

#BEST OF INDIA 2022

Easy Riding in Gujarat

My way is the highway

A 13-DAY MOTORCYCLE TRIP FROM **MUMBAI TO KUTCH** UNRAVELS A SHIFTING LANDSCAPE, FROM THE DUSTY RURAL OUTBACK TO LUMINESCENT WHITE SANDS

BY EDWINA D'SOUZA



Any vantage point of the Great Rann of Kutch (pictured) is magnificent; facing page: Except for a few rocky intervals, Gujarat's wide roads are smooth sailing (left); Dholavira (right), the Harappan archaeological marvel, merits a stopover.

AMITMEENA103/SHUTTERSTOCK



EDWINA D'SOUZA (ROAD), CRS PHOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK (RUINS)

On a January morning in 2021, my friend Brian and I embarked on our motorcycles for a spin from Mumbai to Kutch, hoping to experience the highway life for the next 13 days. A well-worn road-trippers' circuit, popular for the stark dusty canvas of Gujarat's countryside and ravishing coastal span, we were looking forward to the state's sights unfolding slowly, allowing us time to stop and savour them as we liked.

First on our agenda was a quick halt in the town of Kevadia, 400 kilometres north of Mumbai, which these days is more known for its gigantic Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel statue, towering over the Narmada at 182 metres. After a short dekho around the monument, we sprinted off to Ahmedabad, 200 kilometres north-west and our layover for the night. The next morning, we left Ahmedabad's wide-laned highways to barrell along for seven hours non-stop towards Bhuj, 350 kilometres west, breaking for a steaming plate of *fafda gathiya* and spicy *besan* chutney at a street shack.

Most of the ride was smooth sailing barring a bottleneck at the bypass junction for Kandla port, which cost us some precious daylight. We were keen to cross Bhuj by sundown, instead we had to feel our way through the pitch-dark roads to eventually reach our hotel late in the night.

Bhuj, once the capital of the princely state of Kutch, can feel romantic and ravaged at the same time. Its prominent royal markers are housed in a walled palace complex



Darbadgarh, where visitors can see both Aina Mahal (18th century) and Prag Mahal (19th century), their imposing regalia battered by the tragic earthquake that rocked the region in 2001. We devoted our morning to seeing Bhuj, after which we rode on 80 kilometres north to the white desert (or rann) of Kutch. Gradually, the pastoral view of Banni grasslands gave way to endless salt marshes. Once we reached the rann, bags were dropped at our homestay and we made for the desert in anticipation of a full moon, the most magical sight for anyone to witness here, and later treated ourselves to a dinner of Kutchi *dabeli*. Kalo Dungar, the highest point in Kutch at 1516 feet, is also a good spot to enjoy aerial glimpses of the white desert. Once we checked that off our list, we headed southeast for about 170 kilometres till dusk, stopping at a highway lodge managed by a Jain Trust in a nondescript town Bhachau. dining that night on a sumptuous Jain thali.

From Bhachau, we planned to see Dholavira (150 kilometres north); en route, we stumbled upon a less crowded patch of the Great Rann, our bikes cutting through swathes of white sand. Dholavira was finally recognised by the UNESCO as a World Heritage Site this year and we could have spent hours scouring its Harappan archaeology, its ancient yet sophisticated urban infrastructure, but there was little time on our hands, so we opted for a truncated guided tour instead.

We left Dholavira for Dwarka, Lord Krishna's spiritual home on the intersection of the river Gomti and the Arabian Sea. A holy pilgrimage for many Indians, Dwarka's

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centrepiece is its temple, believed in Hindu mythology to have been restored after being submerged in the sea several times. From the nearby Okha jetty, 30 kilometres north of town, we took a beautiful ferry ride across the Gulf of Kutch to Beyt Dwarka, believed to be Krishna's residence. Later in the evening, we also visited Dwarka's lighthouse and Shivrampur beach, which I would find out, often attracted enthusiastic divers. In the evening, we scouted around for dining suggestions, and all fingers pointed to Shreenath Dining, a modest establishment known for its classic Kathiyawadi thalis. So we humbly obliged.

On Day 8, after a dip in the shallow turquoise waters by Dwarka beach, we hit the road again, this time 235 kilometres along the southern coastline. The stretch was by far one of the most scenic roads I had ever driven on, with the Arabian Sea on one side and giant windmills on the other. We took a detour from here to stop in Porbandar and visit Kirti Mandir,

Mahatma Gandhi's birth house, before continuing onward to Somnath.

We had arrived at night, so in the morning, we decided to visit the Somnath temple, the most sacred of the twelve jyotirlinga shrines of Lord Shiva, an ornate structure of amber-coloured stone. We were closing in on the end of our journey and, in a mood to wind down, we rode to Diu, 80 kilometres away. For two mornings, we would see its many sights—there was a fort, ancient caves and a warship, INS Khukri—and settle into a bar by the afternoon for some beer and fish fry.

On our penultimate day, as we left Diu for Ghoghla jetty, we faced the worst roads we had ever crossed so far. So bad was the journey that as soon as we reached Ghoghla, we gladly parked our bikes on the Ro-Ro boat to Hazira, near Surat, across the Gulf of Khambat. At Surat, we prepared to head back home, but not before trying *Surti Ghari* as a sweet capper to our 13-day odyssey that had proven that there was more to Gujarat than many like me had been led to believe. ■

CHRISTOPHE CAPPELLI/SHUTTERSTOCK (WOMEN); EDWINA DSOUZA (FOOD)

There's some quiet respite to be found in sacred temples in Dwarka and Somnath (pictured); facing page: Spend a day in Bhuj (top), Kutch's resilient former capital; All the scrumptious street food (bottom) will demand regular halts along the way.



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