Colours of the Rann

The white sands, a riot of colour, and magnificent open skies—Kutch beckons with its myriad attractions.

Text and Photographs: Gustasp and Jeroo Irani
In the Rann of Kutch, the world’s largest saline desert, the wind howls and hoots like a banshee. Those trackless wastes hijacked our imagination so much so miracles and mirages seemed to merge in the flat vastness, and the lines between the real and the unreal were blurred.

At Than monastery, a remote temple complex on the edge of the virtually untrodden Rann (60 km from the district capital of Bhuj), a caretaker told us about a Hindu saint who had meditated there in the headstand position for 12 years! “Twelve years!” we echoed in a mixture of disbelief and astonishment.

But then we thought, anything is possible in this inhospitable terrain; stark, barren and seemingly devoid of life, with silvery pools of water glimmering in the distance like an answer to a shipwrecked man’s prayer. “Those pools are mirages,” said our guide “as we squinted into the blurry distance where the very air seemed to shimmer like a bride’s veil.”

Despite its aridity and almost monochromatic beauty, this region bubbles with colour and joie de vivre—as evinced in the vibrant garb of its people; the chunky silver jewellery and the embroidered cholis and flared, multi-hued ghagras of the women; the swagger of the turbaned moustachioed men who lead trundling camel caravans with the air of generals leading an army, and the exquisite handicrafts that the region is famed for...

Clearly, time is a stranger in these parts; it lurks in the wings but cannot gatecrash on this world even as the people who live here seem to go about the business of living as they have done for centuries. Rural cameos pop up everywhere—processions of mud-caked buffaloes or woolly sheep and goats led by a sleepy shepherd who seemed to march to a different drummer! A couple of times we saw a group of frail figures squatting by the roadside, the only sign of life in the dun-coloured landscape, edged by
bawal, a wild weed grown to contain the inexorable march of the desert. They were perhaps waiting for a local bus, our guide conjectured, a bus that would never turn up, we thought.

Yet the locals are patient and serene, their faces alive with a certain contentment that comes from having made peace with their environment. They are warm and friendly too and allow you glimpses of their world with a simplicity that is utterly charming...

Indeed a tour of local villages is generally on the guest’s agenda; in fact it is a must. We were courteously invited into the bright, conical-shaped, mud-walled local homes or bhungas, spotless and artfully painted and decorated with chips of glass and mirrors and enlivened with bright handmade throw rugs and cushions. There, an array of handicrafts would generally be scattered for viewing—multi-hued, exotic, and flamboyant. Appliqué work quilts, embroidered cholis, and flared skirts, block-printed bedspreads and cushion covers—the skill that once went into making quilts and garments for a blushing bride’s trousseau has now taken more contemporary forms and has a price tag attached.

Indeed Kutch is like a vast, humming-with-enterprise craft park. We stroked exquisite block-printed fabrics at Ajrakhpur, relocated after the earthquake of January 2001. And there were more, like Hodka, Dordo, Ludia, Khovda—each village a showpiece with multiple stories behind it. We met master craftsmen and award winners whose world had once been circumscribed by the boundaries of the village they were born in; till they got recognition for their masterpieces (like a quilt that took 12 months to fashion) and then were sent abroad to participate in craft fairs.

And in the old days, when they left their village for the acclaim of distant shores, the entire hamlet would turn up to bid goodbye because the simple locals feared that they would never see the award winners again after their foray into the big bad world!

And if a tourist wishes, even dinner can be arranged in a local home. We were invited for dinner by a family that lived in a village in the Banni grasslands marked by wetlands and scrub. We sat outdoors on charpoys while the women bustled around in the aromatic kitchen. Our stainless steel thalis...
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Bhungas or mud-plastered round houses dot the landscape; the interiors and exteriors of these homes are elaborately decorated with hand-paintings and mirror inlays. Kutchi women wear colourful attire embellished with embroidery, lending a vivid contrast to the stark landscape.

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came with steaming hot bajra rotis, a vegetable preparation, a mild curry, dal and large glasses of butter milk. A million stars spangled the sky above even as crickets set up a chorus for entertainment. The men engaged us in conversation and spoke of their work. They are primarily cattle herders, and also fashion leather-work punkhas, furniture and metal bells.

On another occasion, we shared steaming cups of tea with a village elder who wished to educate his three daughters and proudly showed us their sole computer! A clutch of sun-burnt children, little girls in tiny cholis and lehengas and ears elongated with heavy silver earrings, escorted us into the various bhungas, kohl-lined eyes sparkling with mischief and curiosity...

In that dry desert air, we felt like we were enfolded in oceans of warmth as our hosts questioned us
about our hectic lives in Mumbai, and we asked about the welfare of their buffaloes and the rainfall that year. Despite our vastly different concerns and worlds, we felt connected with these simple people by an invisible thread.

Yet Kutch seems divorced in pulse from the heaving mercantile spirit of Gujarat to which it belongs. Indeed the Great Rann of Kutch, spanning an area of 7,505.22 sq km, is an immense seasonal salt marsh located in the Thar Desert, in Gujarat, and spilling over into Pakistan’s Sindh province to the north.

After our colourful, cultural and rather intrusive tour of the villages, we set off for India Bridge, the last civilian point beyond which stretched the salt pans of the Rann and Pakistan. This was no mirage but shallow wetlands and cakes of salt deposits left behind by the waters of an ancient sea.

Later we drove up to the summit of Karo Doonger or Black Hill (with the Dattatreya temple dedicated to the trinity of Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma perched on top) from where we looked down on the Rann that stretched out below us. In the fading light, the colours of the desert—the deep blue of the water, the burnt red-brown of the arid land, the expanses of glistening white of the salt pans and the scrubby green of the surrounding mountains—started to seep into each other and take on the glow of an Impressionist painting.

On moonlit nights, our guide whispered, the salt pans shimmer like a carpet of diamonds. Surely this magical play of light and shadow, the utter solitude and loneliness of this inhospitable expanse must have inspired the brilliant hues of the crafts of Kutch!

As we stood atop that lonely mountain, we too felt the rhythms of Nature thrum around us; and a sense of being the only people in this ethereal corner of the country suffused us.