

# Desert Safari in Zainabad

The Little Rann of Kutch looks vibrant as it is an abode of flamingoes, wild asses or *gudkhars* and beautiful huts. ■ by Murli Menon



Zainabad, is a three hour drive away from Ahmedabad. One passes the historical village of Sanand along the way. We are welcomed by a group of flamingoes flying in formation, as soon as we enter Zainabad. We start our desert safari in an open Jeep and soon find ourselves in the middle of a flat barren terrain with no habitation in sight as far as the eye can see.

After 30 minutes of cruising through the desert, one sees a large

water body in the distance. We are informed by our guide that the water body is not a lake but rainwater which has collected in the desert after the last monsoon. This water would evaporate completely by mid-May.

We come to the edges of this giant "lake" to find hundreds of greater flamingoes, lesser flamingoes and several species of migratory birds from Siberia and North China. It is a pleasure to watch a multitude of colourful birds at close quarters, as

they flock to the edge of the water.

The water is shallow and swampy and boating is not possible, so one has to be content watching the birds from a distance. However, the deep blue sky, reflected in the crystal clearness of the waters is a joy to behold. Watching the crimson sunset over the silver sands of the desert is the highlight of the safari.

After a brief stop to watch the birds, one goes deeper into the desert to spot the wild ass also known as *gudkhars*. This desert safari is exciting and takes us through terrain which resembles a giant cracked clay pot.

After an hour of driving through the desert one can see a glimpse of this magnificent animal. *Gudkhars* are snow-white in colour but have two large elliptical brown spots — one on each side — which makes them look incredibly attractive to behold.

*Gudkhars* are shy creatures and galloped away at great speeds on hearing the sound of the approaching Jeep. Hence the ideal strategy to spot these gentle and shy friends, is to





alight from the Jeep a kilometre away and stealthily trek towards them in a non-menacing way and shoot with the camera as I did. *Gudkhars* live on the dry cacti which are the only vegetation found in these barren flatlands.

There is no inhabitation in these deserts as the groundwater is salty and undrinkable. However, a few rock salt manufacturers do stay in the desert. Their womenfolk have to trek long distances to get drinking water.

The Little Rann of Kutch in Gujarat, situated in the Thar Desert, was established in January 1972 as a sanctuary for the last population of the Indian wild ass (*gudkhar*). 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. It 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. The other wildlife in the Little Rann of Kutch, includes *chinkaras*, bluebull, antelopes, wolves, blackbucks, hyenas, desert foxes, jackals, desert cats and caracals.

#### How to get there.

Zainabad is 120 km away from Ahmedabad. The non-stop drive from Ahmedabad to Zainabad should not exceed three hours.

#### By air

The nearest airport to reach Zainabad is at Ahmedabad. Ahmedabad is connected by direct flights from most Indian cities.

**There is no inhabitation in these deserts as the groundwater is salty and undrinkable. However, a few rock salt manufacturers do stay in the desert. Their womenfolk have to trek long distances to get drinking water.**

#### By train

Viramgam is the nearest railhead to reach Zainabad. From Viramgam regular state transport buses ply to Zainabad. All trains going from Ahmedabad to Bhuj stop at Viramgam.

#### Where to stay.

The Zainabad Kooba Resort run by Nawab Thambi (Desert Coursers) is the most convenient place to stay during one's visit to Zainabad. The resort arranges Jeeps for the desert safari.

#### Where to eat.

Lots of small restaurants serving Gujarati, Kutchi and Kathiyawadi vegetarian cuisine dot Viramgam. 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 opt for fresh tropical fruits including water-melons, papayas, tender coconuts, pineapples which are available at the local market. ■

