers will find a vast variety of silver trinkets. Make a stop at Women Artisans' Marketing Agency (*34, Nirmalsinghi Ni Wadi; 02832-232354*) and Shrujan (*Behind GEB Sub station, Post Bhujodi; 02832-240272, shrujan.org*), private initiatives which work towards enabling sustainable income-generation for Kutchi women.

**WHITE RUN** The road from Bhuj to the White Rann (Great Rann of Kutch) is nearly straight the whole way, flanked by flat, barren land broken by the odd shrub or lone tree. We were headed towards **Dhordo**, about 80 km north of Bhuj, the last inhabited village before the landscape dissolves into a great white sheet. Even during winter, the sun is piercing enough to cause heat stroke. The only excitement along the route is a blue board marking the point where the Tropic of Cancer runs through.

I found the expanse of the White Rann, extending over 7,500 sq km, a little frightening. It was uniformly barren, with no markers to delineate boundaries. The desert, covered in layers of salt of varying thickness, appeared to be a snow-covered landscape. The salt crunched delicately under my feet, like thin glass. Even before the sun had set, an almost-full moon rose gracefully, leaving the landscape awash in an ethereal light. I was hypnotised by the surreal whiteness around me and the odd romance of the moment. Sitting on the ground, I tried to soak in as much as I could before the temperature fell, and it was time to leave.

The many palaces in the Old City area have elaborately carved and sculpted (left) doorways and columns; Bhuj is a great place to pick up richly embroidered fabrics made by the Kutchi tribes of Gujarat. Visitors can also go see the vibrant displays at the Bhuj Folk Art Museum (right).

DINODIA (SCULPTURE), AXIOM/INDIAPICTURE (WOMEN)



UNIQUE EXPERIENCE



About 25 km north of Bhuj, a road winding past green mustard fields deteriorates into a mud path leading to the tiny village of Sumrasar Sheikh. The village is known for Kala Raksha, a grassroots-level social enterprise that helps preserve local art traditions. Housed inside a large compound, Kala Raksha's main focus is on resuscitating nine types of embroidery techniques. These include *suf* and *khareek* that employ geometric patterns; the stylised flowers typical to *paako*; *rabari's* square-chain motifs; and the intricate cross-stitch patterns studded with mirrors, made by Garasia Jats. In addition to working with over 1,000 women artisans from 25 villages, the Kala Raksha museum provides a quick study in all these traditions. Visitors can browse through products such as bed and table linen, bags, apparel, and toys (Mon-Sat 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; 02808 267237; www.kala-raksha.org; entry free).

STAY & EAT

Bhuj has several hotels that cater to various budgets, but many resorts closer to the White Rann offer traditional experiences.

**REGENTA RESORT BHUJ** has clean and comfortable rooms (02832-230166; www.royalorchidhotels.com/hotel-royal-orchid-bhuj/overview.asp; doubles from ₹4,000).

**KUTCH SAFARI LODGE**, about 10 km north of Bhuj, sits on a plateau overlooking Rudramata Reservoir. The cottages and tents have spectacular views of the water body, though the rooms are quite basic (99252 38599; www.kutchsafaribhuj.com; doubles from ₹3,000).

**SHAAM-E-SARHAD** is a village initiative about 65 km north of Bhuj. The accommodation is in Kutchi *bhungas*, slope-roofed circular mud huts (www.hodka.in; doubles from ₹3,200; open 15 Oct-31 March).

**GATEWAY TO RANN RESORT** is the resort closest to the White Rann. It is a cluster of Kutchi *bhungas*, decorated with traditional patchwork embroidery (www.kutchrannresort.com; doubles from ₹3800; open only from October to April).

It is best to stick to the resorts above. Only local vegetarian fare is available (except at Kutch Safari Lodge), including a variety of snacks like *dhokla*, *khaman*, *kadhi*, and *sweet dal*.

During the monsoon the salty marsh of the White Rann is several feet under water. The seawater dries in winter leaving behind the distinctive white carpet.



A new Swaminarayan temple made of white marble and gold was built a short way from the old structure which was destroyed in the 2001 earthquake.

OMRITA NANDI (TEMPLE), URMIMALA NAG (MAP)

ORIENTATION

Bhuj is in western Gujarat, about 865 km/16 hours northwest of Mumbai and 330 km/8 hours west of Ahmedabad.

GETTING THERE

**Air** Bhuj has an airport with two daily flights from Mumbai but Ahmedabad has better connections to the rest of the country. Taxis charge approximately ₹2,500 for a one-way trip from Ahmedabad.

**Rail** Bhuj is connected to Mumbai by several trains, including the daily Kutch Express.

**Road** Take NH8 out of Mumbai to Vadodara, and get on to the Vadodara-Ahmedabad Expressway. From there, take SH 7/NH 947 towards Viramgam, and continue on the road to Bhuj via

Dhrangadhra, Halvad, and Bhachau. The six-lane highway makes for a great drive.

GETTING AROUND

Autorickshaws are the easiest way to get around Bhuj (₹50-75 depending on the distance). Taxis can also be engaged by the day for around ₹2,000. Always negotiate the price.

SEASONS

Between April and October, temperatures go well past 36°C and often cross into the 40s. The monsoon (June-Sept) brings some relief with occasionally heavy rains. From November to February, daytime temperatures go over 25°C, and hover between 10-15°C during nighttime. This is also the ideal time to visit. Avoid visiting the Rann during the monsoon months. ●



OMRITA NANDI (CAMEL), ANITA RAO KASHI (HUTS)