



A DESERT SAFARI ON THE FRINGES OF LITTLE RANN OF KUTCH

Zainabad in the state of Gujarat is a three-hour drive away from Ahmedabad near Viramgam on the fringes of the "Little Rann of Kutch".

One passes the historical village of Sanand along the way. We are welcomed by a group of flamingoes flying in formation as soon as we enter Zainabad. We start our desert safari in an open jeep and soon find ourselves in the middle of a flat barren terrain with no habitation in sight. After

thirty minutes of cruising through the desert, you see a large water body in the distance. Our guide tells us that the water body is not a lake but rainwater which has collected in the desert after the last monsoon. This water would evaporate completely by mid-May.

We come to the edges of this giant lake to find hundreds of Greater flamingoes, Lesser flamingoes and several species of migratory birds from Siberia and North China. It is a pleasure to watch a multitude of colourful birds at close quarters as they flock to the edge of the water. The water is shallow and swampy and boating is not possible, so one has to be content watching the birds from a distance. However, the deep blue sky, reflected in the crystal clearness of the waters is a joy to behold. Watching the crimson sunset over the silver sands of the desert is the highlight of the safari.

After a brief stop to watch the birds, we travel deeper into the desert to spot the Wild Ass also known as Gudkhars. This desert safari is exciting and takes us through terrain which resembles a giant cracked clay pot. After an hour of driving through the desert we catch a glimpse of the magnificent animal. Gudkhars are snow-white in colour but have two large elliptical brown spots, one on each side which makes them look incredibly attractive to behold. Gudkhars are shy creatures and gallop away at great speeds on hearing the sound of the approaching jeep. Hence the ideal strategy to spot these gentle and shy friends is to alight from the jeep a kilometer away and stealthily trek towards them in a non-menacing way to capture them with the camera as I did. Gudkhars

Where to stay?

The Zainabad Kooba Resort run by Nawab Thambi (Desert Coursers) is the most convenient place to stay during one's visit to Zainabad. The Resort arranges jeeps for the desert safari. The resort charges Rs 1500 (28 AUD) for an air-conditioned double room with an attached bathroom.



Greater Flamingoes inside the "Little Rann of Kutch"



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Greater Llamings inside
the "Little Rann of Kutch"



How to get there:

Lots of small restaurants serving Gujarati, Kutchi and Kathiyawadi vegetarian cuisine dot Viramgam. Freshly steamed vegetables with spices, pumpkin cooked in mustard paste, boiled spinach with pulses are served with millet (bajra) rotis cooked in an earthen oven at most roadside dhabas. The food at the high profile hotels is only for the gastronomically adventurous who like greasy food. Vegans can opt for fresh tropical fruits including watermelons, papayas, tender coconuts, pineapples which are available at the local market.

live on the dry cacti which is the only vegetation found in these barren flatlands. There is no inhabitation in these deserts as the groundwater is salty and undrinkable. However, a few rock salt manufacturers do stay in the desert. Their womenfolk have to trek long distances to get drinking water.

The "Little Rann of Kutch", in Gujarat situated in the Thar Desert was established in January 1972 as a sanctuary for the last population of Indian Wild Ass (Gudkhar). This extraordinary area gets partly inundated by about two feet of water in the monsoon months (July-September). Once below sea level, this

area was raised by earth movements which cut it off from the Gulf of Kutch. It was broken up by later earth movements into the flat saline areas (where people can be seen making salt) and higher grounds with sandy, salt-free soil. The wild ass depends on the thorny scrub of the higher ground area for its feed.

The other wildlife in the Little Rann of Kutchj includes chinkaras, blue bull, antelopes, wolves, blackbucks, hyenas, desert foxes, jackals, desert cats, and caracals.

A Gudkhar (Wild Ass) gallops
away in the desert



How to get there:

Zainabad is 120 km away from Ahmedabad. The non-stop drive from Ahmedabad to Zainabad should not exceed three hours. The nearest airport to reach Zainabad is at Ahmedabad. Ahmedabad is connected by direct flights from most Indian cities. Viramgam is the nearest railhead to reach Zainabad. From Viramgam regular state transport buses ply to Zainabad. All trains going from Ahmedabad to Bhuj stop at Viramgam.

