

GUJARAT

A CANVAS *White*

Surreal and seemingly endless, the Rann of Kutch is a land of stark and luminous beauty, perhaps best witnessed during the annual Utsav. **BY ANITA RAO KASHI**



ANITA RAO KASHI/WWW.INDIA TODAY IMAGES.COM

THE CRUNCH UNDER my feet was crisp, a bit like crushed glass. It also felt delicate, as if my foot would go right under, but didn't. Everything was white, as far as the eye could see, stretching for miles in all directions. In the fading evening light, the whiteness stood out and strangely did not reflect the golden hue of the sinking sun. In the sheer vastness, there were no markers and no sound. The surreal silence was broken only by snatches of sounds made by people in the distance behind me, who were so far away that they seemed like black dots against the stark white ground. But around me, all was calm and the luminous beauty of White Rann (also known as Greater Rann of Kutch) in Gujarat washed over me in waves of bliss.

Considered to be the largest salt desert in the world, the White Rann, an endless salt marsh, was also a bit frightening. Stretching for more than 7,500 sq km, and almost uniformly barren of anything else, I shuddered to think about getting lost in this white wilderness. But these thoughts were quickly brushed aside as the moon, almost full, rose gracefully and bathed everything in an ethereal light. It was strangely riveting, ghostly even, but there was an odd musicality to it that was hard to explain. It was as if the land had cast a spell. I could have stood rooted to the spot and watched endlessly, despite the rapidly falling temperature, if not for the faint hypnotising sounds that beckoned me from Tent City at Dhordo, just at the edge of the White Rann, where I was staying.

Almost a township that comes up from scratch for three months, Tent City is a series of clusters of tents with a surprising array of mod-cons to coincide with the Rann Utsav (Dec 15 to Mar 15) aimed at showcasing Kutchi culture and handicrafts. Along one side was set up a series of stalls with traditional Kutchi handicrafts on display which spanned exquisite hand embroidered and block-printed fabrics, embroidered leather footwear, wood carvings, copper cow bells, paintings and much more. But I reluctantly skipped the stalls and headed to the performance area where a sea of colour and movement greeted me. Graceful dancers twirled and danced to haunting melodies. In between, I rushed to the huge marquee set up in the middle clusters for a quick dinner which comprised a few traditional Gujarati dishes such as *dhokla*, *khichdi* and *kadhi*. The music and performances went on well into the night and I retired with a myriad images swirling behind my eyelids.

Next day, I set out to see some of the sights. I stopped at Kala Dungar, the highest point in Kutch, for a panoramic view of the area, before heading to the villages of Ludiya, Khavda, Bhirandiyara and Hodko to watch artisans carve wood, make terracotta articles and embroider leather artefacts. In the evening, well past sunset, I headed back to the White Rann, unable to resist the pull. The full moon rose in spectacular glory, bright orange initially before turning a beautiful creamy colour and ultimately pristine white, competing with the whiteness of the ground. It was a sight that is unlikely to fade for a long time.

Into the wild

Located about 150 km from Bhuj is the *Wild Ass Sanctuary*. Spread over nearly 5,000 sqkm, the land is largely parched waterbed and is home to herds of the highly endangered wild ass as well as blackbuck. Considering there is very sparse vegetation and visibility is fabulous, the animals are easy to spot but they are also quite nervous and tend to run if approached.

Chhari Dhond, about 80 km from Bhuj is a birder's dream come true. Spread over 80 sqkm, these shallow marshy wetlands boast of over 370 species including migratory and endangered species. Over two lakh birds are known to congregate during the monsoon and winter. The place is home to flamingoes, cranes, spoonbills, painted storks.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUJARAT TOURISM

At a Glance

Bhuj, about 80 km, is the nearest town to access the White Rann.

HOW TO REACH

Bhuj has a few flight connections from Mumbai.

A better option is to fly to Ahmedabad and take a train or travel by road to Bhuj.

STAY

During Rann Utsav, the Tent City comes up near the White Rann. Packages start from 27,900 per person per night. www.rannutsav.com. However, there are other interesting places near the Rann such as Shaam-e-Sarhad (www.hodka.in) and Gateway to Rann Resort (www.kutchrannresort.com)

EAT

Kutchi food is simple but delicious and is largely vegetarian. *Khichdi*, *kadhi*, *bajar na rotla* (*bajar roti*), *chatni* (paste of garlic and chilli powder) *khaman dhokla* and *subji* form the staple.

SHOP

Block printed and intricately embroidered garments, tapestries, leather footwear, embroidered handbags and pouches, artefacts, and hand-painted terracotta tiles.

