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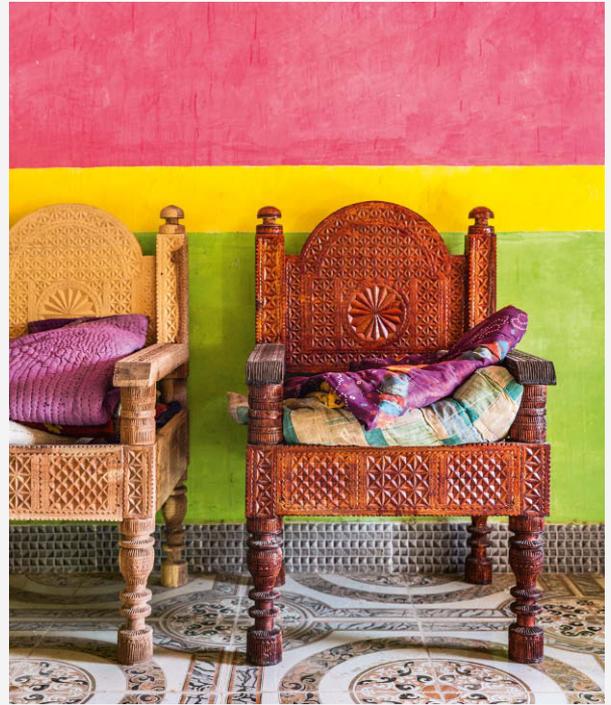
**GET CRAFTY
IN KUTCH**

PLUS HOW TRAVEL IS CHANGING THE FASHION INDUSTRY



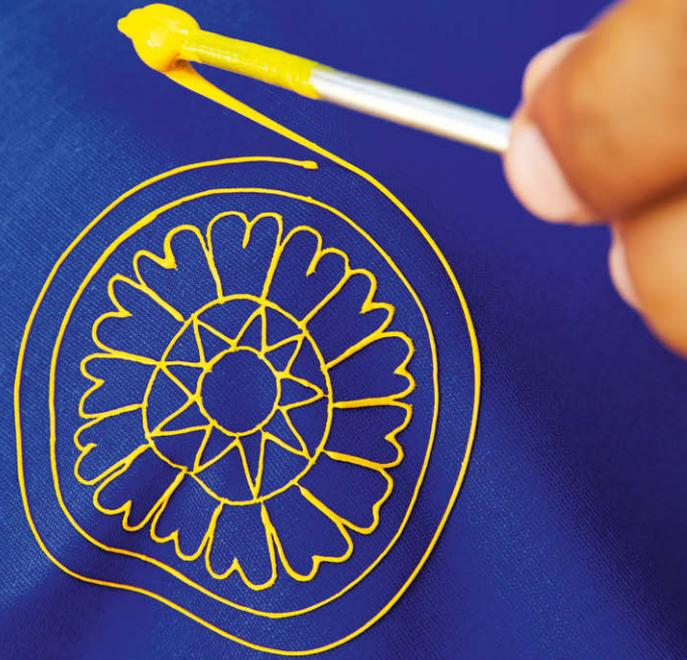
FASHIONABLY

Darlings of the fashion world, Outhouse Jewellery designers—and sisters—Kaabia and



YOURS. LOVE, KUTCH

Sasha Grewal explore one of India's most stylish regions. Photographs by **Julien Capmeil**



In a small dusty village in Gujarat's Kutch district, we've just had an epiphany—that jewellery isn't just about adornment, it can be, and is, a social statement. It can proclaim to the world one's marital status, even before it cues wealth. For instance, a man's first wife wears a certain kind of jewellery that marks her out from his second wife, who has jewellery patterns specific to her. And if you're single, well you've got designs all your own. As jewellery designers, we've always

taken pride in knowing the latest fashion trends, in our access to exquisite craftsmanship and our ability to buy and create world-class products. Our three-year-old brand, Outhouse Jewellery, has showcased at Lakmé Fashion Week and is worn by fashionistas from Deepika Padukone to Tyra Banks. Studying industrial design, working with precious gems, travelling to some seriously glamorous cities—New York, London, Milan—we thought we had a decent grip on the world of jewellery. But here, in the interiors of Gujarat, with *Condé Nast Traveller*, far from the runways of the world's fashion capitals, we have been given a window to a whole different world.

We are at **Kala Raksha Trust** (www.kala-raksha.org), an NGO in **Sumrasar** village that serves as a resource centre on the region's crafts. It was the penultimate day of our week-long journey in Kutch. We had started from **Bhuj**, Kutch's primary city, which seems to be in a state of flux—every nook seeped in history, every corner on the precipice of change. From traipsing around Shroff Bazaar—for traditional silver jewellery,

Above from left: **Sasha tries on an odhni in Bhirandiyara; rogan painting in Nirona.** Previous pages, clockwise from top left: **the ruins of Prag Mahal, a 19th-century palace in Bhuj; quilts in a Bhirandiyara shop; City The Village Resort; Ludiya village is famous for its wood carving; Khavda is known for pottery; a Bhujodi woman wearing silver anklets; a Nirona local; lacquer work rolling pins in Nirona**

vintage smoking pipes and deliciously tangy pickles—to people-watching at Hamirsar Lake and making up for lost calories with a sinful (albeit vegetarian) Gujarati thali at **Hotel Prince** (www.hotelprinceonline.com), there's not been a dull moment here. Everybody knows everybody, and the narrow lanes only make conversation more convenient. Most signage is in Gujarati (after a while, English feels foreign), cattle have the right of way and it's completely normal to drink buttermilk with every meal. Venture beyond city limits and the colour green is a rare sight: the dusty ochre landscape is sparsely dotted with acacia trees, cattle, camels, sheep and the occasional donkey. The heat is maddening; everything looks duller and brighter at the same time.

We notice that most buildings are no taller than two floors. Neha Gandhi, founder of **matsya** (www.matsyacrafts.com) and our tour coordinator, tells us this is to minimise the risk of damage—a caution that's crept in after the devastating earthquake of 2001, in which more than 20,000 people died and scores more were injured. Throughout our time here in Kutch, we realise that the event has permanently changed something among locals, who segregate their lives into before and after the disaster. But if there's one thing that changed us, it's being in the midst of crafts that go back centuries, but are as relevant now as they ever were.

For those of us in the fashion industry, embroidery is to Kutch what beaches are to →



Inside Aina Mahal, an 18th-century palace in Bhuj

Goa—it's the first thing one thinks of. In **Bhirandiyara**, a village where decorated bhungas (traditional mud huts) stand under the scorching sun, groups of women in beautiful embroidered outfits called kanjiris work on mounds of fabric. A young Meghwal woman tells us, "It's something we learn at a very young age from our mothers." Neha explains that it's tradition for mothers to pass on their skills to daughters; as part of their dowry, they make a range of items—torans, bags, beaded jewellery—whose value is judged based on the design, colour combination and neatness of the stitches. As our journey progresses, we realise embroidery is not just a fashion term, it's integral to the very fabric of Kutch.

Nearly 80km from Bhirandiyara is another small village called **Dhaneti**. Maybe it's the harsh afternoon sun, the dusty yellow roads or the modest, cream-coloured houses—but it feels like we're viewing the village through a permanent sepia filter. We meet Lakshmiben, a frail woman who, like most craftspeople, speaks only Gujarati, but we get by with a little help. Sitting on the concrete floor, she's working on some beautiful red fabric. It's not for sale, but meant for her to-be-born grandchild. Lakshmiben belongs to the Ahir community, one of farmers and cowherds. Another revelation here: different communities derive sartorial inspiration from their respective occupations. For instance, the nomadic Rabaris use thorns and bushes to create striking linear patterns. Lakshmiben, on the other hand, creates fluid, rhythmic designs using flowers, leaves and grass-like motifs; we're struck by their neatness and symmetry. She's even using the latest colour trends—pastels, psychedelic, complementary—with a confidence that is astounding and completely instinctual.

Today, Lakshmiben has 50 women working under her, but like many others, she started with working for **Shrujan** (www.shrujan.org), a Kutch NGO founded by Chandaben Shroff, which enables women to work from home. Chandaben, or Kaki, as she's fondly called, explains, "In 1969, I came from Mumbai to a village near here, to help out after a famine." On seeing the exquisite embroidery that women did, she commissioned them to work on a few saris, and Shrujan was born. "I started with 30 karigars, and today we work with more than 3,000 across 100 villages." Kaki still supervises the designs.

NGOs like Shrujan have played a critical role in bringing Kutch's arts and crafts to the fore. Kala Raksha Trust for instance runs a design school, Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya, which has helped artisans repurpose their skills, preparing them for the outside world. Ramji Maheshwari, a 40-year-old weaver in Sumrasar, addressing us in fluent English, tells us, "My father taught me how to weave, but I wanted to learn what the market wants." And so he went to school—the Vidhyalaya. Today, he uses cotton sourced from fields just outside Bhuj →

Top row: **ajrakh-printed fabrics at Sufiyan Khatri's workshop in Ajrakhpur; cattle in Bhujodi; a girl wearing a kanjiri in Bhirandiyara.** Bottom row: **Kaabia with a craftswoman in Bhirandiyara; pickles and papad at lunch in Hodka; stone sculptures at Chattardi, a cenotaph complex in Bhuj**

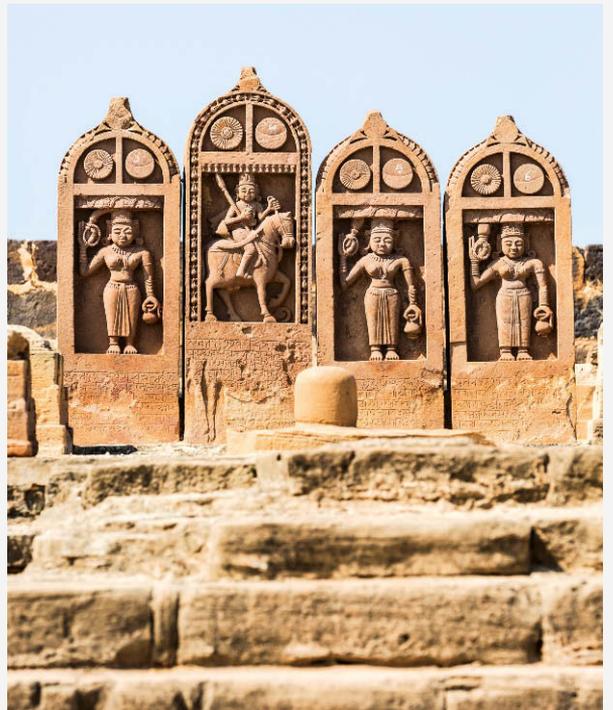


In **Bhirandiyara**, women in





intricately embroidered kanjiris work on mounds of fabric





In **Kutch**, even as a **visitor**, you get used to beauty. **Talent is expected** and **colours** are **taken for granted**



City The Village Resort by evening. Opposite page: a Bhirandiyara local at her home

to make stoles, scarves and shirts. We ask about the stole he's wearing, and he blushes. "It's from my brand, Tana Bana, which means 'warp and weft'. I recently participated in a fashion show by Good Earth, and export a lot of my garments," he says proudly.

Most weavers in Kutch work with cotton and wool. There's also the thriving culture of using kala cotton, a variety that is grown without fertilisers or pesticides, ergo organic. But **Khamir** (www.khamir.org), an NGO established in 2005, also upcycles plastic in its products. Over glasses of chilled lemonade, Paresh Mangaliya, Khamir's design development manager, explains, "A French visitor to the campus, appalled by the state of garbage disposal in the city, brought plastic bags one day, cleaned them and started weaving them with cotton yarn." Today, in addition to kala cotton stoles, kurtas and dresses, Khamir's craft store retails chic bags and clutches made using recycled biscuit wrappers and milk packets.

Time and time again we see evidence that for the many communities of Kutch, crafts like embroidery, printing and weaving, used to create items of daily use, have, over the years, also become sources of revenue and recognition. Sufiyan Khatri, a 10th-generation block printer, for instance, supplies fabrics to Fabindia, and exports his wares to Australia, Canada, Spain and the UK. He's even worked on collections for labels such as péro, Divya Sheth and Bombay Electric. As soon as we enter his workshop, we see fabrics—all in a dark shade of blue—spread out to dry. The colour, he informs us, has special significance to the people of Kutch and the craft form that he specialises in—ajrakh. "While trying to cross the mighty Rann, if people got separated from their groups, they were never to be found again. Since indigo and red can be spotted from a distance, they began to be used in clothing and are characteristic to ajrakh printing." Another revelation of how colour, in this case, goes beyond the cosmetic to play such a crucial, practical role.

But beauty for its own sake, too, has a place here. **Nirona**, near the Rudramata Dam, 40km from Bhuj, is a unique sight. Bougainvillea hangs heavy above nondescript doors and old men sit smoking by the road, oblivious to the children creating a ruckus around them. Perhaps they, too, are hypnotised by the quick, effortless flair of National Award-winner Khatri Sumar, a practitioner of rogan painting, in which he paints directly on fabric, designing seemingly invisible patterns as he goes. The designs are symmetrical and the motifs he uses are inspired by Islamic or Persian art. As we marvel at the delicate works made on cotton and silk, displayed in his living room, he smiles. "I have been doing this for 20 years—the seventh generation of my family in the craft." His family is the only one in India that practises rogan painting. Fitting, then, that Prime Minister Narendra Modi chose a painting by Sumar's elder brother Khatri Abdulgafur as a gift for US President Barack Obama. Meeting Khatri is not just humbling, it's →



The ochre landscape is

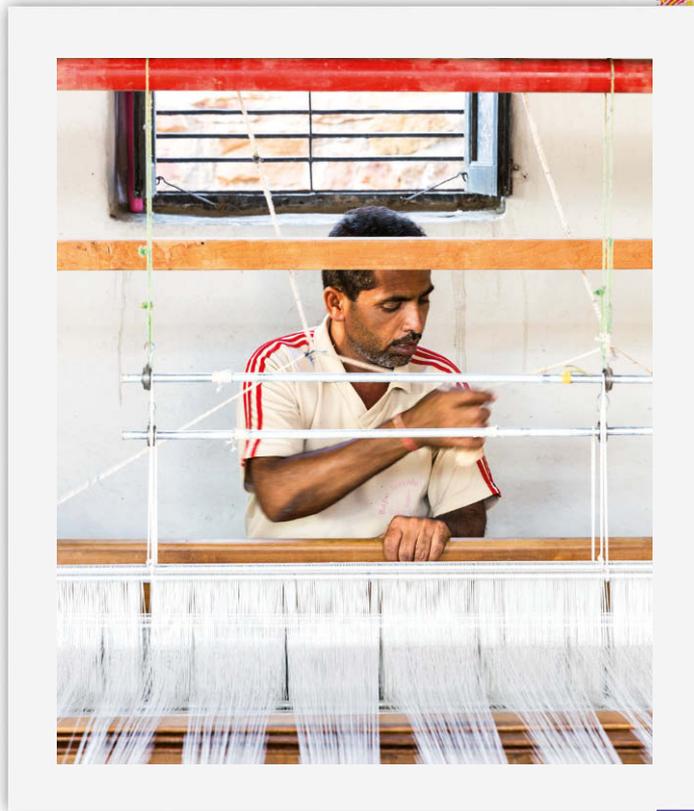


Top row: **a patchwork quilt in Hodka; Nirona is known for making copper bells.** Bottom row: **a woman painting an earthenware pot in Khavda village; camels on the way to Ludiya village; leather jootis in Hodka**



dotted with cattle, camels, sheep and the occasional donkey





a reinforcement of the fact that our country is home to extraordinary talent.

But perhaps the most memorable experience of this trip plays out in Hodka, a dusty village off Gujarat's SH 45. The soil here is lighter and drier—sand coats our Louis Vuitton loafers, and brown stretches till as far as the eye can see. We are with Bhoja Jemal Kachara, a craftsman who works with leather. Around us, the room is littered with embellished bags, jootis and mirror covers—colourful tassels here, strands of silver there. A pair of stunning pink jootis catches our eye—one look at the smooth leather and intricate work and we had to have them!

While Bhoja works with his brothers, his wife, Dai, stays at home with their daughters, six-year-old Lakshmi and two-year-old Usha, embroidering clothes and making bed sheets for their daily use. Some of our loveliest memories of Kutch are of the time spent with them—when it didn't feel like we were away from home. We spent the afternoon flipping through Dai's wedding album over steaming cups of tea, taking selfies with Lakshmi and napping in the bhunga. Bliss.

The path to Kutch's highest point, Kalo Dungar, or Black Hill, is steep; vehicles don't get by without a tiff or two. At the top, there's a welcome breeze and panoramic views of the vast Rann; tourists ride decorated camels and military vehicles keep watch. It's here, watching the unending expanse of white, that we fully realise the enormity of Kutch. The Rann is surreal, the land and sky indistinguishable. They say that if the sky is clear, at night, one can see flickering lights far on the horizon; they're believed to be

Above from left: **a shawl weaver in Bhujodi; rogan paintings at Khatri Sumar's home in Nirona.**
Opposite page: **Kaabia and Sasha at Shroff Bazaar**

villages in Pakistan. The proximity is thrilling—like the neighbour is just a jump away, and at 1,515ft above sea level, you can't be blamed for thinking you can fly.

As the sun sets over the Rann, a calming silence envelops us. Vehicles stop honking, people stop talking, everything seems to move slower than usual—the kind of quiet that beseeches even the most introverted to leave the world inside for the one around them. In Kutch, even as a visitor, you get used to beauty. The woman in the pretty kanjiri doesn't get a second look; talent is expected and colours are taken for granted. As designers, it's a scary, yet familiar idea: what is extraordinary one minute is commonplace the next. But here, in the stillness, watching the sun go down, we resolve not to let that dissuade us. From the sky that changes colours every minute to the moon that won't wait till it's dark to make an appearance, you have to keep moving, travelling, finding new inspirations to bring alive your dreams and ideas. **AS TOLD TO RASHMI SHANKAR**

A bespoke Kutch craft tour similar to this can be booked through matsya (www.matsyacrafts.com); minimum five guests per tour

GETTING THERE

Fly with Jet Airways (www.jetairways.com) to Bhuj from major Indian cities. Contact Rajesh Jethi (094293 77131) to rent a car. A four-seater vehicle costs ₹3,200 per day.

WHERE TO STAY

City The Village Resort, 20 minutes from Bhuj airport, has eight pool-facing cottages. (www.citythevillage.com); doubles from ₹5,200)

