



KUTCH

QUEEN OF THE DESERT

A picturesque glimpse of the western-most area of India. By Murli Menon

One has just returned after spending eight weeks in India's second largest district of Kutch in Gujarat. Kutch is virtually an island. The villages of the Kutch region have long been renowned for their distinctive and high-quality handicrafts (especially exquisite, mirrored embroidery).

The Gulf of Kutch divides Kutch from the Kathiawad peninsula. To the north, it is separated from the Sind region of Pakistan by the Great Rann of Kutch. The salt in the soil makes this low-lying marsh area almost completely barren. The *bandhani* (tie and dye) hand-printed saris and exquisite gold and silver ornaments are some of the traditional crafts of this region.

Bhuj is the main town of Kutch. Bhuj derives its name from the Bhujiyo Dungar a hill, overlooking the present-day Bhuj town. Rao Khengarji of the Jadeja dynasty, which ruled over Kutch for more than 400 years, founded Bhuj in 1548. The oldest museum in Gujarat is situated

in Bhuj. Bhuj is known for its small, meandering streets, palaces and temples.

Lakhpat is the last town situated at the western end of India. This ghost town is 151 km. from Bhuj airport and boasts of a beautiful landscape. Lakhpat is a fortified town with high walls, several gates and bastions made out of hard stone. Due to the harsh climatic conditions, most people have deserted the town. The town has a few old temples, *gurudwaras* and mosques.

Mandvi, founded in 1581, is an ancient seaport. The town has a very pleasant climate throughout the year and is a summer retreat. Mandvi is situated about 78 kms from Bhuj. Mandvi Hawa Mahal is also imposing, and is reminiscent of similar palaces of royal traditions of Rajasthan. Mandvi is also a 400-year-old shipbuilding centre. The Vijay Vilas Palace is maintained in an eco-friendly manner to preserve its pristine beauty.

Kutch is famous for *chinkaras* and the Narayan Sarovar Chinkara Sanctuary is about 210 kms. from

Bhuj. This sanctuary is the home of the *chinkara* or Indian gazelle. Other animals found in this sanctuary are the blue bull, spotted deer, wild boar and a rich variety of smaller wildlife.

Koteshwar, an important pilgrimage centre for the Hindus, is at a short distance from Narayan Sarovar. Koteshwar – the western-most tip of the country houses an ancient Shiva temple. It stands as a sentinel on the seashore, rising boldly from the sea that washes its western parts.

The view of the sunset is excellent from here. The brass Nandi of the temple is an exquisite piece of art. Dholavira (discovered in 1967) lies in the northwest corner of Khadir, a large island surrounded by the Rann of Kutch

The endless desert inspires the local people to innovate. In Kutch one will come across master craftsmen in their traditional art. Banni is the last village on the border. Kutch is full of a quaint little villages suspended in time. The flamingo colony can be approached from Khavda by road and thereafter on camel back. Visit



Local children in traditional Kutchi dress at Dhola Vira

Banni villages to experience the tribal life of Kutch in various types like Meghawal, Harijans, Jat, and Mutva, etc. The villages visit here are Hodka, Dhordo, Khavda, Ludia, Bhindiarana, Nirona, Jurah, Sumrasar, etc.

The Little Rann of Kutch in Gujarat is situated in the Thar Desert and established in January 1972 as a sanctuary for the last population of the Indian wild ass (*khar*). 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 wild ass depends on the thorny scrub of the higher ground area for its feed. Also found in this park are *chinkaras*, blue bulls, antelopes, wolves, blackbucks, hyenas, desert foxes, jackals, desert cats, and caracals.

How to get there.

By road: Visitors travelling by road have to drive from Ahmedabad to Bhuj which is approximately 330 kms.

By air: Bhuj is connected by direct flights from New Delhi and Mumbai.

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



The silvery desert at Dhola Vira.

KUTCH IS FAMOUS FOR CHINKARAS AND THE NARAYAN SAROVAR CHINKARA SANCTUARY IS ABOUT 210 KMS. FROM BHUJ. THIS SANCTUARY IS THE HOME OF THE CHINKARA OR INDIAN GAZELLE.

Where to stay

Forest guest houses are the most convenient places to stay during one's visit to Kutch.

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*. The food at the high-profile hotels is only for the gastronomically adventurous who like greasy food. Fresh tropical fruits including watermelons, papayas, tender coconuts and pineapples are available at the local market.

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