

Dholavira: Kutch's hidden gem

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One of the most tranquil spots to meditate in the Rann of Kutch is the silvery desert around Dholavira. It enjoys the unique distinction of having the oldest signboard of the world. Dholavira is known for its ancient Indus settlement.

Discovered in 1967, Dholavira lies in the north-west corner of Khadir, a large island surrounded by the Rann of Kutch. The first settlers arrived here from the Indus valley, more than 5,000 years ago. There are several bare Harappan houses and silent cenotaphs, which remain mute spectators to a once-glorious past.

The most interesting discovery of Dholavira is the large inscription, comprising of 10 letters in the Indus script; each letter is engraved on slices of crystalline material. Several *Shivalings*, a trident and clay tablets,

which pictorially depict the ancient tribals of Harappa worshipping animals and the forces of nature, were excavated from the site.

Dholavira is a six-hour drive from Ahmedabad. One passes through Viramgam and Dhrangadhra along the way. Located right in the middle of the giant, silver-sanded desert of Kutch, it is home to thousands of flamingoes (both lesser and greater), which migrate every winter from Siberia. The ideal time to visit Dholavira for bird-watching is

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between September and December.

After the rains, a large part of the desert is covered with a shallow layer of water. However, when the water evaporates, the salt-crusted, silvery desert shines in all its splendour. To watch the silvery sands, shimmering during full-moon on a cold winter's night, is an unforgettable experience!

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Tracking *chinkaras* through the grasslands of Dholavira is an adventure! These animals are extremely sensitive to human presence and dart off at almost supersonic speed if they hear human footsteps. So, all you can

see is the *chinkara* galloping away to the safety of the giant bushes that dot Dholavira.

During my three-week stay at Dholavira, I could spot the *chinkara* only thrice. *Chinkaras* also enter the desert and, tracking them by following their hoof-marks in the desert sand, is an easier way to spot the herds.

The desert around Dholavira offers some picturesque views, including some glorious sunsets. Meditating on the silvery sands of the desert, while listening to the shrill cries of the migratory birds, which overfly these deserts, was a hypnotic experience for me.

Chinkara sanctuary

The Dholavira Chinkara Sanctuary, situated in the Thar Desert, was established in January 1972. This extraordinary area gets partly inundated by about two feet of water in the monsoon months (July-September). Once below sea level, this area was raised by earth movements, which cut it off from the Gulf of Kutch, and was broken up by later earth movements into the flat, saline areas (where people can be seen making salt), and higher grounds with sandy, salt-free soil.

The *chinkara* depends on the soft grass and thorny scrub of the higher ground area for its food. The other wildlife in the "Little Rann of Kutch" includes wild ass (*gudkhars*), blue bull, antelopes, wolves, blackbucks, hyenas, desert foxes, jackals, desert cats, and caracals. The local tribals are extremely hospitable and their diet is as delicious as it is nutritious.

I shared a meal with the tribals inside their mud hut. The simple meal consisted of millet (*bajra*) rotis, baked in a traditional mud oven, potatoes steamed with brinjals in a mildly-spiced gravy and boiled pulses.

How to get there.

By road: Visitors travelling by road have to drive from Ahmedabad, which is 300 km away. The non-stop



Dholavira is at a six-hour drive from Ahmedabad.

drive from Ahmedabad to Dholavira should not exceed six hours.

By air: The nearest airport to reach Dholavira is Ahmedabad. Ahmedabad is connected by direct flights from most Indian cities.

By train: Rapar is the nearest railhead to reach Dholavira. From Rapar, regular state transport buses ply to Dholavira. All trains going from Ahmedabad to Bhuj stop at Rapar.

Where to stay.

The Dholavira forest guest house, inside the Dholavira Chinkara Sanctuary is a value-for-money proposition. The simple yet comfortable accommodation costs '500 to '700 per

night, on a twin-sharing basis.

Where to eat.

Lots of small restaurants serving Gujarati, Kutchi and Kathiyawadi vegetarian cuisine, dot Bhuj. Freshly-steamed vegetables with spices – pumpkin cooked in mustard paste, boiled spinach with pulses – are served with *bajra rotis*. Food is cooked in an earthen oven at most roadside *dhabas*. The food at the high-profile hotels is only for the gastronomically adventurous, and those who like greasy food. Vegans can get fresh, tropical fruits, including watermelons, papayas, tender coconuts, and pineapples at the local market. ■