

Harper's BAZAAR

MARCH 2012

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THE BEST
HERITAGE
HOTELS OF
GUJARAT





Champaner, a UNESCO World Heritage Site



Architecture at the Adalaj stepwell in Central Gujarat



Covers
THE BEACH AT MANDVI PALACE
RIVERSIDE PALACE
 PHOTOGRAPHS BY DINESH SHULKA



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THE KING WHO CHALLENGED THE BRITISH

Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad, ruler of the Baroda princely state from 1875-1839, was one of the most respected rulers, known for his economic, educational, judicial, and social reforms. He jealously guarded his rights and status on matters of principle and governance, often picking disputes with the British residents and Viceroy. At the 1911 Delhi Durbar, attended by George V, each Indian ruler or 'native prince', was expected to perform proper obeisance to the King-Emperor by bowing three times before him. Sayajirao was third in line, after the Nizam of Hyderabad and Maharaja of Mysore, and refused to wear his full regalia of jewels and honours; neither did he bow, or maybe just bowed briefly before turning his back on the King-Emperor.

PROGRESSIVE MAHARAJAS

Contrary to popular belief, the life of the princes was not just about fun, games, shoots, and frolic. Maharaja Bhagwat Sinh of Gondal and Maharaja Bhav Singh of Bhavnagar were known for their reforms, civic works, and progressive attitude to women. At their own palaces they abolished the purdah system for the women of their family and their palaces did not have separate zanana wings for women.

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The PRINCELY HERITAGE of GUJARAT



The 16th century mosque at Champaner, a World Heritage Site



The façade of the Palace of Jasdan, which is still the private residence of the Kathi Darbar dynasty



Sunset at Lakhota Lake's Lakhota Palace, now a museum, in Jamnagar



Musicians welcome guests to Darbargadh, the old palace of Gondal which houses a museum

Gujarat, with its wealth of history and art, has for long remained one of India's best-kept tourism secrets. This looks set to change as a number of historical properties, worth visiting for their own architecture, interiors, memorabilia, or historical importance, are steadily being converted into heritage hotels, opening up romantically remote but richly rewarding destinations for visitors. Today, the 20-odd heritage hotels of Gujarat range from converted forts, palaces, and colonial-period villas, and country estates where maharajas and nawabs once entertained European guests, to rural heritage properties owned by the scions of feudal lords and the early 20th-century residences of Ahmedabad's mercantile families. However, what each of them offers is the historical character of the period when they were built, coupled with the modern conveniences required by the contemporary traveller.

Surrounded by orchards, gardens, forests, coastal landscapes, hills, or the rural countryside, these properties have a rich legacy. Walk through halls and corridors filled with rich furnishings, teakwood furniture, European chandeliers, ancestral portraits,

historical photographs, and plenty of memorabilia; sleep in rooms that were once reserved for the owners or their important guests. On the grounds you are bound to admire beautiful European marble sculptures, even as you run into a fleet of vintage cars or carriages, beautifully finished royal rail saloons, and most definitely, a stable of horses. Most of the properties are still owned and often even partially occupied by the original owners, who offer you a glimpse of the opulent life of maharajas, nawabs, and feudal families of the Raj, a period described so evocatively by writers like Kipling who once wrote that providence created the maharajas to provide mankind with a spectacle.

In this booklet, we have included the entire range of properties from family-owned and -run heritage hotels to a few that have been taken over and modernised by entrepreneurs. Whether you want to taste traditional Gujarati vegetarian food in a haveli in Ahmedabad or meat dishes at a nawab's palatial house, or look at vintage cars, or ride Marwari and Kathiawadi horses, or retreat to colonial bungalows on hilltops, you will find it here.

Located on the west coast of India, with a long coastline open to the Arabian Sea, Gujarat has been a centre for overseas trade for several millennia. The Harappan Civilisation, the mature phase of the Indus Valley Civilisation, established its southern outposts along the Gujarat coastline at sites like Lothal between 2400 and 1900 BC. The prosperity resulting from its port attracted invaders, conquerors, colonisers, and traders from different parts of the world. Each of the settlers brought with them their architectural style and cultural influences.

Many warrior communities came into Gujarat and established their kingdoms. The Kathi Darbars came from the north-west and are believed to have Scythian ancestry. In the 11th and 12th centuries, the Solanki Rajputs brought in what is widely considered to be the golden period of architecture in Gujarat. Great patrons of art, the Solanki Rajputs built impressive forts with finely carved gateways at Dabhoi, Jhinjawada, Vadnagar, and other sites, the exquisitely carved temples of Modhera and Sidhapur, and a number of superbly sculpted Jain temples. A unique feature of the Solanki

Rajput reign was the creation of water-retaining structures like stepwells and stepped tanks with ostentatiously carved walls. Between the 12th and the 16th century, many Rajput clans came to Gujarat from neighbouring lands, like Sindh and Rajasthan. The Jhala Rajputs came to Gujarat from Sindh in the 12th century and established their rule at Patdi, later moving their seat of power to Halwad in the 15th century. At the time of India's independence, the Jhalas ruled gun-salute states like Dhrangadhra, Wankaner, Wadhwan, and Limbdi, and non-salute states like Sayla. The Gohil Rajputs came to Gujarat from Rajasthan in the 13th century and settled along the coast of south-eastern Saurashtra. They went on to found the princely states of Bhavnagar and Palitana, and one of the family's branches also got established at Rajpipla. The Chauhan Rajput dynasty, after the fall of Champaner to the Gujarat Sultanate, moved into the eastern hills of Gujarat and established princely states like Chhota Udepur and Devgadhi Baria. The Jadeja Rajputs migrated to Gujarat from Sindh and became the rulers of Kutch and Jamnagar. At the time of independence, they were rulers of Kutch,

Jamnagar, Rajkot, Morvi, Gondal, and other states. The Parmar Rajputs came to Gujarat from Sindh and became rulers of Muli princely state. The non-salute state of Danta and other states were also ruled by the Parmars. Among Muslim dynasties, the Lohanis who ruled over Jalore, moved to North Gujarat in the 17th century when the Mughal Emperors gave Jalore to the Maharaja of Mawar. The Lohanis established the Palanpur princely state.

The Gujarat Sultanate, which held sway over the state in the 15th century, introduced a provincial style of Indo-Saracenic architecture. The Sultans founded the walled city of Ahmedabad in 1411, and endowed it with magnificent mosques and mausoleum complexes. The finest examples of the Gujarat Sultanate-style of Indo-Saracenic

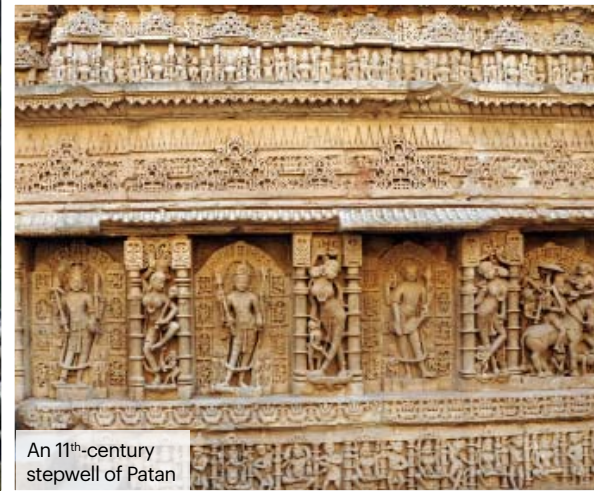
premier princes, after Hyderabad and Mysore, to be entitled to a 21-gun salute.

The British East India Company started its factory at Surat in the 17th century, during the reign of Mughal Emperor Jehangir. In 1807, Colonel Alexander Walker, the Company Resident at Baroda, negotiated treaties that brought the many petty and princely states of Gujarat under the British umbrella. While most of Gujarat was dominated by princely and petty states, places like Ahmedabad, Kheda district, and Surat were brought under direct British rule.

With peace coming to Gujarat after the Walker settlements, the maharajas, nawabs, and other rulers of princely states were able to focus their attention on building grand palaces, public buildings,



The 12th-century Jain temple of Taranga



An 11th-century stepwell of Patan



The 11th-century Sun Temple at Modhera

NORTH GUJARAT

The area is characterised by some fascinating and distinctive ARCHITECTURE, a living HERITAGE of textiles and handicrafts, picturesque tribal areas, and attractive scenery

Archaeology and architecture buffs will enjoy travelling through the fertile agricultural fields north of Ahmedabad to visit the ancient Buddhist sites, a number of walled cities and towns, and a rich treasury of Hindu and Jain temples. There are many architectural masterpieces here like the 8th-century temples of Roda, the 11th-century Modhera Sun Temple, the 11th- and 12th-century Jain temples at Kumbharia and Taranga, the 12th-century Rudramalaya at Sidhapur and Torana archway at Vadnagar, and the 16th-century Hindu and Jain temples in the Polo forests. Another special feature of this region for architecture enthusiasts is the number of water-retaining structures, like wells and tanks, built here on a magnificent scale during the 11th and 12th centuries. The 11th-century stepwell at Patan, the seat of power of the Solanki Rajputs in this period, is so exquisitely adorned that it looks like a subterranean palace!

This region also had important princely states, with impressive palaces and public buildings. Besides the palaces of the Nawab of Palanpur and the Maharaja of Idar, the Naggar Brahmin havelis of Vadnagar and the elaborate Bohra Muslim mansions of Sidhapur are also architectural showpieces.

As you head north towards the Rajasthan border, the plains give way to the Aravalli Hills where there are wildlife reserves like Jessore and Balam Ambaji Sanctuary inhabited by the sloth bear, leopard, and a variety of birds. In the hilly regions, you will find the villages of tribal groups like the Garasia Adivasi and pastoral communities like the Rabari, known for their colourful attire and artistic ornaments.

The heritage hotels of North Gujarat are ideally situated to visit these diverse attractions. Darbargadh Poshina, a family-run heritage hotel, offers a window to the world of the tribal groups that inhabit the hills surrounding the village of Poshina. Vijayvillas at Vijaynagar makes a perfect staging post to explore the Polo forests with their wealth of wildlife, crumbling temples, and tribal villages. The Bhavani Villa at Danta lies near Taranga, Kumbharia, and other historical sites, and also offers access to the wildlife-rich forested hills. The Balam Palace Resort offers access to Balam Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuary and is located near the Jessore Sloth Bear Sanctuary. ■



The intricate architecture at the Patan stepwell



The 1914 Pratap Vilas Palace at Vadodra houses a Railway Staff College



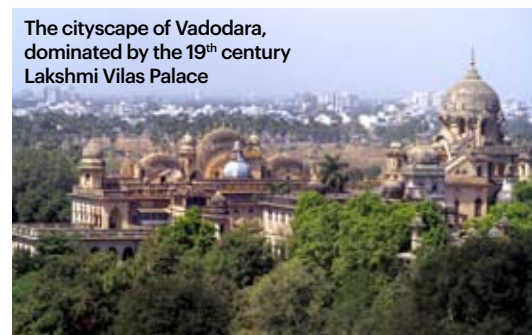
The Durbar hall of the Pragmahal Palace in Bhuj



Ornate balconies of the Darbargadh in Gondal



The imposing Pratap Vilas Palace in Jamnagar



The cityscape of Vadodra, dominated by the 19th century Lakshmi Vilas Palace

architecture can be seen at Champaner, which is now a UNESCO-recognised World Heritage Site. The Mughal emperor Akbar conquered Gujarat in the 16th century. The Mughals built palaces in Ahmedabad and a sarai in Surat, which became a major port of the Mughal Empire and also an important embarkation point for the sea voyage to Mecca.

Following the decline of the Mughal Empire, a number of Muslim subehdars or governors of Gujarat began to carve out independent princely states like Junagadh, Radhanpur, and Balasinor. As the Marathas rose to become the major national power on the fall of the Mughal Empire, the Maratha Gaekwad dynasty established their rule over much of Gujarat, and began to bring Saurashtra (Kathiawar) under their suzerainty. The Baroda Princely State, ruled by the Gaekwads, became one of the wealthiest in India. Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad, who ruled Baroda from the 1880s to the 1930s, was one of the three

and civic projects. From the 1880s to the 1940s, the princes commissioned the construction of flamboyant palaces drawing from various architectural styles like Venetian gothic, baroque, classical, Mughal, Rajput, East Indian, moorish, and art deco, villas at scenic locations like hilltops or on the sea coast, and mansion guesthouses to entertain European visitors and personal guests. Some of these properties are now heritage hotels owned and run by the descendants of the erstwhile rulers.

Apart from the princely states, Gujarat's mercantile families who prospered from overseas trade also commissioned exquisite houses. The havelis of Naggar, Jain, and Vaishnav families in Ahmedabad, Vaso, Nadiad, and other cities are known for superb wood carvings, stone sculpture and stucco work, while the Bohra Muslim mansions at Sidhapur and Kapadvanj have eclectic architectural works.

A tour of the heritage hotels of Gujarat offers an insight into the rich diversity of culture and architecture that exists in the state. ■

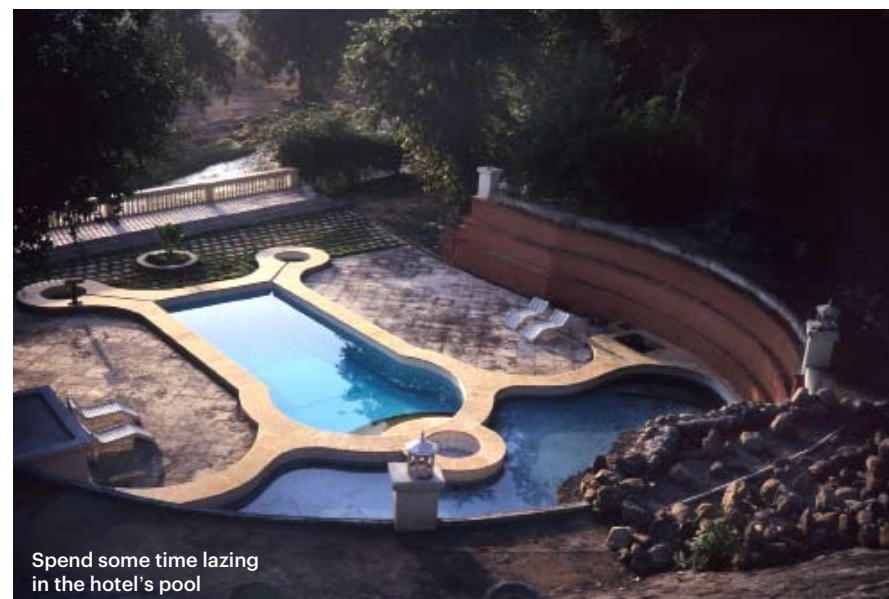


Balaram Palace Resort by night

Best for a Tranquil Getaway BALARAM PALACE RESORT PALANPUR

1 The enlightened Nawab of Palanpur, the late Sir Taley Muhammad Khan Bahadur, built the Balaram Palace in 1935 as a retreat from his capital, Palanpur, 14km away. Here he entertained visiting European guests and fellow royalty with bear and leopard shoots, held lavish house parties, and is said to have spent time here with his Australian wife, Jahan Ara Begum Sahiba Joan Alice Falkiner. Set beside the Chitrasani River, this palace was taken over in the 1990s by a restaurateur from Ahmedabad and has since been turned into a lovely resort.

Drive into the multi-acre palatial estate, with its landscaped gardens, terraced lawns, and a fountain in the forecourt, to enjoy a stay in well-equipped, tented rooms. All the 17 rooms in the palace look out onto the surrounding scrub-jungles, and hills which stretch out to the Balaram Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuary. The best stay though is at the Nawab Suite that includes a sitting room, a bedroom, dining room, dressing area, and bathroom. Sit out by the window and gaze out at the scenery—there are only a few lucky guests who have managed a sighting of the sloth bear that is known to saunter through the jungles.



Spend some time lazing in the hotel's pool

Who goes This property has been a popular venue for several film and television shoots. Don't be surprised if you bump elbows with popular stars.

Top tip One of the highlights of the property is the historic swimming pool, fed by a natural spring with the overflow spilling out to the river below.

Contact Balaram Palace Resort, Palanpur; tel: 02742 284 278; www.balarampalace.com

Best for Trekking VIJAY VILLAS VIJAYNAGAR

2 As you approach Vijaynagar, the drive goes through a long stretch of forested hills, called the Polo Jungles, with mature trees (some of them are actually more than a century old). Eventually, you enter a village and come to the Vijay Villas, a colonial-period villa set on a hill looking out onto the forests on one side and a cricket ground on the other. Days here are spent relaxing in the property's shady courtyard or enjoying the view from the bench behind the property, or even better, climbing to the rooftop for a splendid view of the nearby forests. The dining hall and eight bedrooms are furnished with original period furniture of the early 20th-century—in the rooms you will find large wooden beds and teakwood cabinets. The owners, Vijay Vardhan Singh and Asha

Kumari, personally welcome guests; the latter has also been known to personally prepare the amazing Rajasthani and Gujarati food that is served in a traditional set-up in the property's colonial-style dining room.

When you have had enough of relaxing at the property, ask the owners to arrange a trek or drive in the Polo Jungles. Look out for the grey hornbill, green pigeon, brown-headed barbet, and other birds feeding on the figs and berries in the forests, which are also inhabited by leopards, sloth bears, hyenas, and antelopes; night drives in the jungle are another popular option. Adventure hunters could also get in on the action by visiting the hideout of Maharana Pratap in the jungles.

Who goes Weekenders and holidayers looking to escape the city drill with a quick getaway.

Top tip Ask the owners for directions to 16th-century temples and other monuments that are akin to hidden heritage spots in the area's jungles.

Contact Vijay Villas, Vijaynagar; tel: +63 36 288 4988; www.vijayvilasvijaynagar.com



Revel in Vijay Villas's quiet surroundings



Enjoy the Raj-era charm of the property



The rooms here are done up in original period furniture



Bhavani Villa nestles in a huge colonial estate

Best for Dog and Horse Lovers BHAVANI VILLA DANTA

3 Sitting high over Danta village with a view of the hills and the old palace, Bhavani Villa is a great place for lovers of animals. This is where the owners, Mahipendra Singh and Chandra Kumari, keep their pedigreed dogs, and birds in the aviary. Expectedly, the colonial villa's interiors are full of animal pictures, memorabilia related to horses, equestrian sports, pig-sticking, and trophies won by their dogs and horses at various shows. The couple or their son will happily take you to see their livestock farm, a converted polo ground, where they breed Marwari horses and maintain a dairy. Drive, walk, or ride in the huge estate around the farm to spot birds and antelope in the surrounding woodlands, and maybe even glimpse a leopard basking on the nearby rocks.

Back at the Bhavani Villa, you can choose from four well-appointed rooms offering balcony views, and dine on the terrace with the family members (or when the weather permits, in their private dining room). The food is regional, comprising delectable Rajasthani and Gujarati specialties—much of the produce comes from the farm. For those interested in the local crafts, the daughter-in-law, Divyajyoti Singh, runs a social enterprise called India Ethnics, and will arrange your visit to meet local artisans.

Who goes Horse and dog fanciers from around the world; tourists en route from Rajasthan to the attractions of Gujarat, corporate execs and entrepreneurs from cities like Ahmedabad looking for a break.

Top tip If you like horses and riding, request the family to arrange a cross-country riding trip on one of their stunning Marwari mares; be sure you cover the diverse terrain that ranges from sandy riverbeds to the hills.

Contact Bhavani Villa, Danta; tel: 02749 278 705; www.bhavanivilladanta.com



Darbargadh Poshina houses beautiful antiques

Best for a Rural Experience DARBARGADH POSHINA POSHINA

4 Darbargadh Poshina, a medieval castle in the village of Poshina, offers a glimpse of the Real India which lives in the villages. Near the gates of this heritage property you can watch potters make utensils and terracotta horses that are offered by the tribals at their shrines, and possibly also blacksmiths making swords, daggers, and knives. Wander into the nearby bazaar where tribal women come to buy ornaments and the villagers stock up on produce, visit silver jewellers, or bear witness to rituals in historic Hindu and Jain temples. In the nearby hills are villages and shrines of tribal groups. And amid this bustling village, Darbargadh Poshina is like an oasis with its pleasant courtyard gardens and domed terraces.

Run by Harendrapal Singh and Kailash Kumari who are originally antique dealers, the property is furnished with antique reproductions, heirlooms, and carved wooden furniture. Choose from over 25 rooms, all of them done up in period style. The home-cooked meals served in the dining room are prepared under the supervision of Kailash Kumari, and include Marwari and Gujarati specialties. Harendrapal Singh happily takes guests on excursions to the tribal villages; make sure you visit the shrine featuring scores of votive terracotta figures, mainly horses, and the nearby pastoral colonies of the colourful Rabari community who keep camel and cattle.

Who goes Foreigners and expats interested in tribal culture.

Top tip Ask the owners to arrange for a picnic lunch at a lakeshore, riverside farm, or old fort ruins nearby.

Contact Darbargadh Poshina, Poshina; tel: 02775 283 325; www.poshina.com ■



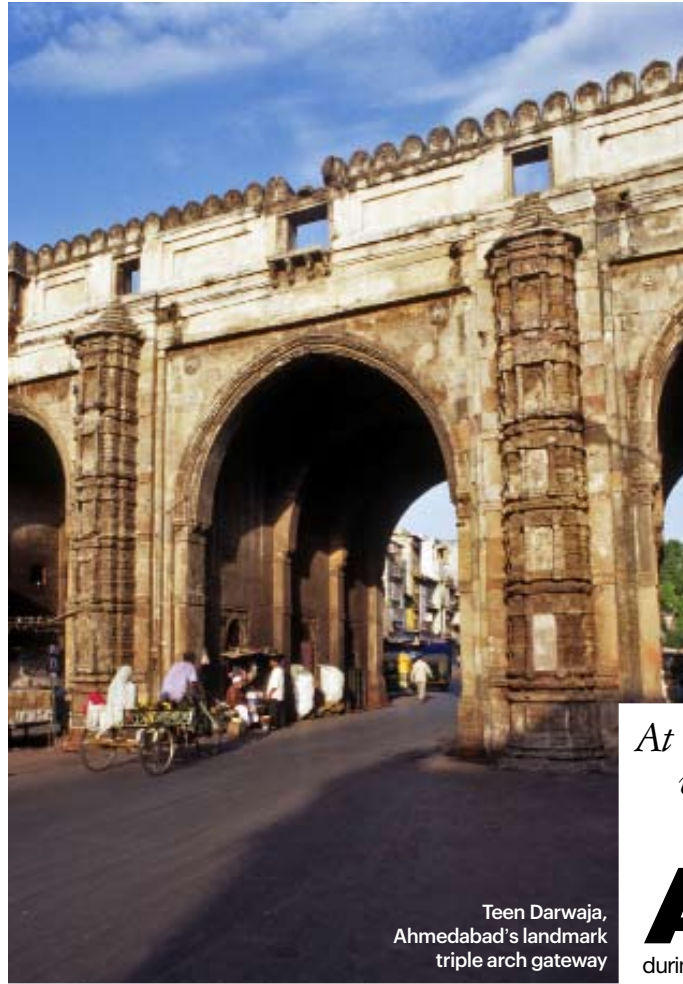
Go riding on one of the area's stunning Marwari horses



Darbargadh Poshina



Make sure you visit the surrounding rural areas



Teen Darwaja, Ahmedabad's landmark triple arch gateway



The mosque in Sarkhej Complex

CENTRAL GUJARAT

At the heart of the state lies AHMEDABAD, a city where visitors expect to be enthralled by stunning ARCHITECTURAL MASTERPIECES

Ahmedabad, the largest city of Gujarat and also the state's commercial and industrial hub, was once called Ashavalli after the Bhil chieftain Asha, and became Karnavati, a temple city, during the reign of the Solanki Rajputs in the 12th century. The present-day city, however, owes its origins to Sultan Ahmed Shah who moved the capital of the Gujarat Sultanate from Patan to the riverside city by the Sabarmati which became known as Ahmedabad. The foundation stone of Ahmedabad was laid in 1411AD and the walled city was declared the capital of Gujarat in 1414. Over the last 600 years, Ahmedabad has assimilated a variety of architectural and cultural influences. Within the walled city lie the majestic mosques, mausoleum complexes, and the architecturally unique shaking minarets built in the 15th and 16th centuries by the Sultans. The intricate tree-of-life latticework of the 16th-century Sidi Syed Mosque is the enduring symbol of Ahmedabad.

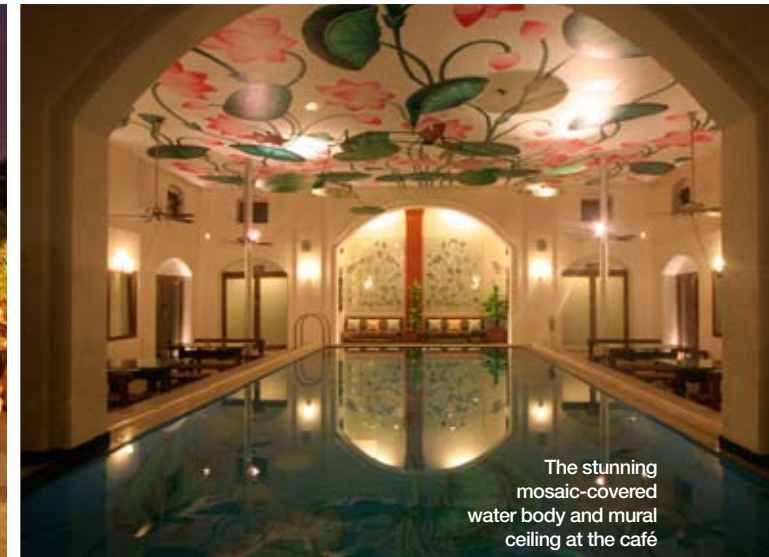
Under the Mughals, the Marathas, and finally the British, Ahmedabad's architecture continued to flourish. The old quarters of the walled city, called the 'pols', are lined with the façades of houses or havelis and embellished with exquisite wood carvings, fine stone sculpture, or elaborate stucco work. The havelis are designed for the arid conditions of Ahmedabad with airy courtyards and water-harvesting systems. The Shahibagh Palace was built by Shah Jahan, when he was governor of Ahmedabad, to the north of the walled city.

With the industrialisation of Ahmedabad from 1861 when the first textile mill was founded in the city, the business families began to build grand mansions in outlying areas of the city. After independence, modern master architects like Le Corbusier, Luis Kahn and well-known Indians were commissioned to build houses, villas, and institutions in Ahmedabad. Charles Correa built the museum in the Gandhi Ashram and Balkrishna Doshi moved to the city where he has built some of his finest works.

Today, Ahmedabad has a wealth of architectural masterpieces, its three heritage hotels well-positioned for visitors to the city who come visit to enjoy these exquisite offerings. ■



Enjoy rooftop dining at The House of MG



The stunning mosaic-covered water body and mural ceiling at the café



The House of MG

Best for Modern Comforts THE HOUSE OF MG AHMEDABAD

1 The House of Mangaldas Girdhardas is located opposite the iconic Sidi Syed Mosque in one of the most heavily trafficked areas of Ahmedabad. But the traffic snarls outside are soon forgotten once you enter the ornamental Indo-Baroque mansion built in the 1920s by the late Mangaldas Girdhardas, a textile industrialist. Featuring pleasant outdoor cafés, marble floors, long corridors, mosaic-tiled courtyards, an old elevator, majestic staircases, and stained-glass windows, it's all old-world glamour here. Built in the 1950s and thereafter in a dilapidated state, this heritage property was converted into a hotel in the 1990s by Girdhardas's grandson, Abhay Mangaldas. It now blends yesteryear's charm with modern facilities for the contemporary business traveller.

Relax with a cup of coffee, snack, mini-meal, or handmade ice-cream in The Green House, the outdoor café that is like an oasis in the bustling city; or at the Lotus Pond, an indoor pool and café with ceiling murals of lotuses done in the style of the Shrinathji Pichwais of Rajasthan. For a more elaborate dining experience, head upstairs to the Agashiye Restaurant, spread over two rooftops and offering Gujarati cuisine.

The rooms and suites are spacious and smart, appointed with solid wooden furniture, with the odd swing in true Gujarati tradition, and other mod cons. The master bedroom of the Mangaldas Suite has a king-size four-poster double bed, and a large bathroom with dressing area, while the Grand Suite is an entire apartment looking out onto The Green House on one side, a private verandah, a full-service kitchenette, and a queen-size, four-poster bed.

Who goes Industrialists, corporate executives, foreign tourists, and artists looking to enjoy a bygone era.

Top tip Visit the Mangaldas-ni-Haveli, a Naggar Brahmin haveli, taken over by Abhay Mangaldas. It is an excellent example of Ahmedabad's historic domestic architecture with intricate wood carvings.

Contact The House of MG, Ahmedabad; tel: 079 2550 6946; www.houseofmg.com



The Charles Correa memorial in Gandhi Ashram

Best for Artistic Endeavours

ARTS REVERIE

AHMEDABAD

2 The way to Arts Reverie is just as fascinating as the house: walk through Dhal-ni-Pol, one of the typical old quarters of Ahmedabad with narrow lanes shaded by two- or three-storey buildings, and gaze at the ornate balconies, brackets, and carved doors of havelis all the way till you reach an old Jain temple. Just opposite the temple lies Arts Reverie, an ornamental 1920s house that once belonged to a Jain jeweller. Restored by the Ahmedabad Heritage Centre as part of an Indo-French project for revitalising Ahmedabad, this house is run by Mumbai-based art consultant and gallery owner Anupa Mehta, with Jeremy Theophilus and Barney Hare Duke. Positioned as a guesthouse for those who want to experience life in the pols (old residential clusters), especially artists and other creative professionals, the property has four rooms to let—simple, clean, streamlined, and comfortable. Walk its corridors to admire the photographs and artworks signed by artists who started here, and traditional paintings by Kalamkars (traditional artists) of the city.

Featuring wooden staircases, balconies, and stained-glass windows, there is also a studio and gallery area upstairs, perfectly suited for small events and exhibitions. There is also a library and a dining area where home-cooked food is served; the abundance of informative brochures and maps for visitors to discover the city is bound to leave you spoilt for choice on the things you want to do through the day. At night, the façade is specially attractive when the lamps and candles are lit.

Who goes More than 100 artists and other creative people have stayed here since 2006.

Top tip Ask the management for details of the Craft Heritage Walk, which includes a number of artistic houses and handicraft centres in this and other nearby 'pols'.

Contact Arts Reverie, Ahmedabad; tel: 079 2217 0629; www.artsreverie.com



The façade of Arts Reverie, Ahmedabad



The winding staircase of Corporate Suites

Best for Old-World Living

CORPORATE SUITES

AHMEDABAD

3 A short walk from Ashram Road, the main commercial artery of Ahmedabad, brings you to the early 20th-century ancestral house of businessman Tushar Dalal who converted it into a heritage homestay facility, with a pleasant lawn and garden, balconies, and ample car-parking area. Spend time here chatting with the owner who takes pride in telling you about Indian theatre personalities, Gujarati poets and authors, and national leaders who stayed as guests of his grandfather and father in this house. There is a patio in front and a large hallway with old photographs from where a sweeping staircase leads up to some of the suites. All the 18 suites are like apartments, equipped with a kitchenette, dining area, and other modern facilities. If you are a gourmand, then you are definitely going to love the home-cooked Indian and Western meals that are prepared by the cooks who have been with the family for decades.

Who goes Well-known musicians, popular performing artistes, and other long-staying visitors to the city of Ahmedabad.

Top tip Request the owner or staff for a meal on the patio or lawn.

Contact Corporate Suites, Ahmedabad; tel: 079 2657 7404; www.corporatesuites.in ■



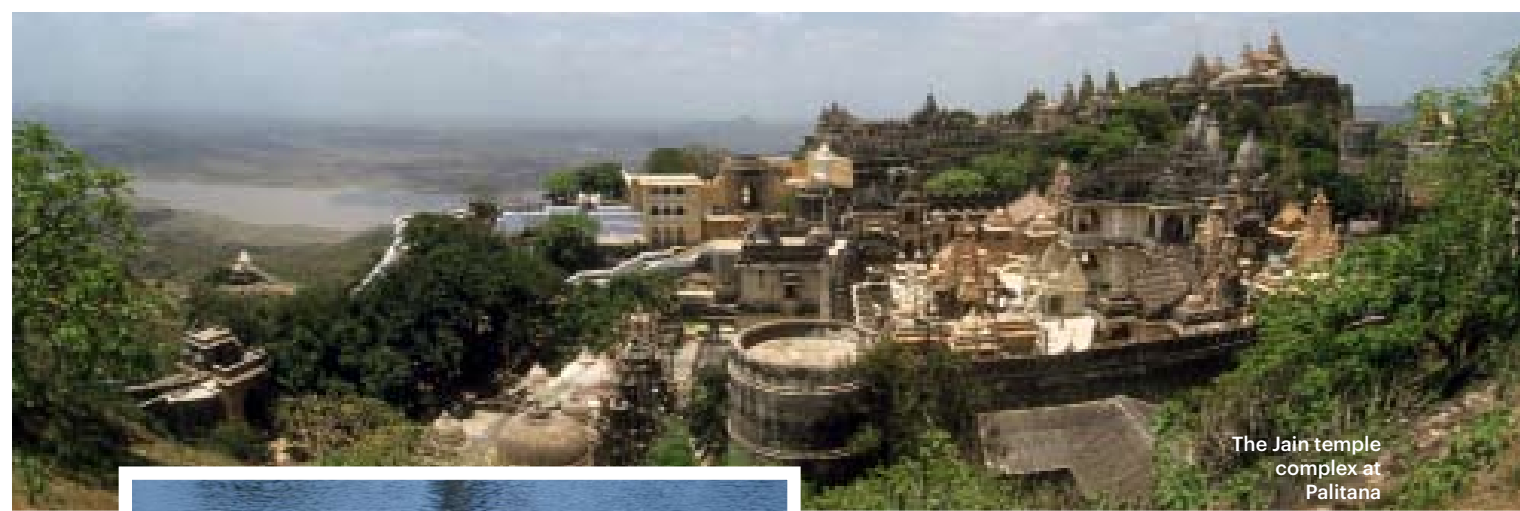
The artistic interiors of the property



Arts Reverie is a haven for the creatively inclined



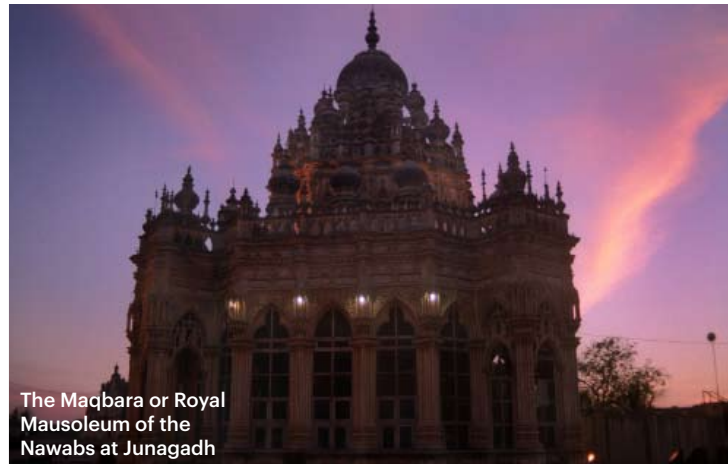
Corporates Suites, Ahmedabad



The Jain temple complex at Palitana



The flamingos that abound in Saurashtra



The Maqbara or Royal Mausoleum of the Nawabs at Junagadh



Blackbucks at Velavadar National Park near Bhavnagar



A public building in Bhavnagar

KUTCH & SAURASHTRA

Also called the Kathiawar Peninsula, the state's westernmost bulkhead has fascinating archaeological sites, distinctive HANDICRAFTS, attractive beaches, and some of India's best WILDLIFE reserves

For wildlife enthusiasts, the western regions of Gujarat encompass India's first Marine National Park, the expansive Kutch Desert Wildlife Sanctuary, India's only Wild Ass Sanctuary, the last remaining habitat of the Asiatic lion in the Gir National Park, the Velavadar National Park with India's largest blackbuck herds, and the Khijadiya and Porbandar Bird Sanctuaries. Some of the most substantial remains of the Harappan civilisation in India can be seen at Lothal in Saurashtra and Dholavira in Kutch. Saurashtra also has fascinating temple cities like Palitana with more than 860 temples sites on a secluded hilltop, Dwarka and Somnath with their shore temples, and Junagadh with Hindu and Jain temples set on 3,660 ft high Mt Girnar. The long coastline offers superb beaches like the one at Mandvi along the Gulf of Kutch.

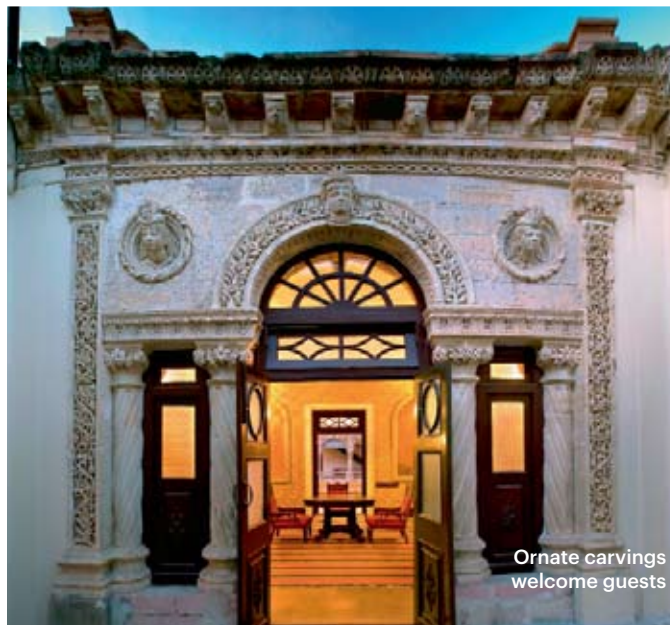
When Walker of the East India Company negotiated settlements with ruling families, the Kutch-Saurashtra region was divided into more than 230 states, ranging from small fiefdoms to large princely states like Kutch, Jamnagar, Bhavnagar, Porbandar, Junagadh, Dhrangadhra, Morvi, Gondal, Wankaner, Rajkot, Dhrol, Limbdi, Palitana, and Wadhwan. Dotted with hill forts and walled towns that stand testimony to a turbulent past, Kutch and Saurashtra boast many flamboyant palaces, art deco mansions, and colonial villas. Here, along the long western coastline of Gujarat, maharajas and nawabs built their beachside palaces: from the enormous summer palace of the Maharao of Kutch in Mandvi, and the sea-shore palaces of the Nawab of Junagadh at Chorvad and Veraval, to the Huzoor Palace of the Maharana of Porbandar and the beachside estates of the Maharaja of Bhavnagar at Gopnath and Hatabh. Not surprisingly, this is where you find the largest concentration of Gujarat's heritage hotels including some of the best-known from the state. ■



The stately bedroom at Darbargadh Palace, Morvi



The hotel's gorgeous central courtyard



Ornate carvings welcome guests

Best for Elegance DARBARGADH PALACE MORVI

1 Seen from the opposite bank of the Macchu River, the Darbargadh Palace in Morvi looks like an enormous mansion that could very well have been set among the romantic canals of Venice. Its shady loggias and Venetian gothic façade rise majestically and are reflected in the waters that amble gaily alongside it. This palace was built in the 1880s, during the reign of HH Shri Waghji Rawaji Thakore, and has been subsequently extended and renovated studiously and beautifully. Classical columns and Gothic arches compete for guests' attention with Rajput jarokhas and Islamic domes. Here, a pointed Gothic arch window consorts with cusped Indian arches, and there, an Italian balustrade and Grecian urn line a corridor leading to a Mughal-style pavilion. It is this precise and studious mix of apparently disparate styles that adds to the charm of this 19th-century edifice. Wooden stairways lead to marble pavilions that skirt the palace walls, and you could sleep in a vast suite with an attached bath the size of an apartment! But don't let that take away the pleasure of wandering around in the garden and unwinding in a courtyard with a bubbling fountain. This is the stuff fairytales are made of.

Who goes The elite from cosmopolitan cities across India, looking for an elegant retreat.

Top tip Those staying in this palace are entitled to a tour of the fantastic 1930s and '40s art deco palace with its era-defining signature rooms, a seashell covered bathroom, and a subterranean room with erotic mural-work.

Contact Darbargadh Palace, Morvi; tel: 011 4666 1666; www.neemranahotels.com



A life-size chessboard at the Old Bell Guest House



The striking façade of the Gondal Palace

Best for Some Alone Time **OLD BELL GUEST HOUSE** SAYLA

2This colonial guesthouse is right out of a scene from British India, with its European columns and arches, overhanging creepers, bougainvillea, stately gardens, sweeping driveway, sepia-toned photographs lining the corridors, and a wide staircase leading upstairs to a gallery. Owners Preeti and Somraj Singh are usually around to welcome you, and the meals are homely, made by the household help. Select from any of the rooms, all of which are generously large with wooden furniture and modern fittings, an extra baggage room and good-sized baths. If one of your main concerns is space, then the rooms in the corners, upstairs, are especially large. Start your day by walking up to the gallery and watching the several variety of birds, particularly owls, that nest in the nearby trees. And if you feel like stepping out for a bit, the owners will happily arrange for you to tour the village, nearby archaeological sites, or for those who enjoy arts and crafts, the workshops of weavers and craftspeople. There are plenty of opportunities for long walks in the grounds, and maybe even an outdoor game if you are travelling with children. Sayla village is nearby and is known for its Kathiawadi horses—if you are keen, the owners can arrange riding sessions on these graceful, indigenous horses that are known for their arched necks and beautiful eyes.

Who goes Weekenders and tourists

Top tip Somraj Singh takes pride in personally driving guests to the nearby scrublands where you may spot antelope, gazelle, and rich birdlife.

Contact Old Bell Guest House, Sayla; tel: 097246 78145



The Old Bell Guest House



The Palace Museum at Gondal



A 1920s Delage at Orchard Palace



The Gondal Palace

Best for A Royal Stay **RIVERSIDE PALACE & ORCHARD PALACE** GONDAL

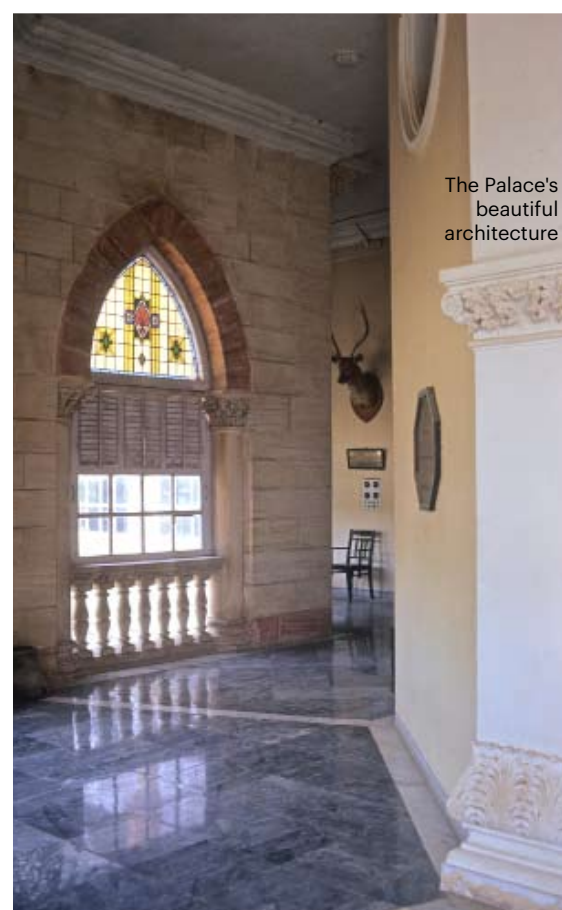
3 When the Maharajas of Gondal moved their residence from the walled palace called Darbargadh to the green and more open estate of the Huzoor Palace in the 1880s, they also built two villas—the Orchard Palace as his guesthouse for personal visitors in the palace estate and the Riverside Palace on the shores of the river as the home of the Yuvraj (Crown Prince), about a kilometre away. Converted by Kumud Kumari into heritage hotels during the 1990s, these properties feature antique furniture like canopied four-poster beds, carved tables and chairs, ornate cabinets, old dressers, and brass-ribbed wooden chests called pataras; the grounds of the Orchard Palace even go as far as to flaunt a beautifully finished royal railway saloon, a fleet of vintage and classic cars including 1920s and '30s European models, and a horse-drawn carriage. All the rooms (11 at Riverside Palace and seven at Orchard Palace) are high-ceilinged, in impeccable colonial style—you may recognise some of the rooms from the blockbuster *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*. Indulge in early morning tea in one of the galleries, while watching peacocks gather to drink at the lotus-covered pond, and dine on largely European food that harks back to the Raj.

The staff will take you to see the Darbargadh which is a festival of stone carvings, and houses memorabilia like antique textiles, utensils, silver caskets etc, of Maharaja Bhagwat Sinhji, who transformed Gondal into a progressive princely state. Kumud Kumari proposes to open a few rooms in this palace too.

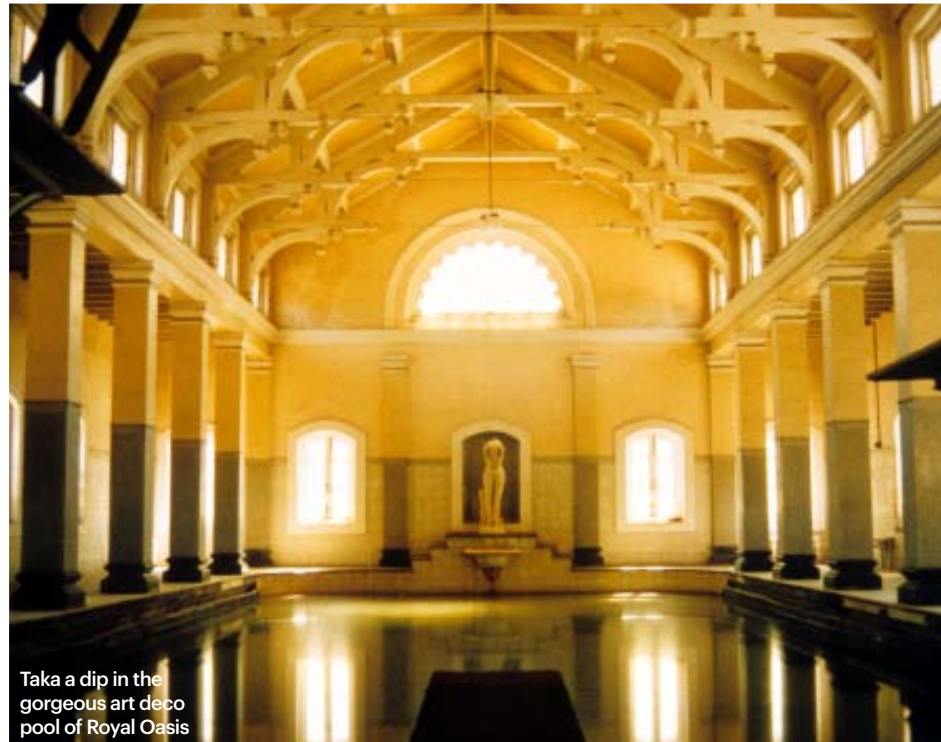
Who goes Gondal is popular with European tourists and has entertained many prominent personalities.

Top tip Nature lovers shouldn't miss out on taking a drive or walking in the nearby rolling grasslands for close views of prinias, larks, quails, sandgrouse, francolins and harriers.

Contact Riverside Palace and Orchard Palace; tel: 079 2630 2019; www.gondalpalaces.com



The Palace's beautiful architecture



Taka a dip in the gorgeous art deco pool of Royal Oasis

Best for Antique Lovers ROYAL OASIS AND THE RESIDENCY WANKANER

4 Set halfway up a hill, the Ranjit Vilas Palace of Wankaner is an architectural extravaganza with a Venetian-Gothic façade, Mughal-style pavilions, Rajput jarokhas, a colonial-style clock tower, Indo-Saracenic domes, and Moorish arches. The interiors of this palace are equally impressive with Belgian chandeliers, stained-glass windows, Italian marble floors, hand woven-rugs, about 95 species of stuffed animals, and a variety of princely bric-a-brac. Digvijay Singh, the owner, will regale you with stories and anecdotes about the princely states, and may show you their stunning collection of swords and daggers, shields, standards, palanquins, howdahs, and caparisons. Stay next door at The Residency, a 19th-century accomodation which once housed the British Resident of Wankaner, or at the Royal Oasis, a 20th-century mansion in 33 acres of orchards and gardens by the Machhu River; you'll fall in love with its art deco indoor swimming pool.

Who goes History and antique buffs.

Top tip Visit the marble stepwell in the grounds of the Royal Oasis: descend down the stairways to see the marble fountains and beautiful Hindu sculptures in this rare example of late-19th- and early-20th- century stepwell architecture.

Contact Royal Oasis and The Residency, Wankaner; tel: 02828 220 000

The Ranjit Vilas Palace of Wankaner



Best for Destination Weddings HERITAGE KHIRASARA PALACE KHIRASARA

5 The medieval and the modern meet at Heritage Khirasara Palace, a fortified structure rising up from an elevated land mass, next to a water body near Rajkot. Memories of fairytale castles come to mind as you wind up the driveway into the gateways of this walled complex, said to have been built by Thakor Ranmalji who ruled this area within the Dhrol princely state in the 16th century. It was later renovated by his descendant, Sursinhji who is credited with bringing education to the people of Khirasara during the British colonial period. Once inside, the hotel is a delight, matching the contemporary standards of luxury properties—you'll find a resort with wide-ranging facilities like a swimming pool, Ayurvedic spa, conference halls, multi-cuisine vegetarian restaurant, all-day coffee shop, and even a trendy discotheque!

Choose from the suites, most of which are furnished with carved furniture typical of the Kathiawad region while offering wide-ranging facilities. Climb to the rooftop for a view of the pleasantly old-fashioned village and the surrounding countryside. Extremely popular as a dining destination with the people of Rajkot and Jamnagar, the hotel management stages candle-lit dinners, vegetarian barbecues, and music programmes.

Who goes Khirasara Palace has been the location for many weddings of prominent people of Rajkot and other cities in Saurashtra.

Top tip Ask for evening tea and dinner at Ashtachal, the terrace of Khirasara, facing a glorious view of sunset in the countryside.

Contact Khirasara Palace, Khirasara; tel: 099130 77077; www.kirasarapalace.in

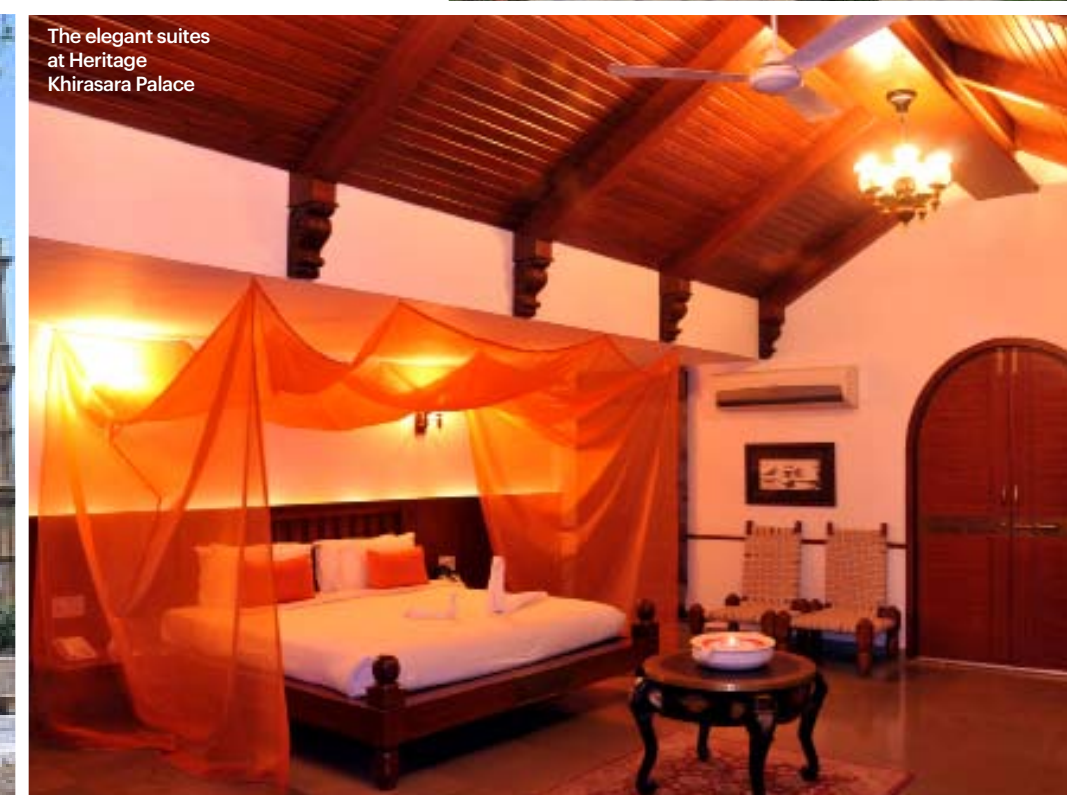
Heritage Khirasara Palace



The property flaunts all the luxe, modern amenities



The elegant suites at Heritage Khirasara Palace





The regal Rajmahal Palace



The antique offerings of Rajmahal Palace



The four-poster beds in the bedroom

Best for Grandeur RAJMAHAL PALACE WADHWAN

6 Drive into the crested iron gates of the Rajmahal Palace at Wadhwan and you are likely to find a strutting peacock in the forecourt and grey francolins scuttling through the 13-acre grounds. The huge portico is said to have been designed to allow an elephant to enter the hall inside the palace. Walk through a reception room, which has a large chandelier hanging from a ceiling richly decorated with gold-leaf embossed patterns, paintings, and murals, into the Durbarhall. The hall in itself is grandeur personified—you find columns with ornate bases and capitals, detailed plaster decoration on the ceilings, richly gilded paintings, velvet furnishings, and the gaddi (Indian equivalent of a throne) with rich tapestries, apart from crystal and other decorations on an ornate platform below a luxuriant velvet canopy. Walk from here into the centre courtyard with a pleasure pool surrounded by columns and latticework. Owners Karneika and Sidharth Singh are offering three high-ceilinged rooms with canopied beds, elegant chairs, and settees, and attached marble-floored baths. Our pick: the 'Velvet Room', which features original velvet tapestries that are said to have come from a factory in Paris that was taken over by the erstwhile ruler of Wadhwan to make furnishings for his own palaces!

Who goes Recently opened, the palace hotel is still spreading its wings, but is certainly worth checking out.

Top tip Car connoisseurs should most certainly request permission to visit the garages where there are likely to be vintage and classic cars ready for restoration, a great hobby of the property owners.

Contact Rajmahal Palace, Wadhwan; tel: 094264 91550



The leisurely reading room



Nilambagh Palace Hotel



Nilambagh is a haven of Raj-era artefacts

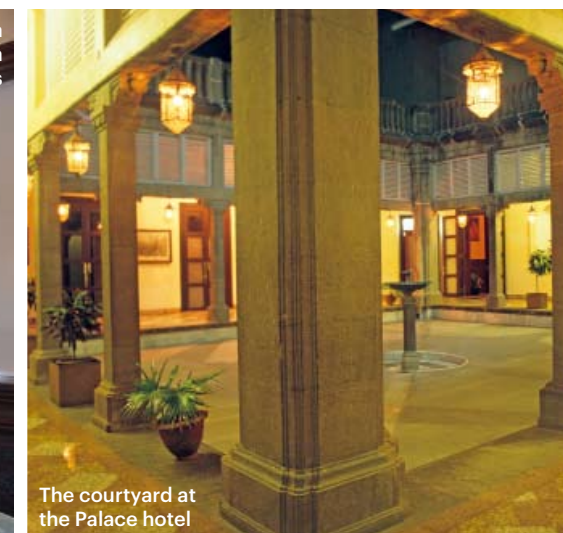
Best for Exotic Artefacts NILAMBAGH PALACE HOTEL & NARAYANI HERITAGE BHAVNAGAR

7 Nilambagh Palace Hotel, and its adjacent Narayani Heritage hotel, are set in more than 10 acres of grounds with tall trees that act as a wall against the traffic on the roads surrounding it. Teakwood carvings frame the doors leading into the lobby, once the front room of the palace, with its gilded ceiling, royal portraits, a stuffed leopard, Burma-teak furniture, and chandeliers. At the other end of an open-centre courtyard is the dining room, now a restaurant, with Chez chandeliers, Belgian-cut mirrors, and oil paintings. The paintings here depict the days when the maharajas and princes kept falcons and cheetahs for their hunting trips, and there are photographs of rulers from different princely states. Choose one of the large rooms with colonial-period furniture still in place and sit out on a private balcony or a gallery, spending evenings watching the peacocks, ibises, parakeets, and other birds roost leisurely.

Who goes European tourist groups and business visitors to the industrial estate of Bhavnagar.

Top tip Swim in Nilambagh's strikingly beautiful swimming pool, designed like a Roman bath complete with steps, scrolls, and colonnades.

Contact: Nilambagh Palace Hotel and Narayani Heritage, Bhavnagar; tel: 0278 2424241; www.nilambaghpalace.com



The courtyard at the Palace hotel

Best for Seaside Relaxation

GOPNATH BUNGALOW

BHAVNAGAR

8 From 1942 to the accession of the princely states in 1948, the late Maharaja Krishnakumar Sinh Gohil of Bhavnagar would spend the summer months from April to September at the Gopnath Bungalow, his relaxed country estate by the sea. As soon as you enter the estate, the strong sea breezes make it easy to understand why the Maharaja selected this spot for his summer capital and retreat. Set artistically on an elevation, Gopnath Bungalow has a scenic location flanked by rocks with a lighthouse on one side and an unending view of the sea from the grounds. Enjoy a shady lunch under the overhanging eaves or ponder the waves at your leisure, or even sit out at one of the cottages to enjoy the views of the sea—you may get a view of shore birds feeding on the mud banks, peregrine falcons and ospreys hovering in search of prey, dolphins surfacing for air, or fishing boats bringing in their catch, imagery seldom experienced today.

Who goes Gopnath is very popular with weekend tourists who come here from nearby cities.

Top tip Gopnath Bungalow serves traditional cuisines of the Kathiawad region, but if you are a seafood buff, make sure you ask the cook to prepare regional delicacies when the local fishermen bring in a good catch of lobster, prawns, or fish.

Contact Gopnath Bungalow, Bhavnagar; tel: 02842 287 708



The Mandvi Palace

Enjoy the sunset at Mandvi Beach



Best for Luxe Camping

THE BEACH AT MANDVI PALACE

MANDVI

9 For an exclusive holiday, head for the Beach at Mandvi Palace, a beach secluded from the crowds by its location in the 450-acre private palace estate of the erstwhile Maharao of Kutch. Tucked away among the dunes and coastal bushes, the 10 deluxe tents take you back to the colonial-day royal camps, with their striped canvas walls, carved wooden furniture, and verandas with solid wooden deck chairs. The rooms are air-conditioned and the bathrooms modern. Days here are spent strolling on the long beach, sunbathing on the deck chairs set under thatched canopies, or swimming or paddling in the calm sea. Lunch is served in the open-air restaurant, a regional food spread that also features the catch-of-the-day fish or prawns. There is also a beach-volleyball court for the more sporty.

Located near the western boundary of India, the beach is best enjoyed in the evening when the chef brings out the grill for a beach barbecue and a brilliant sunset can be witnessed on the western horizon. Don't miss a visit to the Vijay Vilas Palace, a majestic building where the Maharao of Kutch spent his summer months in the 1940s with his entire administrative team and family. You will recognise parts of the palace from movies like *Lagaan* and *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* that were filmed in Mandvi.

Who goes The exclusivity of this beach is enjoyed by a luxe guest list that ranges from celebs to expats and foreigners.

Top tip Climb to the palace's rooftop pavilion for a view that spreads over the estate and the sea.

Contact The Beach at Mandvi Palace, Mandvi; tel: 02834 277 597; www.mandvibeach.com



Gopnath Bungalow by the sea



The opulent interiors of Mandvi Palace



Vijay Vilas Palace, Palitana



The well-appointed royal ambience of the Vijay Vilas Palace

Best for a Homely Experience VIJAY VILAS PALACE PALITANA

10 In 1906, the late Prince Vijay Singh of Palitana built a country house at Adpore, about four kilometres away from the bustling town centre of Palitana. Today, his grandson, Yashpal Singh, runs this tranquil property as a homestay facility for tourists visiting the magnificent temples nearby. Much of the furniture dates from the early 20th century, when this property was still occupied by

the Prince. There are carved wooden cabinets, brass four-poster beds, heavy wooden tables and chairs, huge portraits, and plenty of old photographs. The family welcomes guests and usually dines with them. The food is interestingly eclectic—besides the Kathiawadi cuisine of the region, Yashpal Singh offers the Malwa cuisine of his father's village near Ratlam, and his wife who hails from Jaipur cooks up Rajasthani fare. In addition to this, fresh fish is often brought in from the Bhavnagar coast, which is about an hour away.

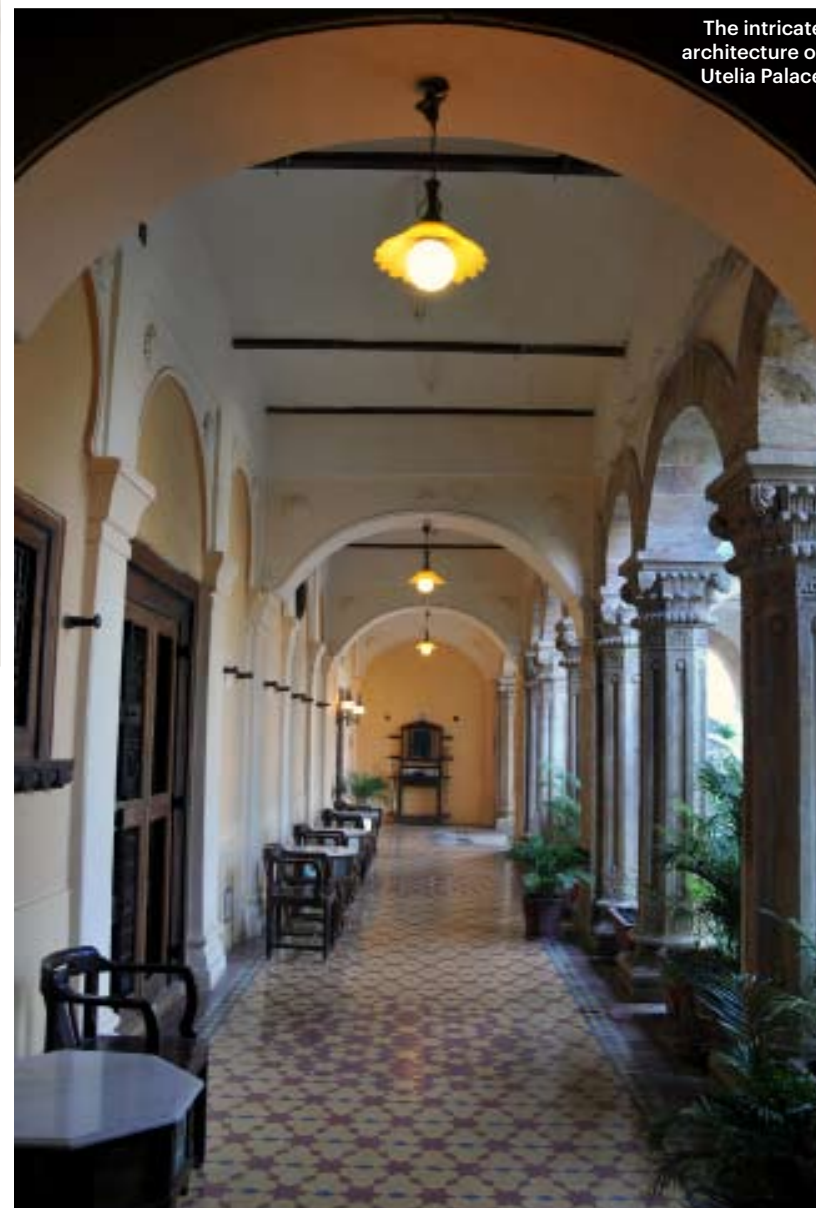
Who goes Primarily visitors to the Palitana temples.

Top tip Wander around the grounds of the Vijay Vilas to explore scenic water bodies and a good view of the temple-covered Shatrunjaya Hill.

Contact: *Vijay Vilas Palace, Palitana; tel: 02848 282 371; www.vijayvilaspalitana.com*



The Utelia Palace



The intricate architecture of Utelia Palace

Best for Pastoral Living THE UTELIA PALACE UTELIA

11 This is a princely property right in the heart of rural India—the terracotta roofs of the houses of Utelia village stretch on all sides of the high walls of The Palace Utelia. The property rises up from over the village with its five Indo-Saracenic-style domes visible for miles on every side. Drive into the gateway, and you are presented with a picture of huge arches and columns. Galleries lead to good-sized bedrooms inside which are carved wooden beds with painted panels and spotless bathrooms with modern fittings. The dining room is the centrepiece of the property, with its huge chandeliers, portraits, mirrors, corner cabinets, and elegant wooden furniture. The Palace Utelia deservedly enjoys an excellent reputation for its sumptuous Indian and Western meals personally supervised by Bhagirath Singh, Vidhatri Devi and other members of the family.

Who goes Peace-seeking travellers.

Top tip The owners are horse enthusiasts; get a lowdown from them on indigenous breeds.

Contact *The Utelia Palace, Utelia; tel: 07926 445 770. ■*



Maharaja Sayajirao University, Vadodara



Dine alfresco at the Garden Palace's quaint garden restaurant

EASTERN GUJARAT

The least explored part of Gujarat is bound to lure you with SURPRISES APLENTY

The eastern and southern districts of Gujarat have until recently remained largely off the beaten track for most travellers. It is now beginning to get attention because of the Champaner-Pavagadh Archaeological Park, the first and so far only UNESCO-notified World Heritage Site in Gujarat, the tribal culture, and a number of scenic sites. It is also the corridor for tour groups coming from Madhya Pradesh to North Gujarat, Central Gujarat, and Saurashtra-Kutch.

This part of Gujarat is remarkably diverse, ranging from the industrial cities of Vadodara, Bharuch, Ankleshwar, Surat, and Vapi along the Ahmedabad-Mumbai Highway to the forests and tribal-dominated hilly areas along the eastern boundaries of the state towards the Madhya Pradesh border. The princely states of eastern Gujarat included the Muslim-ruled state of Balasinor, Khambhat, and Sachin, the massive Maratha-ruled Baroda state, and the Rajput states of Chhota-Udepur, Dharampur, Lunawada, Santrampur, Baria, and Rajpipla. Most of these princely states were known for their grand palaces.

The city of Vadodara saw much palace-building during the reign of the Gaekwads from the mid-1700s, especially under Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad (1875 to 1939). Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad, known to be one of India's model rulers, was also responsible for public parks, an excellent museum, and a number of educational institutions. To the east of Vadodara, the 12th-century fort at Dabhoi, is specially known for its splendidly carved gateways. Further east of Daboi Champaner is a star attraction of Gujarat with its majestic mosques, forts, Hindu temples, stepwells, tanks, pavilions, and medieval ruins. A Swiss-style cable car takes travellers to the historic Laukalish temple on Pavagadh Hill.

After Champaner, the road runs through hills, inhabited by tribal groups like the Rathwas and the Bhils. These hilly areas, including forested sanctuaries like Jambughoda and Ratanmahal, are inhabited by the sloth bear, leopard, flying squirrel, and other wildlife.

Another attraction of eastern Gujarat is the Narmada River. Along this river you can see temples, ashrams, and the Sardar Sarovar Dam. In the Narmada district, Rajpipla has fine palaces. ■



The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Champaner



Admire the fascinating artefacts at the property



The Vadia Palace in Rajpipla



For the more adventurous, there is an option to stay in tents

Best for Camping GARDEN PALACE BALASINOR

A wide driveway leads from the crested gateway, through orchards and gardens and around an ornamental pond in the forecourt to the entrance of the Garden Palace in Balasinor. Guests are then welcomed by Salauddin and Aaliya Babi, the brother-sister team that run the property.

It would suffice to say that Garden Palace is a history buff's paradise, and everything in the hotel is a testimony to that. In the drawing room, with sumptuous European settees and chairs rescued from their grand old palace devastated by a fire in the 1940s, you will also spend time admiring carved wooden tables, ancestral portraits, and photographs. In a similar vein, the rooms around this hall have solid wooden furniture.

Aaliya Babi also runs excellent tours of the Raiyoli Dinosaur Site, where a huge cache of 65-million-year-old fossils, including dinosaur eggs, have been excavated. In keeping with this spirit, at one end of the palace, among sprawling trees that are frequented by parakeets and other birds, lies the Kasbah Camp Dinosaur, deluxe tents done up in the style of the Raj. A good place for a stroll is the lake across the road from the property gates. In the evening, sit out in the paved front courtyard of the palace to watch the birds coming in, or enjoy a candle-lit dinner under the clear skies in the property's garden restaurant that's at the opposite end of the palace.

Who goes Paleontologists visiting the dinosaur site and people looking for an atmospheric stay in tents.

Top tip Farhat Sultana, the former Begum of Balasinor, is an excellent cook with a repertoire of Mughlai recipes from princely states. On prior appointment, you can dine on these rich and elaborate dishes with the former Nawab, Muhammad Salabat Khan Babi, and Farhat Sultana in the dining room of the Garden Palace.

Contact Garden Palace, Balasinor; tel: 02690 63786



The Rajvant Palace Resort

Best for Celeb-Spotting RAJVANT PALACE RESORT RAJPIPLA

2 This palace resort contains the Vijay Palace, built for Maharaja Vijay Sinhji of Rajpipla when he was the crown prince in 1915, and its outhouses. Set over eight acres, it has an attractive location above the Karjan River, with banana plantations at the back. A driveway through the gardens leads to the forecourt of the palace which features a canon and an Italian marble fountain. The front elevation of the palace has Corinthian pillars, Gothic arches, and European domes. The interior is furnished with colonial period furniture, family portraits, and statues. Historic photographs of the late Maharaja Vijay Singh and his racehorses takes pride of place in the palace, currently owned by his grandson, Raghuvir Singh. Some of the suites are really large, and feature old pictures and furniture. Relax on the wrought-iron furniture beside the swimming pool, to the rear of the palace, and gaze out at the groves and fields by the Karjan River.

Who goes The hotel is a celeb hotspot, with many Gujarati feature films and Hindi TV serials having been shot in this palace.

Top tip Ask to see the museum which exhibits heirlooms including mirrors, glassware, crockery, metalware, exquisitely embellished wardrobes of erstwhile maharanis, stuffed animals, musical instruments, a marble throne, ancestral portraits, and photographs of courtly life and Rajput rituals. There is also a section dedicated to the life of the tribal groups.

Contact Rajvant Palace Resort, Rajpipla; tel: 02640 220 345; www.rajvantpalace.com



The Jambughoda Palace, on the grounds of which A Home for Nature Lovers is set

Best for an Eco Retreat A HOME FOR NATURE LOVERS JAMBHUGHODA

3 As the name suggests, it is back to nature at Home for Nature Lovers, a cluster of colonial and newly built cottages set in the gardens of the century-old Jambughoda Palace. The rooms in the heritage cottages and recently built annexe are simple and comfortable, with a home-cooked lunch being served under the trees, on grounds that are thickly vegetated.

Not surprisingly, Vikram Singh, the owner, has a green thumb and besides the gardens and groves in the palace precincts, you can take a walk in the green fields outside the palace gates. For those who like trekking and watching birds, the teak and bamboo forests of Jambughoda Wildlife Sanctuary unfold near the palace, while a lake nearby attracts waterfowl in the winter. The family often entertains visitors at the palace, which is appointed with antiques and old furniture, and its walls are spanned by historical photographs. Over dinner, Vikram Singh will tell you about Viceregal visits, leopard-shooting trips, and the important political leaders who were hosted by his father. He is especially proud that it was at his behest that Rajiv Gandhi pushed through the protection of the surrounding Jambughoda forests.

Who goes European tourists, people visiting Champaner and families from the cities of Gujarat. The property also features on the itinerary of the luxury train, Maharaja Express, which stops at Vadodara Station.

Top tip Vikram Singh's son, Karmavir Singh, is usually around to arrange your visit to the Rathwa and Nayaka tribal villages, where you can see ritualistic murals called pithoras.

Contact A Home for Nature Lovers, Jambughoda; tel: 02676 241 258; www.jambughoda.com



The cottages nestle in a natural haven, amidst thick foliage



Amble along the property's long corridors

Best for Riverside Jaunts

KALI-NIKETAN

CHOTTA-UDEPUR

4 The Maharaja of Chhota Udepur built Kali-Niketan as a scenic getaway from the town, set amid 60 acres along River Orsang. Even today, this is one of the main draws of the property, over and above the fact that it is attractively located in sprawling grounds that are filled with groves of fruit trees. The drive through the grounds leads one to the colonial-style, palatial mansion, where there are fountains in both the forecourt and the inner courtyard. The property features two drawing rooms, two dining rooms, and two lounges that are beautifully appointed with colonial-period furniture and artefacts. The property is boutique in the sense that there are six rooms, all appropriately furnished according to the period in which the palace was constructed. The owner, Sajjansinh and his wife Devendra Kumari, and occasionally their son Udayrajsinh, personally entertain the guests over dinner that features a menu of European, Indian, and regional Gujarati cuisine.

Kali-Niketan has six terraces. Select one on which to unwind with a good view over the gardens to the nearby hills. One of the highlights of this property is also the tribal village tour that explores the Rathwa hamlets around Chhota-Udepur.

Who goes Those interested in tribal culture.

Top tip Visit Kali-Niketan on Saturday when there is a large weekly tribal market (called haat in local parlance) in Chhota-Udepur. Another large tribal market is held at Kvant village nearby every Monday.

Contact: Kali-Niketan, Chhota-Udepur; tel: 098255 56413; www.chottaudepur.com ■



The period style décor at Kali-Niketan



Kali-Niketan at Chhota-Udepur

Enjoy the subdued elegance of Kali-Niketan's rooms



The outer wall of Prag Mahal

Prag Mahal



BHUJ

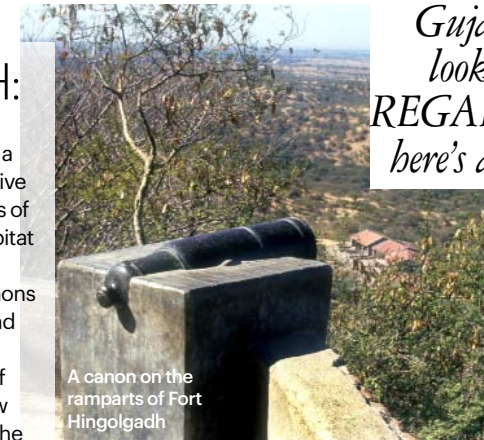
Bhuj has been the capital of the Maharajas of Kutch from the 16th century. During the 18th and 19th century, the Maharajas commissioned elaborate palaces like the **Aina Mahal** (which used the expertise gained by a sailor named Ram Singh who picked up skills of foundry, clock-making, ceramics, glass blowing, and stonecarving when he was in Europe) and the **Prag Mahal** with elaborate ceilings, Shakespearean paintings, and fabulous columns in its Durbar Hall. Though these two palaces were damaged by the 2001 earthquake, they are still worth a visit to see the arts and craftsmanship. Another palace museum is in the **Sharad Bagh Palace**, which has interesting artefacts and beautiful colonial-period furniture.

A BRUSH WITH HISTORY

Gujarat's a HAVEN for all those looking for a glimpse into India's REGAL PAST. Beyond heritage hotels, here's a list of what more you could do

HINGOLGADH:

This fort of the Kathi Darbars of Jasdan stands on a hilltop about a 1,000 ft above the plains. The drive to the fort is via the shrub jungles of **Hingolghadh Sanctuary**, the habitat of the Indian gazelle, blue bull antelope, and other wildlife. Canons still stand on the old ramparts and the outer wall has ornate stone balconies and brackets. Some of the rooms in this castle have now been opened for visitors to see the antique clocks, utensils, beadwork, and other heirlooms of the erstwhile ruling family. The late Shivraj Kumar Ala Khachar of Jasdan was a well-known naturalist, and in the property's courtyard you are likely to glimpse peacocks, parakeets, and other birds, while the fort in itself is also part of the Hingolghadh Nature Conservation Education Program. This is a delightful place for birdwatchers.



A canon on the ramparts of Fort Hingolghadh

Avail the option of staying in the fort palace



VADODARA

The **Lakshmi Vilas Palace** in Vadodara is a true reflection of the wealth, power, and influence of the Maharajas of Baroda. Spread over more than 700 acres, the palace has a huge façade designed by architects Major Charles Mant and RF Chisholm. Inside the palace you could get a permit to visit the Durbar Hall, famed for its cedar galleries, decorous domes, and murals. Set in the grounds is also the Maharaja Fateh Singh Museum, which exhibits the collection of portraits, works of art, porcelain, and artefacts collected by Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad. The Baroda Gaekwad Golf Club on the palace grounds has an amazing golf course. Tee-off with a view of the elaborate façade of the palace, a one of its kind golfing facility.

MULI The **Ambika Niwas Palace** is a grand edifice in Muli. This palace is being converted by its Parmar Rajput rulers into a 15-room heritage hotel, which will include five royal suites done up in period furniture. Slated to open mid-2012, the palace will have a multi-cuisine restaurant, swimming pool, conference room, and spa. Its historic billiards room will also be made available to visitors. Planning a grand wedding or lifestyle event? We suggest you consider their gardens and halls.



The frescoes of Natwas Niwas Palace in Rajpipla



The Italian marble fountain and flooring

RAJPIPLA

The **Natwar Niwas Palace** in Rajpipla is an early-20th century palatial mansion with a reception room featuring an Italian marble statue fountain, marble floors, a dome inlaid with stained glass, classical pillars, and murals of the scenes from the life of Lord Krishna. Other rooms have murals of Rana Pratap, Shivaji and other heroes of Indian history. This property has been recently restored and now features a lawn. It has rooms to let and is being converted into a heritage hotel.



The spectacular, opulent interiors of the Hutheesing Haveli

DEVPUR

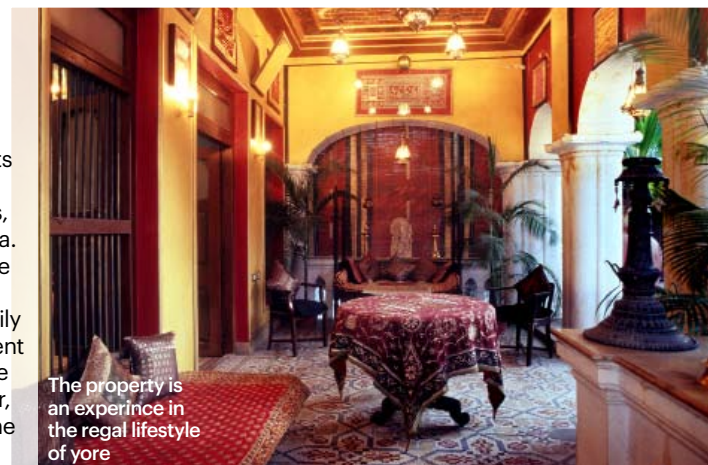
Darbagadh of Devpur, a village in Kutch, was built in the early 20th century. Set on two acres, this palatial property showcases the craftsmanship of Kutch with stucco work pavilions and ornate stonework. With elaborate gardens, lawns, and courtyards, the property now also hosts a residential school, aside of the family's living quarters, though the owners let out three rooms to paying guests. Dine with the owners on the traditional cuisines, all the while learning about the preparation of various dishes from the women of the family.



The Adalaj stepwell in Central Gujarat

AHMEDABAD

The **Hutheesing Haveli** was built in the 1800s by Purshottam Hutheesing, one of the well-known businessmen of Ahmedabad. The haveli has been beautifully restored and arranged in a manner that reflects the living style of the well-known mercantile families of Ahmedabad, showcasing the crafts, arts, myths, legends, folklore, traditions, Vedic iconography, and textiles of India. It contains rich gilded ceilings, exquisite wooden furniture from Jorasanko (an area in north Kolkata) together with photographs of Rabindranath Tagore (the Hutheesing family has had marital ties with Nehru, Tagore, and other prominent families), a museum of woodcraft, and an excellent textile collection. It also has the design studios of present owner, Umang Hutheesing, and an art gallery. Not surprisingly, the haveli is a venue for many prestigious events. ■



The property is an experience in the regal lifestyle of yore

THE NAWAB'S DOGS

His Highness Sir Mahabat Khan Babi, Nawab of Junagadh, was known for his love for horses and dogs. Reportedly he kept hundreds of dogs in considerable comfort, complete with servants, air-conditioning, and special foods. His favourite was Roshanara and her wedding to Bobby, the golden retriever of the Mangrol ruling family, was a grand affair with state holidays, sumptuous food, dancing girls, music, fireworks, a 'baraat' of gorgeously attired dogs, and elephant processions. Roshanara was bedecked in a pearl necklace.

THE MAHARAJA'S SEA VOYAGE

When the Maharaja of Bhavnagar went to England to attend a coronation ceremony he chartered a ship in which he carried not only his own water and cooks to prepare Indian food for him but even buffaloes for milk!

A TALE OF VELVET

His Highness Dajiraj Singh of Wadhwan was known to be a widely travelled man. According to his descendants, when building the palace in Wadhwan it is said that he bought a textile unit in France to manufacture velvet tapestries and had it closed down so that the designs could not be repeated!



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