

Kala Dungar

The Queen of the Kutch Hills



Meditating on the peak is a refreshing, rejuvenating and highly relaxing experience! The salt-crusted desert, the cloudless, clear-blue skies and the foliage of green covering the area offers a most soothing sight. ■ by Murli Menon

A seven-day safari in the Rann was a most memorable experience. One of the tranquil spots to meditate in the Great Rann of Kutch is the Kala Dungar hill, near Khavada. Khavada is a two-hour drive from Bhuj. One passes through the villages of Hodko and Dhordo along the way.

Kala Dungar has a history that goes back 5,000 years. Located right in the middle of the giant, silver-sanded desert of Kutch, it is home to hundreds of wild jackals, who live around the thick forests that surround Kala Dungar.

"Kala dungar" means "black hill" in Gujarati. This hill is the highest peak of Kutch and one can get a bird's-eye view of the silvery sands of Kutch, from the top.

Kala Dungar is at the height of about 2,000 feet and the weather is pleasant throughout the year. It offers some picturesque views, including crimson sunrises and magenta sunsets. One also gets a panoramic view of the wide expanse of the white-sanded desert from the peak of Kala Dungar. Words cannot express the beauty of the silvery sands, shimmering on a full-moon night, in the cold month of January; the starlit skies on a full-moon night in the pin-drop silence of the night are mesmerising.

The ideal time to visit Kala Dungar is between May and June, as the rain-water evaporates in these months and one can get a panoramic view of the wide expanse of the silvery desert. After the rains, a large part of the desert is covered with a shallow layer

of water. When the water evaporates, the salt-crusted, silvery desert shines in all its splendour.

Kala Dungar is home to hundreds of jackals and porcupines and, during my short stay at Kala Dungar, I could spot several jackals and two porcupines. On the return trip, we came face-to-face with two *chinkaras*, who galloped away into the desert after giving us a smirking look. Kala Dungar also boasts of a chinkara sanctuary on the grasslands that surround the desert.

Meditating, while lying supine on the salt-crusted desert floor, listening to the gentle, lapping sound of the giant lake, formed by the collection of rain-water in the desert, was an energising experience. Words cannot articulate the experience of eating a



humble lunch of roasted potatoes and millet (*bajra rotis*), with the local tribals, who live in the Thar desert, while listening to their folk music. Watching these tribals make mud sculptures and painting them with colours extracted from the cactus and baking them in the sun and decorating their mud huts, was also most enjoyable.

Kala Dungar, situated in the Thar Desert, was established in January 1972 as a sanctuary for chinkaras. 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 for its feed. The other wildlife in the Rann of Kutch includes wild ass (*gudkhars*),

blue-bull, antelopes, wolves, blackbucks, hyenas, desert foxes, jackals, desert cats, and caracals.

How to get there:

By road: Kala Dungar is 100 km from Bhuj. The non-stop drive from Bhuj to Kala Dungar should not exceed three hours. Visitors traveling by road have to drive from Ahmedabad to Bhuj, which is approximately 330 km away.



Captivating dance and music performance by tribal artists.

By air: The nearest airport to reach Kala Dungar is at Bhuj. Bhuj is connected by direct flights from New Delhi and Mumbai.

By train: Bhuj is connected by trains from all over India.

Where to stay:

Kala Dungar Forest Guest House at Kala Dungar is a value-for-money proposition. The simple yet comfortable accommodation costs Rs 500 to Rs 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 millet (*bajra*) rotis cooked in an earthen oven, at most roadside *dhabas*. Vegans can get fresh, tropical fruits including water-melons, papayas, tender coconuts and bananas, at the local market. ■

Dhordo

Home of nomadic desert tribes in Kutch

In 2010 September, I journeyed to the only home of the Zat tribals in the Great Rann of Kutch, located in Bhuj District of Gujarat.

The village of Dhordo is located 100 km from Bhuj town and 40 km from Khavada, which is the entry-point for the Banni grasslands. The terrain is barren and covered with cacti.

Wildlife, including jackals, blue-bulls and chinkaras can be found on the fringe areas of the desert. During winter, several species of migratory birds from Siberia visit Dhordo, which is in the heart of the Banni grasslands, on the edge of the silvery, salt-crust desert.

There are several unnamed villages in the desert, which are populated by Zat tribals. They once lived deep in the Thar Desert and migrated to Kutch after Partition. These tribes, called Zats by the locals, trace their ancestry to Baluchistan, and speak remnants of Baluchi, to this day.

The India-Pakistan border is very near Dhordo. The base-camp for entering the white-sanded desert of Dhordo is Bhuj. The Zat settlements around Dhordo are a 12-km-trek on a dirt-road, which winds its way through the salt-crust desert.

The tribals respect the law of the desert and do not indulge in hunting. They live in eco-friendly mud-huts, known as *bhungas* in local dialect. They trek through the desert on foot and do not use camel-carts. They live on fresh vegetables, millets, dates and wild fruits. They do not rear cattle or camels and live on an extremely frugal diet. Wild fruits, grass and berries are available in plenty.

Women-folk wear a large nose-ring, which are passed down the gen-



erations. Zat women are very good at embroidery and mud sculptures and their art and sculptures are extremely attractive.

Addiction to alcohol is rare as prohibition is in force in Gujarat and brewing or sale of alcohol is illegal. Zats are forced to live off the land, in extremely inhospitable conditions. There are several watering-holes across the desert. The Zat women-folk trek long distances to collect water from these watering-holes.

Living in the desert

The Zats continue to exist in the desert, cheerful and facing the harsh realities of life. Music and dance are a way of life for them. They continue to sing their ancient songs in their tribal dialect and sway to the beat of their ancestral music. The Zat tribal songs are a constant feature during community gatherings.

Almost all Zats have married amongst themselves and maintained their ethnic purity over the years. Zats have also preserved their ancestral costumes, and every family has preserved one set of tribal costumes, which they don during ceremonial occasions, marriage or other festivities. The tribal flute and other musical instru-

ments, played during the singing, have also been maintained in working condition.

The beat of the drums and the swaying steps of the dance transport the viewer into a bygone era. The dancers move in synchronicity; men, women and children dance together in reverie and camaraderie in a community gathering.

During the monsoon, every year, most of the Zat tribal houses are swept a way by the rains. However, the Zats remain extremely stress-free and rebuild their huts after every monsoon. They continue to live inside the desert during the rains and do not migrate to higher ground.

An important aspects of Zat culture is their existence in the present moment. They think only about the here and now. They do not dwell on the past or contemplate the future. They are always aware of the present. If they get a meal, they are happy; but they continue to remain cheerful, even if forced to go hungry to bed.

It would be an understatement to say that the Zats are free from mental stress or worries. Smiling children, laughter, music, boisterous chatter, trance-dancing and cheerful faces are the highlights of a visit to this inaccessible Zat village, in the heart of chinkara country.

One of the most important lessons one can learn from the Zats is to shut out the past and forget about the future and continue to exist in the present. This is aptly conveyed by this ancient Zat proverb: "Do not pursue the past, Do not lose yourself in the future; The past no longer is, The future has not yet come; Looking deeply at life, As it is; In the very here and now, The Zat lives in stability and freedom." ■