

The journey

Shimla to Beyt Dwarka

- Distance: Over 1800 km
- Shimla to Chandigarh: By bus
- Chandigarh to Jaipur: By Garib Rath train
- Jaipur to Okha: Jaipur-Okha Express
- Okha to Jetty: By 'mercedes'
- Jetty to Beyt Dwarka: By ferry
- Time: 10 nights/11 days including 48 hours in the train
- People: Three adults, 19 students
- Cost: Only 18,000 per head including all transport, food and accommodation!

HIMACHAL PRADESH TO GUJARAT

REACHING TREASURE ISLAND

One mad bunch decides to set out from Shimla for Beyt Dwarka—by train. Read about an incredible journey that involves endless hours on trains, besides travelling by bus, auto, ferry and 'mercedes'. **BY MANDAVI MEHTA**

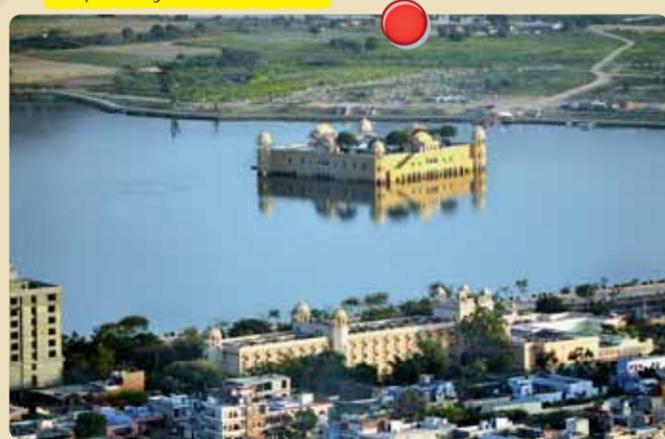
IT'S BEEN MANY years since I last went on a really long train journey by three-tier sleeper, accompanied by a bunch of school children. Not since I was last in boarding school, oh, twenty years ago. Since then I've come to rely on proper bathrooms and almost daily baths so I was expecting and dreading the worst. The journey: Shimla to the island of Beyt Dwarka, perched on the lower lip of the Gulf of Kutch and home to India's only Marine National Park. The company: Two teachers, 19 Class 10 students and I. The total cost for 10 nights and 11 days: 18,000 per head including all transport, food and accommodation.

After a five-hour bus journey and an energetic game of dodge played with a rolled up sock outside Chandigarh station, it was time to board the Garib Rath to Jaipur. We waited on the platform with some trepidation, wondering what kind of dilapidated trap would roll up. The Garib Rath rolled in, not dull blue or brown but fully painted over like a cheery impressionistic bouquet. The train was all AC and, much to my surprise, impeccably clean; the only reason for calling it the Garib Rath seemed to be the third berth squeezed into the corridor seats.

Chandigarh by bus



Jaipur by Garib Rath



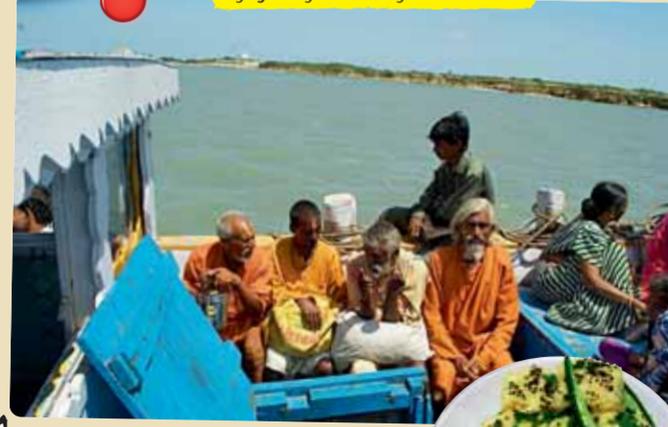
SUDHANSH SHARMA

Since we boarded late at night, everyone unpacked their sheets and blankets and went to sleep. When we woke up early next morning, we were in Rajasthan, somewhere near Alwar and had the first of the dozens of cups of tea we would have over the next few days—110 for a medium sized cupful, medium sweet. The lush green and gold fields of Haryana, unfolding like an endless quilt, were a thing of the past. The landscape outside was painted in shades of pale green and brown, with domed, rocky hills in the backdrop. We got off at Jaipur a couple of hours later, to eat a meal of *aloo puris* and spend the day till we caught our evening train to Okha. A whirlwind tour of Amber Fort followed. Tired and thirsty, many students had their first taste of sour starfruit (*bilimbi*) with salt and water chestnut (*singhara*) outside this majestic fort. Then back to the station for some totally refried *pakor*as and glasses of orange soda before boarding the Jaipur-Okha Express.

Let me note here that when the weather is not extreme, travelling in non-AC compartments is greatly superior to AC travel, despite the noise and dust. You feel the wind in your face, the sun on your skin and all you have to do to

DEEP PAHWA

By jetty to Beyt Dwarka



Dwarkadeesh Temple

DEEP PAHWA

get food and drink is stick your hand out of the window at stations. We knew we were approaching Ajmer when the train was invaded around 7 p.m. by a stream of transient visitors—*hijras*, sufi singers, beggars asking for alms—for those pilgrims (Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs) who would disembark to make the pilgrimage to the *dargah* of Moinuddin Chishti, but whose piety and charity was being tested from this moment on. Dinner was an insipid *thali* of *dal*, rice, *roti* and some mixed vegetable goo, but we all fell upon it hungrily. We were carrying no food of our own and my initial worries of starving the children proved unfounded—there was always something to be had, and even if it was not always good, the hunger pangs that strike during train journeys made most things palatable and some things taste downright divine. After many fevered rounds of cards, we went to sleep and woke up the next day in Gujarat.

The landscape was still arid scrub but the food had changed. Now we had a steady stream of fresh *dal* and spinach *pakor*as, vendors with soft, neon yellow piles of *dhoklas*, packets of *theplas*, big green chilies fried in *besan* or swimming in sharp mustard paste and any amount of cool, refreshing *chaas* (buttermilk). *Sev* and peanuts made their grand entrance into our lives and would remain omnipresent in several guises for the next eight days. We kept shooting envious looks at the massive tiffin carriers brought along by our Gujarati fellow travellers, and many were generous in offering us a taste of their meal despite our group's size. Tea underwent a change—getting smaller in quantity and more expensive, culminating in “cutting tea”—a euphemism for a seven-rupee portion, served in a thimble-sized cup (your thumb would fit snugly in it). Servings of plastic also increased alarmingly and stretches of deserted land were littered with polythene bags blowing in the wind.

From Jamnagar on, we could smell the sea, though we wouldn't see it till we reached Okha, the port from which we would board the ferry to Beyt Dwarka. Cultivation was only intermittent and we saw some cotton and peanut fields, along with fields of *bajra* and *jowar*. We saw our first sightings of the ‘mercedes’ of Saurashtra, a wonderful contraption we were lucky to ride in in Beyt Dwarka—a fully bedecked three-wheeler powered by a 500 cc motorbike with the ability to seat about 20 at a pinch. Somewhere near Jamnagar, we saw flocks of pink flamingos and magisterial pelicans sitting idly on the side of the tracks.

Near Dwarka, around lunch time, a whole lot of pilgrims for the Dwarkadeesh temple got off to visit Lord Krishna's kingdom, while small troupes of musicians got on. These were once again sufi singers, but had a distinct folk style and sang in Gujarati. We learnt that our island of Beyt Dwarka, and many other small islands around it, housed the shrines of sufi *pirs*. Many of these remained deserted colonies for a bewildering number of nesting sea birds most of the year but were visited by thousands of pilgrims who came by boat each year on their Urs (the death anniversary of the saint, which is a day of rejoicing as the saint was united with Allah on that day).

For the spiritually inclined

Around Beyt Dwarka are several ancient temples worth visiting:

- Shri Krishna Temple: The enormous 500 year old temple is a 15 minute walk away. Built by Shri Vallabhacharya, the temple's idol is believed to be made by Rukmini.
- Dandiwala Hanuman Temple: Only 5 km east of the Beyt Dwarka's main temple, it houses a rare idol of Hanuman's son Makardwaja.
- Kachoriyu: This Ram temple carries sculptures of Garuda along with the idol of Hanuman at the entrance.
- Haji Kirmani Pir: Towards the eastern seashore of Beyt Dwarka, one can visit the shrine of Haji Kirmani Pir, considered one of the important Sufi saints, who came from Kirman in Iran.
- Gurudwara: Beyt is also believed to be the birthplace of Panjpyare's saint Shri Hukamchandji and many Sikhs visit this Gurudwara located in Budhiya area nearby.

We finally reached Okha at lunchtime, and rode in two ‘mercedes’ to the jetty where I bought some lovely peacock stickers for my car from an elderly man who looked very much like a sufi saint. We boarded the Dhanlaxmi, our boat, to Beyt Dwarka. Hundreds of fishing boats were parked at sea, each flying a dozen flags in black, green and red, looking like a pirate's armada. I half expected Captain Jack Sparrow to saunter jauntily onto the deck of each one; he would have fit in perfectly. We had finally reached our destination, the truly magical place that is Beyt Dwarka, but that is a whole other story. Yet even here I was most strongly reminded of the verses of one of my favourite poems, *Ithaka* by Constantine Cavafy:

*As you set out for Ithaka
hope the voyage is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery...*

*Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you are destined for.
But do not hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you are old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.*