

The airport at Ahmadabad or Amdavad was surprisingly efficient, spacious and clean- it reminded me of a similar sized airport at Kolkata which was a model of crowds, chaos and calumny. Panditji, a middle aged driver from Basti district is waiting for us at the airport and we are soon on our way to some hotel in Ahmadabad for breakfast and as he says, to freshen up (a universal euphemism in North India for using the toilet!) before we leave for the Little Rann of Kutch.

Ahmadabad seems like a very well run city- the roads, the commercial establishments and the traffic all seem to be efficient and well run- at least in this part of the city. We cross the Sabarmati over one of the many bridges- for several miles along the riverfront one can see construction activity- apparently the riverfront is being developed into a hospitality and entertainment district, a la Singapore. The main commercial street has the standard look that these places have- malls and shops on the ground floor, offices on the top floors. Surprisingly, one doesn't notice any encroachment- something so ubiquitous in other large cities.

The driver is clearly a Modi fan- everything good that I comment on is attributed to Narendra Modi. And everything that doesn't seem to function to the Central government!

We go to a historic Jain temple built by some local chief called Huthi Singh in the mid-19th century. There don't seem to be many tourists but several local residents coming to pray before they start their day. Along the way we pass the residences of the textile magnates of yore- the ones who made Ahmadabad the commercial and manufacturing hub of the past. The mansions are expectedly huge and surrounded by high walls- though the decline shows in the poor maintenance of the boundary walls.

The old part of town is more interesting- in the middle of a road there is a mosque- the Shiddi Sayyid mosque. Built in the middle of the 16th century by an Abyssinian (more on this later) who was in the employ of the local Sultan, the mosque itself is not very impressive but the stone lattice work with floral motifs is exquisite. There are 10 such windows and each one is different. In fact, one of them has been used as the logo of the other institution of Ahmadabad- IIM, A. There is hardly anyone there though from the number of prayer caps in the basket, this is clearly a popular place of worship. Interestingly, the prayer caps are not the usual lacework ones- instead they are very cheap plastic baskets which are used for washing vegetables! Maybe to avoid pilferage!

We are soon on our way out of the city- the outskirts, especially the industrial area extends for quite some distance. This road is a state highway and yet the quality of the road is superb. In fact, this is one of the things which one notices in Gujarat- the roads, even the one's connecting villages are in fairly good condition. The potholes are filled and the roads are well maintained. Why this is the case, I couldn't find out.

This seems, at least for most part very fertile country. Paddy waste lying on farms where other crops like jeera and tobacco has been planted. This was puzzling since I had thought we were close enough to the Rann of Kutch to have saline, bad agricultural land. This was obviously not the case- even at the very edge of the vast saline desert of the Little Rann of Kutch, I saw cotton farms and was told that this is a two-crop-a-year land. Part of the reason must be the extensive network of canals made possible by the Sardar Sarovar on the Narmada. The canals seem to be in good health and at several places one sees maintenance work going on.

The Royal Safari Camp is located at the edge of the Wild Ass Sanctuary in the Little Rann of Kutch. The salty marshland, about 5000 square kilometres in area abuts the more well known Rann of Kutch or the Great Rann of Kutch. Almost the whole marshland has been declared as the Wild Ass Sanctuary, the largest sanctuary in India.

There are cottages surrounded by cotton fields and the resort seems to be well equipped. There are the usual weekend Ahmadabad tourists (this being only about 3 hours from the city) and then there are serious birders- mostly foreigners but also an Indian team of photographers. The Manager tells me that half the rooms are reserved for the engineers of an under construction solar farm- youngsters, mostly from South India who appear to be totally lost in this wilderness- literally!

The afternoon safari or jeep ride into the Sanctuary is on a very old, rickety open Mahindra jeep. Our driver is Mehboob who is a resident of the nearby village Bajana. After getting the permission from the forest office, with a totally bored clerk who is more interested in changing the ring tone on his mobile than in telling me about the sanctuary, we are on our way.

The landscape changes immediately as soon as we enter the park boundary. Thorny bushes, very few, isolated babool trees and miles and miles of flat,

cracked land-with no vegetation because of the salinity. One can see the salt on the soil. It is amazing that any life survives in this harsh environment with temperatures in the summer going upto 50C and in the winter nights, dropping to about 1C. And yet, the miracle of evolution has made sure that even here, there is a huge variety of fauna. The eponymous wild ass is the most famous of course, but we also saw blackbuck, neelgai, and a huge variety of birds. The wild ass, of which there about 3000 left now is a highly endangered animal and is only found in this place.

The flat Rann is broken by some 100 elevated regions called bets where the animals take refuge when the Rann is filled with water during the monsoons. And the depressions in the landscape hold the water, giving the place its well known birds. The flamingos are the most famous but there are many other varieties near the small ponds and lakes.

In the middle of this vast expanse of nothingness, we see a small shack with a blue polythene roof of the kind used by slum dwellers everywhere- while landing in Mumbai, especially during the monsoon, the unbroken blue that one sees from the plane is the very same sheet. I am very curious to find out who is living in this harsh, inhospitable terrain.

It turns out that these are salt farmers- people who dig into the ground (one only needs to dig to about 20 feet) to hit water which is then pumped out and allowed to evaporate to harvest salt. A family of 3 lives in this shack for 7 months of the year (non-monsoon months) and sells the salt to the nearby chemical factories. The whole thing is of course totally illegal- but given the poverty amongst certain sections and the difficulties of policing such a vast expanse I guess almost inevitable.

On the way back, we drive through the village of Bajana. The village has a large Muslim population as is evident from the large number of mosques. A fairly large village of about 10000 people, it is like any other village in eastern India- open ponds at the edge where pigs and other animals abound, no sewage system though there is electricity like in almost all villages in Gujarat.

We go to a weaver's workshop to see some famous Kutchi shawls. The walls are covered with old, black and white photographs with the weaver's father and grandfather presenting shawls to local bigwigs. The weaver sits in a small depression in the floor so that he is level with the loom. He is weaving a very intricate design on a woollen shawl.

The economics of this whole operation still boggles my mind- we purchased a few shawls, each for around 500/-. Given the amount of time it takes to weave one with the intricate designs, and the cost of the thread etc, it is unclear to me how he would be surviving.

The drive to Gondal the next morning is through the very fertile Saurashtra region. We pass the district town of Surendranagar which seems like any other district town in North India. One can see that this is cotton growing region by the number of cotton related enterprises. Ginning mills, pressing mills are there all along the road amidst cotton fields. Cotton is ready to be picked and in some places this is going on. The labor is mostly women- interestingly wearing saris and a woollen scarf to cover their head, even though it is warm. Am reminded of the old joke about Bengalis in Delhi- they start wearing monkey caps on November 15 and take them off only on March 15- irrespective of the actual weather!

The cotton crop looks marvellous. The driver gives us a running commentary on the advantages and disadvantages of Bt cotton vis-à-vis native varieties. Apparently, the local farmers have started preferring the native varieties again since the oil content in cotton seed is much higher. But like several of this other nuggets of information, one is not sure if this is impressionistic or really true. But I did find out that Surendranagar district, because of its dry weather was the preeminent destination for patients of consumption to recuperate.

Past Surendranagar, we pass a small village called Muli. It looks like a wayside rest for busses and we have some tea at a Dhaba. From the road, one can see a decrepit yet, elegant palatial house in the village. On going there, we encounter locked gates at the entrance to a huge enclosure with dilapidated outhouses. The main palace or kothi is built in the style of an English Manor house. We manage to get inside and see that this belongs to the erstwhile Raja (or zamindar) or Muli who is now making it into a Heritage property.

Gondal is the main city of the eponymous principality in the Saurashtra region. It obviously has the feeling of a small Taluka or Tehsil town though I am told that the place was a major centre of commodity speculation – Gujarat being the hub for commodity speculative markets for cotton, groundnut, oilseeds etc, much before this was legalised. The heritage hotel where we are booked (one of the three properties in the town which are all palaces of the Raja of Gondal) looks like a haunted house from outside. We find out that we have been bumped

because Murari Bapu, an enormously popular preacher is delivering his discourses in a nearby temple town Birpur. The hotel has put us up in the other property of the Raja.

The Royal Orchard Palace is actually two palaces- the front is the hotel which is absolutely marvellous in its old style architecture. Separated from this by a mango orchard, is the private residence of the Raja on the back side. The hotel is very well maintained and as expected, we are the only native guests there. All the other guests are from overseas- one Australian couple being heritage tourists who are spending about 3 weeks driving from Mumbai to Delhi and "taking" in the heritage properties on the way!

The town has few noteworthy things which can be seen in an afternoon. One of the palaces of the erstwhile Maharaja has been converted into a museum. Part of the museum is open and strangely one has to buy three different tickets for three sections- the royal residence overlooking the river (which is really a sewage canal at the moment), the crockery section which includes a collection of memorabilia collected by the Maharaja of Bhavnagar (related to the Maharaja of Gondal by marriage) and a horse carriage section. Each of these gives you a sense of the kind of carefree luxury in which the royal families of even small principalities lived till half a century ago. The small kid who is our guide apparently studies in Class X and does this during his vacations. The only interesting thing he told us, apart from a straightforward description of the objects d'art was that the royal assembly hall has been used for the climax scene of a Bollywood blockbuster!

The most famous of the Maharaja of Gondal was a benign monarch (if one believes the hagiographic accounts) who had done his Bar-at-Law. Impressed with the English public school system (and obviously the architecture) he built a school in the city which is modelled after Eton! The building is magnificent though now, with stinking toilets, overflowing sewage and general decrepitude, it is not a pleasant sight. The cricket grounds of this home-grown Eton are being used to play tennis ball cricket as well as to practice driving by novice drivers!

The Royal Orchard Hotel where we are staying is a small, heritage property which has been converted into a hotel. The food is cooked in the royal kitchen and so one cant order but has a fixed menu- one eats what the royalty feels like eating that day! The Maharaja has a passion for vintage cars and the palace garages boast of around 50, immaculate old beauties. They include an all-wooden car from 1905.

The one thing which is not seen in Gujarat is alcohol. There are no liquor vends or drinking places and one cant find alcohol except from a known bootlegger. However, it seems that everyone turns a blind eye to drinking- every single place where we stayed, happily provided soda and snacks in the evening when I wanted to have my drink!

We see the other two landmarks of this small town- the famous Bhuvaneshwari Mata temple and the attached Ayurvedic medicine factory. The medicine factory is fascinating since one sees how modern technology is being used apparently in synch with the exact methods laid out in the scriptures to manufacture the preparations. It is not possible to be there for too long since the smell is nauseating.

The following day we leave for Junagadh and Gir. We are now in the heart of the Saurashtra region and one can see that the land is immensely fertile- black cotton soil with cotton, oilseeds or even wheat crops everywhere. On the way we pass the small hamlet of Birpur which is the place for the shrine of Jalaram Bapa, the Sai Baba of Gujarat- a saint of very humble origins who has an immense following all over Gujarat.. The place is teeming with people because of the Murari Bapu discourse.

Rajkot is not very far and though we don't go into the city, even from the highway it is evident that this is a very prosperous city. The mainstay of the city is the machine industry and it is said that all the chakhras-motorcycle adapted means of transport which are ubiquitous in the rural areas as well as mofussil towns- are made in Rajkot. From the number of luxury car dealerships on the highway outside the city, it is clear that Rajkot has a lot of moneyed people.

The driver insists on taking us to another small town on the way- Jetpur which apparently was until recently, the textile printing centre for all of Gujarat. The textile printing industry is now almost defunct but several small units still exist and each of them has a retail outlet. We go to one of them which is inside the mill complex. The Mill complex, which also houses the owner, is huge but totally decrepit. The land being more valuable than running the industry it seems. It is only a matter of time before the whole thing is pulled down and a mall or residential flats are constructed.

As one approaches the city of Junagadh, one notices a number of Muslim owned businesses on the roadside. Junagadh has a fairly large population of Muslims and in fact was one of the few kingdoms which decided to integrate with Pakistan instead of India in 1947. The Nawab of Junagadh argued that like Kashmir which shared a boundary with Pakistan, his state also shared the boundary and hence he has a right to accede to Pakistan rather than India. Except in this case, the boundary was maritime.

This argument obviously was not in tune with what Sardar Patel had in mind and so there was for some time danger of military action like that in Hyderabad. The Nawab fled to Pakistan taking with him, it is said, the royal treasures and leaving the state bankrupt. The Dewan of Junagadh, Shah Nawaz Bhutto, father of Zulfikar Bhutto then invited the Indian state to take control of the kingdom.

We go to the Royal Mausoleum complex which is opposite the district courts. The complex has a few buildings which, though not very large, are exquisitely carved with huge French windows. The place is deserted except for a few urchins playing cricket. The grounds and the buildings, though with the archaeological department are very poorly maintained and one notices that they are used as a communal toilet by the locals.

The old city of Junagadh is located on a hill at the base of which runs the railway line, which also separates it from the new constructions. The older part of the city, as with all such habitations is a maze of very small roads and lanes with open drains at some places. We go to the Museum which is housed in the palace near the top of the hill. The Museum is a total disappointment with poor lighting, very little collection (mostly of arms, clothes and some paintings) and very unhelpful staff.

The main attraction of Junagadh is the fort or uparkot- the citadel built above the city on a hill. We drive up to the citadel and stop at the magnificent canon which overlooks the valley below. The canon, apparently made in Egypt in the 16th century is very impressive. A hawker is selling a strange kind of fruit which apparently is called the pista (not the pistachio as it turns out). It is a triangular, flat fruit, green in colour which needs to be broken open. The seeds inside then have a hard covering which again need to be broken to get to the nut which tastes a bit like an almond.

The citadel complex has many buildings- the mandatory mosque, the gardens and two fabulous step wells. Apart from this there are rock cut caves which apparently date from the 5th century AD.

It is now almost lunch time and after a Gujarati thali at a small restaurant in Junagadh, we head off towards the other major attraction, Girnar. Girnar is a series of hills just beyond Junagadh which, as with all such places are major sites of pilgrimage. The main temple is the Jain temple near the summit though there are many Hindu temples along the way. The road to the small habitation has the famous Asokan edict dating from the 3rd century BC. The huge rock on which are inscribed Asoka's instructions has now been given a roof to protect its inscriptions from the elements. The inscriptions on the uneven rock which has stood there for more than 2 millennia, is in sharp contrast to the white washed walls around it.

The small town of Girnar, at the base of the Girnar hill is custom built for pilgrims- dharamshalas, small shops selling trinkets as well as pooja material, cows meandering freely, happily eating the wares of the hawkers in case the hawker's attention is diverted for a moment- and temples. Every other house is a small temple. It is not the time for the major fair right now and so the place has only a few tourists like us.

The drive to Sasan Gir takes about an hour and a half from Junagadh. The road is tolerable though since one has gotten used to exceptionally good roads in Gujarat, it seems a let down. One can see the fertility of land on the way as well. Another remarkable thing one notices is that the villages in Gujarat don't give an impression of being any more prosperous than similar places in the Indo-Gangetic belt. However, the one thing one notices immediately is the presence of the development apparatus of the state- dispensaries, schools, panchayat buildings, bus shelters etc- these are all well maintained and from the look of things, functional. The driver, Panditji of course waxes eloquent over what miracles Narendra Modi has performed in Gujarat, but one can't deny the overall high level of infrastructure that is noticeable.

We are staying at a Birding Lodge at the edge of the forest reserve in Sasan Gir. The lodge is a collection of cottages made in a mango orchard and is about 3 kilometres from the village of Sasan Gir. The Gir National Park has another reserve area which is mostly out of bounds for tourists and has a small enclosure where tourists are taken for an open air safari to see the animals.

The Gir Forest was the hunting ground for the Nawab of Junagadh and was the site for many a hunting expedition including those with visiting British notables. Apparently Jim Corbett made the Nawab change his mind and he declared the whole forest as protected.

After settling down in the cottage we go for a walk on a path, at the edge of the forest area. The path leads to a small rivulet. The whole place has a very idyllic look that is if one ignores the bridge on the rivulet which sees a huge amount of traffic- Gir being on the road to the major pilgrimage town of Somnath.

Dinner at the Lodge is good and wholesome- since the whole place has few guests, the cooking is done home-style. The electricity goes off and since the Lodge is next to the forest, it is not permitted to operate a generator. This proves to be a huge boon since with complete ambient darkness in the orchard, the sky is mindboggling and one can see the stars clearly.

The next morning is time to go into the forest. We get into a jeep with a driver and a guide. It is reasonably cold and one sees everyone bundled up in their anoraks and mufflers. Since the trip starts around 6.30 am, it is still dark. Our guide, Bhavesh is a local resident who seems to be incredibly knowledgeable about birds. And he talks! I am reminded of the opening scene of Dev Anand in Guide when he is giving a breathless introduction to some monument!

Bhavesh takes us around the forest- mostly semi arid though in places Sal trees also. Incredibly, there is a huge variety of vegetation in the forest which Bhavesh points out excitedly.

We see many birds and some animals- mostly deer and wild boars. No sign of lions of course but I am not complaining since the whole experience of moving on the jungle trails, in the cold early morning light makes it worth it. Most of the tourists that we see are foreigners but we do encounter several jeep loads of local Gujrati families. Bhavesh, the guide is at his sociological best and talks disdainfully about how these "locals" are- they make a lot of noise, they throw their waste and more importantly, they are parsimonious with their money! Extending his analysis, he then gives a historical analysis also- apparently till a couple of years ago, there were almost no local visitors to this place. And then Amitabh Bacchan was appointed the Brand Ambassador for Gujarat and he made a series of advertisements promoting Gujarat as a tourist destination. That opened the floodgates according to Bhavesh. After this sociological analysis, whenever we would run into a jeep carrying a Gujrati family in the forest,

Bhavesh would conspiratorially whisper, “Khushbu Gujrat Ki”, the catch phrase of the advertisement by Mr. Bachhan!

That afternoon we go to the village of Sasan Gir. A small habitation which for years served as a way stop for pilgrims to and from Somnath, now has several upmarket resorts. One can see the impact of development on the village- the fertile lands are all marked for the development of this or that resort.

The Wild Life facilitation centre has a small museum with information panels on the forest. For some reason, one has to remove one’s shoes to enter the museum. Several interactive displays exist in the museum though none of them work. The lady sitting in the museum obviously is most unhelpful regarding why they are not repaired etc. The centre also has a souvenir shop where calendars, caps and other memorabilia is on sale- mostly made in China of course!

On the way back to the Lodge, our driver takes us to a drive through one of the lanes of the village. Perfectly normal rural setting- open drains, pigs and other animals running all over, urchins playing with old cycle tyres, the men sitting under a tree gossiping and smoking etc- however, the children and the adults are all African! And thereby hangs a tale!

These people are the Shiddis- there are over 250,000 of them settled in Gujarat. They are descendants of the slaves imported by the local chieftains as soldiers or slaves who escaped from trading ships during the medieval and late medieval times. They retain several of their customs including music and dancing though their language is now the local language. They are supposedly in great demand as dancers and musicians and one saw several resorts advertising “dhamals” which is the Gujarati word for African dance and music, especially the Ngoma drumming.

The evening safari is not terribly exciting since our guide doesn’t seem to be terribly clued in. We pass some habitations inside the forest (there is also a railway line passing through the forest!). The guide informs us that these are the houses of Maldharis who the natives of this forest. They are mostly cowherds and make a living by selling the milk to the local dairies. The houses look very ramshackle though one could see motorcycles parked. There is no electricity in these houses which are scattered all over the forest. I see a Maldhari man talking animatedly on a mobile phone and enquire where he might be charging his phone- the guide is clueless and shrugs his shoulders! The driver at this point pitches in and says that he goes to the village of Sasan Gir very day to sell milk

and so possibly charges it there! The driver also points out a camel tied outside one of the houses. This is the famous camel who smokes bidis though my asking for a demonstration is met with obvious excuses!

While on the way back to the resort we see a whole line of vehicles parked near a trail and it turns out that the forest rangers have managed to spot a large group of lions. We see some 7 of them sunning themselves on the rocks near a stream. They do look very majestic though to me a tiger seems more self-confidently powerful. But since everyone here is only interested in seeing the Asiatic Lion which is found only in this forest, everyone returns happy. Never mind the enormous variety of other animal life in this forest. Or the very interesting mix of flora, from the dry shrub kind to the sal, lac and other trees. They are interested in only the lion and they have got their fix!

We drive to Ahmadabad the next day to return. Panditji, our driver has assured us that he would be able to squeeze in a quick trip to Lothal on the way back since that involves only a short detour. The road leading to Lothal is a single lane one and it is hard to believe that this leads to one of the most important Indus valley site in the subcontinent.

I have been to Lothal about 20 years ago and am pleasantly surprised to see that the museum has been given a facelift and one can actually spend some time there admiring and being awestruck at the remarkable ingenuity of people, almost 3 millennia ago.

Finally, after crossing the huge urban-industrial sprawl that Ahmadabad is (the industrial area starts some 50 kilometres from the city centre!), we reach the airport and say goodbye to our faithful guide, Panditji the driver. We have a few hours of wait and after an uneventful flight, land at the foggy and bitterly cold Indira Gandhi airport.