

GUJARAT With **Hindol Sengupta**



Hindol Sengupta has written two definitive books on the Indian luxury industry. His latest book *The Liberals*, on living through 20 years of Indian economic liberalisation, was described by economist Meghnad Desai as, "this is your life if only you knew how to articulate it". He is the founding trustee at the Whypoll Trust, India's only open government platform. He was voted by the global ideas platform IdeaMensch on its 2011 list of 33 Entrepreneurs Who Make The World A Better Place. He is writing a new book on enterprise and the citizen. For us, he takes a closer look at Gujarat.

Scent of a city

There is a functional Ahmedabad and a frolicking Ahmedabad. A city of vibrant deal-making (last heard there were 12 five-star hotels coming up) and a city of pseudonyms and surreptitiousness, like a giggle during garba season, the city of unspoken possibility

THE MAN WEARS old clothes. He wears them lovingly. When the lights come on in his old, old mansion, he stands, his silks glistening like memories, on the landing that divides the two floors and raises his left arm to the twinkling darkness. He is the king again for the night, and the shawl, one hundred years old, draped on his arm with the carelessness of those who depend on their antiques, sways solemnly contemplating the history of vanity.

Umang Hutheesing, whose forefathers built large swathes of Ahmedabad, introduced me to the city about six years ago through a party at his old haveli, more than 125-years-old, where the soirées are almost spelt out in costume dramas, with Umang playing himself in royal attire collected for decades.

These costumes are now shown—most recently at a show with





The House of MG is a boutique hotel that offers authentic Gujarati food

Pierre Berge, the companion of the late Yves Saint Laurent—in Paris. I touched them and watched my fingers go up in flames.

There were former royals in that party, business folk, a socialite or two, patrons of the arts, and as the lights came on, we gathered along the terrace of the mansion that reeks of residual gossip to watch a classical dance performance by one of the most renowned groups of the city. The name and the style has faded from memory but what is alive is what is sometimes, wrongly in my opinion, called the essence of a city. A city does not have an essence as much as it has a scent, a perfume of pent up, collective paroxysms. For what is a city but woven desire?

There is a functional Ahmedabad and a frolicking Ahmedabad. A city of vibrant deal-making (last heard there were 12 'five-star' hotels coming up at a suburban patch) and a city of pseudonyms and surreptitiousness, like a giggle during garba season, the city of unspoken possibility.

I go to Ahmedabad because there is a Law College Road there, full of crafts bazaars and great roadside shopping, but when you ask for direction, people pronounce it as 'love' college road. This is a city of sotto voce love.

On one of my visits, overwhelmed by the ennui of the breakfast table at the hotel, I went hunting for a Krishna eatery. And though too many things are called Krishna in this town, I found my place. The tables, white plastic, were being wiped right behind the man with the cadaverous face and his Alibaba-style oil cauldron. He was frying *jalebis*. To be eaten with *fafda*, *dhokla* and *thepla* and green chutney. With a bite of green chillies every now and again. The calorie count is distinctly un-Gandhian but since then I go to Ahmedabad to eat breakfast.

Then there was that time when I went to Ahmedabad rushing from Paris. In Paris, I had heard of Jean-Louis Dumas, the man who made Hermes, the very profitable seller of handmade women's bags, the global curator of luxury that it is today and who spent many days every year in Ahmedabad.

If you want to understand the fabric of Ahmedabad, go to the Calico Museum. Five hundred years of textile history unwraps itself as if unravelled from the bodies of the temple dancers of yore. It's the antithesis of the idea of big commerce that today's Ahmedabad stands for. It is bespoke in a fleshy, muddy, wear and tear sort of way that only hands can convey.

In the night eat lavishly at House of MG, once the home of a big name philanthropist, now a boutique hotel and authentic Gujarati food establishment with unending courses and a brass jug and hot water to wash the fingers in the end.

I go to Ahmedabad for the ice-cream, nothing you have ever tasted anywhere in the world compares to the best home made ice-cream in Ahmedabad. But if you are still bored, try and befriend Umang.



MUST DO

- Go shopping in Ratanpol, Ahmedabad. Walk through streets lined with shops and showrooms selling coloured chaniya cholis, embroidered blouses and ethnic wear for men
- Take in the arts scene of Vadodara. See the Maharaja Fatehsinhrao Museum in the magnificent Lakshmi Vilas Palace complex
- Though the 2001 earthquake devastated Bhuj, it is still one of the best places to get an introduction to Kutch with its fine monuments, museums, markets and craft bazaars

The Plus Side



GOOD TO KNOW

- **Rann Utsav:** A grand showcase for Gujarat is the Rann Utsav held between December to January every year. It offers an opportunity to explore the Great Rann of Kutch and the Banni Grasslands to the north of Bhuj. Brilliant sunsets, walk on the salt flats, authentic Gujarati food, and cultural shows is what Rann Utsav is all about. www.gujarattourism.com
- **Wildlife:** For a chance to see the Asiatic Lions, visit the Gir National Park, located 60 km from Junagadh. Gujarat also has great birding opportunities at the Little Rann of Kutch, home also to the wild ass
- **Good to know:** There is prohibition in Gujarat, and the liquor laws are quite strict—however for foreigners and those visiting from other states, it is possible to get a temporary liquor permit from the Gujarat Tourism Department counter at the airport. www.gujarat.gov.in

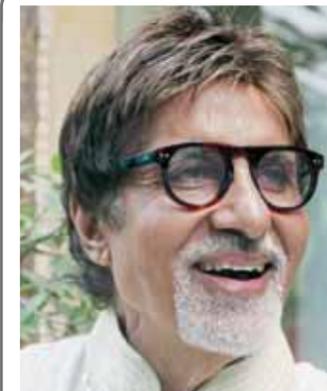
Buy handicrafts: Gujarat is famous for needlework, tie-dyed fabrics, bead work, Patola, and Zari work. A good option is to buy directly from the artisans in villages in Bhuj like Sumrasar Sheikh, Bhirendiaro and Hodka



Celeb Speak

AMITABH BACHCHAN
Actor

Rann of Kutch on a moonlit night



During my travels, for the tourism campaign, I discovered that the maximum number of archaeological sites in the country are in Gujarat. All of these locations had a distinct identity, and all most beautiful. Pushed to give one destination, I would choose the Rann of Kutch on a moonlit night! The uniqueness of the terrain—it is just a white desert, plain, no habitation, no plants—nothing. The emptiness that nature has provided, and the absence of town and city life, makes it a preferred choice. If I am on a holiday, I would definitely visit the Sabarmati Ashram and the Rann of Kutch in Gujarat. When we were filming the campaign in the Gir Forest, the encounter with and the sight of the Asiatic lion, was most memorable.



TRY NEW THINGS

ENTERTAINMENT



SNOW TIME: If you want to get away from the heat and dust of the city and have some fun in the snow, you don't need to head to the mountains, for in the heart of the state, in Ahmedabad, is a snow park where you can, literally, chill out. There's artificial snowfall and you can ride on sleighs and even do rock climbing and rappelling. Tickets are priced at 2220 for adults and 180 for children for an hour. www.maniarsnowpark.com

ADVENTURE



SKYDIVING: There are few good and secure sites for skydiving in India, but if you are an adrenalin junkie then head to Deesa in Banas Kantha district, one of India's first skydiving zones which provides a thrilling and safe experience of the adventure sport. A once in a lifetime experience, the skydiving camps are organised by the Sports Authority of Gujarat (SAG) along with the Indian Parachuting Federation (IPF). www.sycd.gov.in