

# Condé Nast Traveller

+

**MALDIVES  
SPECIAL**  
INSIDE

THE LAST WORD IN TRAVEL  
MAY-JUNE-JULY 2021 | ₹200

**INDIAN EDITION**

**INDIA'S 50  
BEST VILLAS**

The perfect  
staycations to book

★★★

**THE HOT LIST**

The world's best  
new hotels

★★★

**BEYOND THE  
THEPLA**

Gujarat's little  
known cuisines

*Family  
first*

50 incredible experiences  
with the kids across India



# FEATURES



A server walks through a courtyard at Ahmedabad's House of MG. Photographed by Pankaj Anand for *Beyond the Thepla* (p168)







BEYOND

A trip through Gondal, Balasinor and other lesser-known towns in Gujarat reveals a whole new meaning to its food, finds **Smitha Menon**, as she explores the state's multicultural and royal culinary legacies

THE PLA

Photographs by **Pankaj Anand**

**T**he perfect mutton warqi samosas, named after delicate ornaments of thinly beaten precious metal, seem much like jewels themselves. The brittle shell shatters into a million pieces. With each bite, the textures become more apparent: the deep-fried outer layer is crisped to perfection, the richly spiced, smoky kheema filling tingles with a low heat. I realise, five samosas down, that I simply cannot stop eating them.

The tiny parcels of meat are a far cry from the food I thought I would be devouring on a trip to learn more about the food of Gujarat. So far, there hasn't been a thepla—the spiced roti synonymous with the state—in sight. Instead, I am astounded by the unique flavours and histories I encounter on my week-long expedition to learn about the state's rich culinary legacy.

At Garden Palace (*palacebalasinor.com*), an elegant six-room property in **Balasinor**, the former royal family shares their rich culinary legacy with their guests. Set amid giant fig, chikoo and mango trees, the buttery yellow palace flanked by rani-pink bougainvillea was built in 1883 and is the current home of the begums and nawab of Balasinor.

The family traces their roots back to the Babi dynasty, originally a tribe of Pashtuns from Afghanistan who had ruled over parts of Gujarat. When the family decided to open the doors of their private residence to guests, the

For lunch—served in delicate crystal and silverware decorated with freshly plucked roses and jasmine—we dig into the Balasinor Roast (a Raj-style tender meat roast, spiced with freshly ground, family-secret garam masalas), gote ka pulao (a delicately spiced, meatball pulao with crisped onions), and jarees (a Ramzan dessert made with wheat, slow-cooked for 15 hours). I silently take note to exercise more restraint for the next meal.

Balasinor, a town that fell into relative obscurity after independence, shot to fame in the 1980s when dinosaur fossils were discovered on the royal family's ancestral property in Rayoli, a nearby village. The discoveries eventually led to the uncovering of the third-largest fossil site in the world, thanks primarily to the efforts of the Archaeological Survey of India and Aaliya Sultana Babi, aka 'Dinosaur Princess' for her interest in protecting and promoting the fossils. As a nod to her daughter's passions, the rajmata developed a special recipe for guests at their property. 'Dinosaur Eggs', is her take on the Nargisi kofta, all jazzed up to resemble prehistoric eggs. "I coat the 'eggs' in besan and lightly fry them. They're rested on a plate of salli, so it likens to a nest," she explains.

Guests can walk their meals off at India's first dinosaur museum and fossil park that opened in 2019, just 15km from Garden Palace. But if you'd rather lounge around the

“It is crisped to perfection and the richly spiced, smoky kheema filling tingles with a low heat. I realise, five samosas down, that I cannot stop eating them”

rajmata took it upon herself to develop Balasinor as a culinary mecca for travellers.

For dinner, silver platters of roasts, shammi kebabs and dishes that sound too romantic to refuse, appear. Consider Murg-e-Alamgeer, named after Alamgir, another moniker for the great Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Or perhaps, Hariyali ki Nazakat, an ode to the elegance of greens. Finish with Motiya Kheer, a silken milk dessert of bottle gourd and sago balls that promises the sophistication of pearls.

“The men in my family have been known to be large,” laughs the titular Nawab Sultan Salauddinkhan Babi, pointing to the figures of the bejewelled, colossal men, whose portraits hang from the walls of his family's sitting room. The rather prosperous 10th-generation descendant of the nawabs, along with his wife Begum Zeba Sultan Khan Babi and his mother, Rajmata Saheba Farhat Sultana Babi run Garden Palace, extending the family's large-heartedness and generosity of spirit to guests.

Having hosted television cooking shows and pop-ups on Shahi cuisine, the immaculately turned out rajmata with a soft laugh and a maternal fondness for feeding is now working on a cookbook documenting their food. The cuisine of Balasinor, she tells me, is an amalgamation of the Mughlai recipes passed down through the generations, with influences from colonial associations and marital ties with other royal kingdoms. “Earlier, massive thaals were placed on dastarkhwans and entire families would partake together in the feasts. I can still smell the heady desi-gulabs and rich aromas that filled the air.”

property, take in the family's relics salvaged from a fire that destroyed their old abode during the British Raj. The most noteworthy piece from their collection is the Bal Mubarak, a hair said to be from the Prophet Mohammed's moustache. It is brought out once a year only, every Eid e Milad. Despite a massive fire in the palace it was originally in, a devastating earthquake in the region and communal riots not far away, the relic has survived six generations and continues to bless Balasinor. Visiting seers have told the family that the house has a visible aura. We sense it in the warm hospitality that the titular nawab, the begum and the rajmata extend to us during our stay.

Roughly 230 rulers governed across what is now considered Gujarat, of which about 35 were salute states, granted a gun salute by the British Crown. Balasinor, a nine-gun salute state is but one of the many microsoms that exist within the vast expanse of Gujarat.

As a state that spans roughly 2,00,000sqkm, Gujarat and its cuisine cannot be defined by one tradition. Each stretch is characterised by distinct flavours and spices thanks to the stark differences in temperature and terroir. Gujarati food expert Sheetal Bhatt breaks it down: “Kathiawad in the south is known for its spicy food made with simple ingredients to keep bodies cool; Surat's cuisine features green leafy vegetables and seasonal ingredients like lila lasan (green garlic) and ponkh (winter millet), Kutchi cuisine draws from the desert and the Sind region in the north; while Ahmedabad's cuisine, though sweeter than the others, also features generous amounts of red chilli powder →



Clockwise from top left: **the ancestral sword at Balasinor; sunti kebab at Madhav Bagh, Baroda; Indrayani and Shivraj Gaekwad at Madhav Bagh; zarda-e-jamiat at Garden Palace, Balasinor; Idar ratan mango; Balasinor's titular Begum Farhat Sultana and Begum Zeba Sultan; mutton warqi samosas at Balasinor; the Idar vintage car collection. Previous pages: the Balasinor Roast; a courtyard at House of MG, Ahmedabad**





“A recipe remains an artefact of its time, giving us clues of life at its moment of inception ingredients, techniques and its creator”







to induce perspiration and protect against the hot summer wind known as the loo.”

The state also owes much of its culinary heritage to the traders and migrants who entered India via its ports. They brought with them unique dishes that led to creations such as Surat’s khawsa—inspired by the Burmese khao suey—and Rangooni paratha.

The story of Gujarat’s food, Anil Mulchandani, journalist-researcher and our guide in **Ahmedabad** tells me, began much before the state was even formed. “Earlier, Maharashtra, Gujarat and most parts of Karnataka were one region under the Bombay Presidency, an administrative region of the British Raj. The political borders between Maharashtra and Gujarat drawn in 1960 were based on linguistics, not regions. The food of Gujarat therefore, is a mosaic that represents the different communities that live here,” says Mulchandani.

Legend has it that when the Parsis first arrived in India on the shores of Gujarat, they mixed sugar in milk, to demonstrate to the king of Sanjan, Jadi Rana, how they would blend into existing communities and sweeten the lives of those around them.

In the late 1800s, the illustrious Cama family from Navsari in Gujarat moved to Ahmedabad, seeking fortunes.

“A majority of Gujarat’s population is Jain and Vaishnav. These traders and businessmen established their food as the dominant cuisine of the state”

In 1960, they began a hotel business, sensing an opportunity. While caste divisions and religious customs kept Hindus and Muslims outside of each others’ food establishments, neither community had a problem visiting eateries that were run by the Parsis and Iranis, who technically fell outside of the caste system.

Cama Hotel ([camahotelsindia.com](http://camahotelsindia.com)) opened its doors to the public on 30 April 1960, just a day before the state of Gujarat was formed. Designed by visionary architect Charles Correa, the hotel, located on the banks of the Sabarmati River, was one of the first luxury establishments in the city. It introduced locals to Parsi specialities such as patra ni machhi, chicken farcha, dhansak, salli boti, as well as their spins on classic British fare such as fish and chips.

While Cama’s signature dishes are the most popular, owner Rustom Cama doesn’t want them to define Parsi food. “Yes, for most people, dhansak is a gateway to Parsi food, but for the Parsi community, it is a dish eaten on a sombre occasion. Why aren’t people as excited about dhan dhar patio, the meal we eat on festive occasions such as Navjotes and birthdays?” he wonders.

For Cama, the lockdown provided him with a window of opportunity to reimagine the menus at his hotel. Digging deep into *Vividha Vani*—the Parsi cookbook that enjoys a cult status amongst the community—and translating recipes from Gujarati for his cooks, Cama is breathing life into dishes from the community’s past.

For lunch, we tucked into patra ni machhi, a fish fillet steamed in vine leaves with a vibrant paste of freshly ground mint, coriander, chilli and garlic. Dhan dhar patio, a combination of white rice, yellow dal and prawns in a sweet and sour curry, is a culinary lesson in pairing. The piquant flavour of the Parsi favourite, Kolah’s sugarcane vinegar, in the patio goes surprisingly well with the dal that’s minimally tempered with fried onions and garlic.

Apart from the usual dishes like dhansak, fish and chips and salli boti, we also try mutton vindaloo, a dish, Cama says, that tells a story of his community’s past.

“In the early 1900s, many Goans came to Bombay, Ahmedabad and Surat to work at affluent Parsi homes,” Cama recalls, “They learnt the hallmarks of Parsi cooking and tweaked some of Goa’s most iconic recipes to suit Parsi palates. The Parsi mutton or fish vindaloo is one such preparation.” The deep red gravy is not as fiery as a Goan vindaloo, but has the signature khatta-meetha balance that Parsi cuisine is so famous for.

Cama is excited about his updated menu but is also apprehensive about the response it will get: “Much of our home food is adapted from Gujarati food as the Parsis first landed here. If I begin to serve those dishes, people may not see it as ‘authentic’ Parsi cuisine.”

Later that day, at Agashiye, the award-winning terrace restaurant at House of MG ([houseofmg.com](http://houseofmg.com)), a hip design hotel in the heart of Ahmedabad, I dig into a soft, warm thepla. It tears easily and leaves a slightly bitter caramel aftertaste on my tongue. It is an intrinsic part of the Agashiye ‘Gujju thali’.

There’s a cooling drink of chaas and several types of farsan (such as khaman dhokla and methi na gota—fried dumplings of besan and fenugreek, seasoned with spices and served with unsweetened curd), seasonal subzis, kala channa, rasawala bateta (a spiced potato curry), a tangy Gujarati dal, hot rice and crisp puris.

While making my way through this delicious plate of seasonal ingredients, I wonder where the idea of a monolith Gujarati vegetarian cuisine comes from. This thali is fantastic, but as my meals at Balasinor and Cama demonstrated, the food of the state is clearly a study in cultural influences.

“A majority of Gujarat’s population is Jain and Vaishnav. These rich traders and enterprising businessmen established their food as the dominant cuisine of the state,” explains Mulchandani. The same communities have perpetuated this default idea of Gujarati cuisine via the popular restaurants they opened outside of the state. Swati Snacks, Soam and Thakkar’s in Mumbai, for example, all offer vegetarian Hindu cuisine from Gujarat.

When I mention to Abhay Mangaldas—owner of the hotel that used to be his family home—that Agashiye is →





widely recognised for serving ‘authentic’ Gujarati cuisine, he laughs at the irony. “This is the food I grew up eating thanks to my mother, who was half Jain and half Maharashtrian. People categorise it as ‘Gujarati’. But who is to say that this food holds up as the definitive cuisine of an entire state?”

\*\*\*

In her most recent book, *Cook, Eat, Repeat*, the queen of home cooking and cookbooks, Nigella Lawson said, “Recipes, once they outlive the age in which they were born, become curios. They become of historical interest or part of anthropological research—and, also, they may just simply be forgotten.” She argues that there is a particular immediacy about a recipe and that even if it endures after its author, it is a message entirely in the present. Browsing through the tome during a four-hour drive from Ahmedabad to Gondal, I was struck by Lawson’s take that deviates from the general idea of recipes being bridges across time. But later, as I spooned the wonderfully fresh orange and carrot soup with sliced orange rinds over dinner at Orchard Palace (*heritagepalacesgondal.com*) in **Gondal**, I understood the meaning of her words.

Seated in a beautiful 1920s palace that hosted guests of the royal family, using gleaming silverware embossed with the Gondal insignia, I felt like a guest of the late Maharaja Saheb Jyotendrasinhji.

“I don’t want to photograph this scene. I want to imprint it on my mind. This is the reason we travel. To be transported, and not just literally, outside of ourselves”

Having studied in England, the Maharaja developed a taste for European cuisine and when he returned to Gondal, he ensured he ate it every day for dinner—using fresh ingredients from the palace’s farm. A recipe then, when examined, can tell you much about the circumstances that led to its creation. It remains an artefact of its time, all along giving us clues of life at the moment of its inception—the ingredients, where they came from, the technique of cooking and of course, its creator.

Overlooking the kitchen operations for the hotel as well as her home is the titular Maharani Saheb Kumudkumari. With the air of a strict but benevolent headmistress, the octogenarian instructs farmworkers, cooks and servers about kitchen operations, overlooks the upkeep of the Orchard Palace, Riverside Palace (the family’s other heritage hotel in Gondal), the Maharaja’s old luxury railway saloon, as well as Naulakha Palace, the former residence of the family that has since been converted into a museum. Having noted our allergies and food preferences in advance, the Maharani proclaims our entire menu for the rest of our stay. It is planned to the T, right down to dessert.

“At Gondal, food always played a major role in our lives,” she explains. “We travelled to Europe a lot and tried to incorporate the international dishes that we loved into our menus. For high tea, silver tea sets were brought out. We would have bateta poha, cucumber sandwiches and cookies. When I tried to introduce scones to the kitchen, they produced stones instead. Thankfully, they have learnt since then,” she chuckles.

The next day, as peacocks dance across the garden, we enjoy a Kathiawad thali meal of signature dishes from the royal kitchen: stuffed masala brinjals, dal dhokli, kadhi, khichdi, rotli, bhakri, lasaniya (garlic) potatoes and a country-style chicken curry. We’re just a few hours away from Ahmedabad, and the meal, while similar in dishes to the thali we had at Agashiye, is completely different in taste.

Much of Gujarati Hindu food has a touch of sweetness, but Kathiawadi cuisine is distinctive with the considerable lack of sugar and characteristic use of spices, onions, garlic and green chillies, often resulting in a fiery dish. Given the European influence, the food at Orchard Palace dials back the spice quotient.

Later, as we tour the museum, I’m astounded by how much and—how well—the family has been able to preserve their history. Royal carriages, an astounding teapot collection (at least 400!), a weighing scale made to human proportions, kitchen equipment, sculptures and royal beadwork from the 17th century sit, neatly labelled, alongside each other.

We reach Riverside Palace—formerly a home built for the crown prince—at twilight. The colonial-style powder-blue mansion set against the inky blue of the sky makes a stunning picture, but I don’t want to photograph it. I want to imprint this moment in my mind. The symphony of chirping

birds and crickets, the cool evening breeze, the hues in the sky and the beautiful setting—no image can capture this. It is the reason we travel. To be transported, and not just literally, outside of ourselves.

\*\*\*

A former Maratha kingdom, **Baroda**, our next stop, was ruled by the royal Gaekwad dynasty. A six-hour drive from Gondal, it was one of the largest and richest princely states in India. During what historians describe as the golden era of the kingdom (1875-1939), the pioneering Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III enabled the state to prosper with religious freedoms, education, art, architecture and of course, a booming textile industry.

This ancestral benevolence makes an appearance at Madhav Bagh (*madhavbagh.com*), a royal heritage homestay run by descendants of the Gaekwad family, located in the heart of Baroda. The striking red and white facade of the building built by Maratha rulers in the 1900s draws from a number of design styles, explains owner Shivrajsinh Gaekwad: “Our ancestors delighted in blending cultures and this mansion is a testament to that spirit—its central section borrows from church architecture, to the left are jharoka balconies, and to the right, sleek minarets.”

While the imposing Lakshmi Vilas Palace—the private residence of the titular Maharaja of Baroda and his family—is open to the public for tours, it is at Madhav Bagh where one can get a true taste of royal life. Managed by Shivrajsinh and his wife Indrayani, Madhav Bagh is a quiet little four-room oasis. The peepal, mango and gulmohar trees that →



Clockwise from top left: **Riverside Palace at Gondal;**  
**House of MG's Abhay Mangaldas;** Naulakha  
Palace has a great teapot collection; the titular  
Maharani Saheb Kumudkumari of Gondal; a  
peacock at Orchard Palace; patra ni machhi at  
Cama Hotel; the titular Maharaj Narendra Singh  
at home in Himmatnagar. Previous pages: Orchard  
Palace in Gondal





surround the property invite birds in, that bathe in the Rajera fountain out front. When we visit, the garden is bursting with bright yellow blossoms that herald spring.

Having ruled over a vast empire that stretched from Gwalior to Thanjavur, the Gaekwads infused into their food the many flavours of the regions under them. There is no sighting of the thepla here, but foods best described as Marathi with colonial and regional influences arrive. Kola urundai, for instance, a Thanjavur dish of spiced mutton and gram flour meatballs bound together with banana fibre, is said to be inspired by the Maratha sunti kebab. It spins like a top across my plate when released from the string that binds it. On the menu is bharleli kombdi, which translates from Marathi as stuffed chicken. What I expect is a fiery chicken curry thickened with freshly ground garam masalas. What arrives instead is a colonial-style pot-roasted chicken, stuffed with dry fruits, ghee and fresh coconut, accompanied by a jus released from the bird as it cooks.

Batata gola pulava is no ordinary potato ball pulao—it is an explosion of spice and texture, layered between soft grains of basmati cooked in ghee and dry fruits. These dishes appear alongside the Marathi specialities kothimbir wadi (spiced coriander fritters) and bharlela wanga (masala-stuffed brinjals), making me question my definition of Gujarati food again.

“All this was once ours. We must keep telling our stories. Once we are gone, these stories are the only things that will remain”

“Though Maratha cuisine was widely consumed across the region earlier, outside of homes, it has become tough to access the foods of our ancestors,” explains Indrayani.

“Soon after the lockdown, we launched a delivery service for our food and watched the orders fly off the shelves,” says Shivraj, who used his expertise from years of working at the Taj Group to set up Madhav Bagh. The Gaekwads—Shivraj, Indrayani and their children Divyanshu and Riddhi are laidback and easy to chat with. Divyanshu helps his mother serve us food, treating us as members of their family. We swap Instagram handles and promise to stay in touch.

\*\*\*

“I’m so happy you have made yourselves at home, in my home. It gladdens my heart to see guests relaxed and easy,” says the octogenarian Maharaj Narendra Singh of Idar, as we tuck into a meal at Dowlat Vilas Palace ([dowlatvilaspalacetheheritage.com](http://dowlatvilaspalacetheheritage.com)), a heritage hotel in Himmatnagar, the seat of the erstwhile Idar state.

Located roughly 180km away from Baroda, **Himmatnagar** was ruled by the Rathore Rajputs originally from Marwar, present-day Jodhpur. Having migrated to the region in the 1700s, the Idars refer to their new home as ‘Lilli Marwar’, which translates to ‘green Marwar’, a nod to its lushness as compared to Rajasthan’s Thar desert.

The food we relish then is yet another lesson in Gujarat’s variety, a consequence of history and terroir. On the table is a dish associated with Rajasthan: the fiery laal maas. Unlike

what I’ve tried before, it is a milder version, brightened with ingredients grown on the family’s farmlands close by. While traditional Rajasthani dishes of dal baati churma, papad ki sabzi and ker sangri evolved from the scarcity of water and green vegetables, the food of the Idar state in Gujarat has taken on local ingredients and spices.

We’re served a dum cauliflower, a signature dish of Rani Nirupama Devi, the Maharaj’s late wife. Whole cauliflower is smoked, topped with cream and flavoured with saffron. There’s also a velvety doodh ki dal, moong dal slow-cooked with spices and subdued with milk, a recipe that’s been in the family for four generations.

“It’s an accident of birth to be born into a royal family,” says Karni Singh, son of the Maharaj and manager of the family’s dealings across Himmatnagar. The Idars were a progressive lot, building schools for girls, universities and municipal buildings. Karni, the Maharaj’s only child, feels the weight of this ‘accident’ every day and a need to preserve his history and continue the family’s legacy.

One way he does this is via the family’s mango orchard, which grows the unique Idar ratan variety of mango. Beginning plump and ending pointed, the mango resembles a regal nose. Befitting, considering the fact that it was grafted especially for Karni’s forefather, Maharaj Himmat Singh. “Sweet, not too tart, with a thin flesh that tears easily

and can be eaten completely right from the top,” were his precise instructions to the royal gardener, explains Karni, as we stroll through the orchard. Dry mango leaves crunch underfoot, while bulbuls, squirrels and kingfishers dart about.

The mangoes aren’t ready for us to try, but over tea, we’re served an unusual snack that makes up for it. Missi ki roti, buttery soft atta biscuits speckled with cashews, almonds and rose petals, is the perfect accompaniment to masala chai.

When not tending to the orchards, Karni oversees the maintenance of the family’s vintage car collection—the garage houses beauties like the 1948 four-door Pontiac Silver Streak Torpedo, and the 1957 Dodge Kingsway. Guests can walk through the collection, and explore the nearby Polo Forest and Idar Hills, scattered with temple ruins and 8th-century Buddhist monasteries now reclaimed by nature. “All this,” says Karni, pointing to the Aravallis in the distance, “was once ours. We must keep telling our stories. Once we’re gone, they are the only things that will remain.”

Stories, as I witnessed over the past week, are not the only things that live on after we’re gone. Food often bends time, allowing us to recreate experiences that would otherwise be lost to us forever. For every thepla and dhokla we know, there are rich, unique kebabs and dals that are fading into oblivion. Proust said that the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new sights, but in looking with new eyes. Perhaps then, along with new eyes, we must look with new appetites too. 🍴

Left: a beautiful feast at the house of Balasinor. Following pages: inside the royal rail saloon at Orchard Palace, Gondal; dawn at Himmatnagar’s Dowlat Vilas Palace





