

Bazaar **ESCAPE**

DESERT ROSE

*Explore the region of Kutch in Gujarat, from its
astounding salt desert to beautiful indigenous
art and craft forms*

MAGIC IN

... for the sheer beauty of



ARTISANS OF THE HEARTLAND

MOST OF MY TRAVELLER FRIENDS who have been to Kutch have gone there for the white sand deserts of the Great and Little Rann. But Kutch is also a repository of indigenous art and craft, most prominently Ajrakh printing, Bandhini tie and dye, batik, hand embroidery, and lacquer and wood work.

I was driven to the region by my interest in its textile crafts. It helped that the villages I wanted to visit were within a hundred kilometres of each other.

Ludiya, a couple of hours from the main town of Bhuj, was my first stop for the day. That small village of just a few hundred inhabitants was a riot of colours: The garments worn by the women and the fabrics being embroidered by them, their glass and silver jewellery, and the paintings in floral and geometric patterns on the external walls of the bhungas (traditional round houses of Kutch).

None of the women paid any attention to me as I walked around; they were busy with their embroidery, heads bent, hands going up and down in a steady rhythm. They were on the front porch of their own homes, with all the space needed to spread out the cotton fabric—typically a bedspread or quilt—being embellished.

In other villages, too, I found women engrossed in the same activity. Later, when I visited the Kala Raksha museum at Sumrasar village I understood the region's rich craft traditions, and how

each community had its own motifs and techniques. The permanent exhibit here explains why women embroider, and the types of embroideries. For instance, the most common is the Rabari work of the nomads, using small mirrors of various shapes on a dark cloth. There are other styles like Suf, Khaarek, Paako and Mutava, distinguished by the kind of stitch.

The next morning, I headed to Nirona village to see an entirely different kind of work with textile: Rogan art, practised only by Gafoorbhai Khatri's family for over three centuries now. With its roots in Persia, Rogan art is believed to have come to this region over four centuries ago (the word rogan itself meaning 'oil' in Farsi). The paint is viscous, made of castor seed oil, to which natural dyes are added. The art is intricate and painstaking, each cloth taking over a month to finish. The paint is applied with a long, blunt needle called 'kalam', and motifs are mostly floral.



Most of these are family occupations, still carried out in the confines of a home. About 30 families here create lacquerware, which means colouring hand-carved wooden items with resin from trees. My last stop was the home of the copper bell maker from the Lohar community, originally from Sindh, whose heavy bells are tied to the necks of cattle—a rural Indian version of Swiss cowbells.

Many of these craftspeople sell to tourists from their small workshops; not surprisingly, I left the village laden with gifts in the form of lacquer ladles and roughly hewn bells. I was happy to be taking back a tiny piece of this land's rich heritage. ■

By Charukesi Ramadurai