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Experience

Vibrant Gujarat

A Guide to Tourist Attractions



Welcome

2024 is here and we are all excited to experience what the New Year has in store for us. Will that international trip we have been planning for years materialize this year? Will the management be kind enough to approve our leaves this year so that the road trip dream could become a reality? Will we meet our financial goal to fund that hiking trip? While there are many questions, travelers are eternally hopeful about trips, with no exception to this year.

Since we are talking about future events, how could we miss Vibrant Gujarat 2024? This month, the State of Gujarat will host delegates from across India and the world. The State with rich cultural heritage and diverse landscapes has so much to offer to all kinds of tourists. In this edition, we present a list of tourist attractions of Gujarat that you can consider during your visit to Vibrant Gujarat 2024.

January will witness a historic event, the opening of Ayodhya Ram Mandir. While India waits to have a glimpse of Shri Ram Lalla, we bring you all tidbits of the aesthetic abode of Lord Ram.

Read on!



Verfront, Ahmedabad

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Gujarat

A Guide to Tourist Attractions

By PRIYANKA DESAI, Staff Writer

Gujarat, a state known for its vibrant culture, rich history, and diverse landscapes, welcomes guests attending the prestigious Vibrant Gujarat summit to immerse themselves in a tapestry of unique tourist attractions. From ancient temples like Somnath, bustling markets like Ratanpole to futuristic infrastructure like GIFT City, Gujarat offers a kaleidoscope of experiences that showcase the state's cultural, historical, and natural heritage.

Swaminaran Temple, Kalupur, Ahmedabad

Ahmedabad

Heritage and Modernity

As Gujarat's largest city, Ahmedabad seamlessly blends heritage and modernity. For more than 600 years, Ahmedabad has been an epitome of peace and unity. It is a city where Mahatma Gandhi began freedom struggle of India. India's only UNESCO World Heritage City has some of the finest monuments and exquisite architectural tradition.

The Sabarmati River gracefully cuts through the city, providing a picturesque backdrop to its diverse landscapes. The Old City narrates tales of centuries past through its intricate 600 odd Pols, historic mosques like Jama Masjid, and the iconic Sabarmati Ashram, a pivotal site in India's freedom struggle, stands as a testament to the nation's history.

On the other hand, the modern Ahmedabad boasts impressive skyscrapers, bustling markets like Law Garden, a shopping paradise and Manek Chowk, and a culinary scene that entices with flavorful street food and fine dining alike. The city is also a hub for textiles and craftsmanship, with the Calico Museum showcasing the region's rich textile heritage. Whether wandering through the serenity of Sabarmati Riverfront or immersing in the lively chaos of the markets, exploring Ahmedabad is a captivating journey through time and culture.

Ahmedabad Heritage Walk, an initiative of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, is a great way to explore the old Ahmedabad. The Heritage Walk starts from Kalupur Swaminarayan Temple at 07:45 a.m. daily and terminates at Jumma Masjid at 10.30 a.m.

Attractions: Gandhi Ashram, Sabarmati Riverfront, Kankariya Lake, Adalaj Stepwell, Hathee Singh Jain Temple, Manek Chowk, Law Garden, Sidi Saiyyed Mosque, Gujarat Science City, Jami Masjid, Swaminarayan Temple – Kalupur, Calico Museum of Textiles, Vaishnodevi Temple, Sarkhej Roja, Praveg's Grand Eulogia

Special Events during January: International Kite Festival (8-14 January, 2024), Makar Sankranti (14-15 January, 2024)



Statue of Unity

Tallest
Tribute to
the Iron Man
of India

The Statue of Unity, located in the Ekta Nagar, stands as an impressive testament to both engineering prowess and historical significance. Soaring to a height of 182 meters, it is the world's tallest statue and was unveiled in 2018 as a tribute to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, a key figure in India's struggle for independence.

The statue's strategic positioning on a picturesque island on the Narmada River offers visitors breathtaking panoramic views. The surrounding Sardar Sarovar Dam, expansive gardens, and a museum dedicated to Sardar Patel's life further enrich the visitor experience. The Statue of Unity has become a symbol of national unity and pride, attracting travelers from across the globe who seek to witness this monumental marvel and delve into India's rich history.

Attractions: Sardar Sarovar Dam, Valley of flowers (Bharat Van), Cactus Garden, Children Nutrition Park, Butterfly Garden, Dino Trail, Glow Garden, Khalwani Eco Tourism, Zarwani Eco Tourism, Rajvant Palace, Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary, Tent City Narmada

Rann of Kutch

White Desert Magic

The Rann of Kutch, a vast salt marsh spanning the border between India and Pakistan, is a unique and mesmerizing tourist destination. Its expansive white desert landscape transforms into a surreal canvas of cultural vibrancy, particularly during the Rann Utsav that takes place from November to February every year.

This annual festival celebrates the region's diverse heritage, showcasing traditional dance, music, and crafts against the backdrop of the shimmering salt flats. Visitors are captivated by the ethereal beauty of the moonlit nights when the salt crystals glisten under the celestial glow.

The region is also home to the Wild Ass Sanctuary, providing opportunities for wildlife enthusiasts to witness the endangered Indian Wild Ass in its natural habitat. As one explores the Rann of Kutch, the intricate handicrafts of local communities, such as the renowned Kutchi embroidery, add another layer of allure to this extraordinary destination, making it a must-visit for those seeking a blend of cultural richness and natural splendor.



Dholavira

Harappan Civilization

Dholavira, an ancient archaeological site in Gujarat, India, is a fascinating tourist attraction. Explore its well-preserved ruins, intricate city planning, and the remarkable water conservation system of the Harappan civilization. Immerse yourself in the rich history that dates back to around 2650 BCE, and witness the ingenuity of the people who once thrived there.

Attractions: White Desert, Kalo Dungar, Vande Mataram Memorial, Aaina Mahal and Prag Mahal, Vijay Vilas Palace, Swaminarayan Temple (Bhuj), Mandvi Beach, Narayan Sarovar, Dholavira, Indian Wild Ass Sanctuary (Little Rann of Kutch), Anjar, Kutch Bustard Sanctuary, Shopping spree at Bhujodi, Nirona, Dhamkada and Bhachau, White Rann Resort (Rann Utsav), Praveg Resrot Dholavira

Special Events during January: Rann Utsav Festival (November to February at Dhordo, Kutch)

Patan

A Heritage Marvel

Patan boasts a rich cultural and historical heritage, making it an enticing destination. One of the prominent attractions is the Rani Ki Vav, an intricately designed stepwell that is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The Patola House, famed for its exquisite Patola sarees crafted by skilled weavers, offers visitors a glimpse into the traditional textile artistry of the region. The Patan Patola Heritage Museum further explores the history and craftsmanship behind these celebrated textiles.

The Sahastralinga Talav, a historic artificial tank, and the hemispherical Sun Temple are other architectural marvels worth exploring. Additionally, the Jain temples of Panchasara Parshvanath and Mahavir Swami attract pilgrims and tourists alike with their serene ambiance and architectural brilliance. Patan stands as a testament to Gujarat's cultural tapestry, inviting travelers to immerse themselves in its historical charm and artistic finesse.



Modhera Sun Temple, Mehsana

Modhera Sun Temple

Ancient Architectural Wonder

Approximately 39km from Patan is Modhera Sun Temple. Located in the Mehsana district of Gujarat, the Sun Temple is a stunning example of ancient Indian architecture and a UNESCO world heritage site. The temple is dedicated to the Hindu sun god and features intricate carvings, sculptures, and a reflecting pool that makes for a great photography spot. The exclusive three day Modhera Dance Festival is held every year during the third weekend of January after the conclusion of Uttarayan festival.

Attractions: Rani Ki Vav, Patan Patola Heritage, Sahastralinga Talav, Modhera Sun Temple

Special Events during January: Modhera Dance Festival

Vadnagar

An Ancient Heritage City

Archaeological excavations indicate that Vadnagar was an important city in the second century. The excavated township has revealed a 1900 year old Buddhist sculpture, coins and pottery sherds.

Today, the symbol of Vadnagar is its toranas, archways spanning huge columns sculpted with beautiful carvings. These toranas according to many scholars and architects were probably kirti stambhas or pillars of fame built for rituals like hanging the ceremonial swings for the gods on auspicious days or for weighing the ruler against gold for distribution to the deserving. They were built during the reign of the Solanki Rajputs who were the major power in Gujarat during the 11th and 12th centuries

Entering through huge carved gateways erected by Solanki ruler Kumarapal, and passing Nagar havelis, a visitor comes to the 17th century Hatkeshwar Temple, an important pilgrimage for the Nagar Brahmin community. In the town is the Sharmishta Talav which is a good example of the magnificent scale of the water bodies built for water by these rulers and the hydraulic engineering of the period that has seen the water body remaining useful for almost a millennium. The main lake is fed by a smaller water body that has examples of the sculpture that must have decorated its every niche in the 12th century.

The centuries-old town of Vadnagar, home to PM Modi in his young years, is getting a heritage makeover. Vadnagar is focusing on creating tourist-friendly infrastructure, including well-maintained roads, signage, and public facilities. The introduction of accommodations, restaurants, and recreational facilities caters to the comfort of visitors, making their stay enjoyable and memorable.

To deepen visitors' engagement with Vadnagar's heritage, interactive museums and interpretive centers are being established. These spaces use technology and multimedia to narrate the town's history, connecting the dots between its past and present. Such initiatives enrich the visitor experience and encourage a deeper understanding of Vadnagar's cultural significance.

Attractions: Kirti Toran, Hatkeshwar Temple, Sharmishta Lake

Siddhpur

History and Mythology

Splendor

Siddhpur was an important Solanki town. Here, Raja Siddhraj built the impressive Rudramalaya Temple which was once a three storey complex with a forest of pillars and subsidiary shrines. Today only the tall gates and ruins remain to tell of its glory.

Siddhpur continues to be an important pilgrimage. Since Siddhpur is where Lord Parshuram is said to have performed matru shraddha, the rites paying homage to his mother, at this site the Bindu Sarovar by tradition has remained the place for such rituals.

The architectural highlight of Siddhpur is its Bohravads, which is full of exquisitely carved mansions. In medieval times, around the 13th to 15th century, the Dawoodi Bohras migrated from Yemen where they were facing religious persecution to Gujarat. Siddhpur's Hasanpura is one of the oldest Bohra settlements in India. The Dawoodi Bohras fanned out to different lands in the 19th century. They have attractive houses with extravagant brackets and capitals, graceful balconies and delicate wooden grills along the edges of the tin roofs. Some of the houses show strong influences of the European Renaissance period with three-part facades, each part with a tall door or window, ornate pilasters and gabled roofs that are like European pediments. The facades have intricate wooden columns and beams, with subtly concealed joineries. The highlight of most houses is the beautiful covered balcony called 'jharokha', with a window seat to look out at comings and goings on the streets. The Bohravads or Mohallas show superb alignment of the facades, so that no projections are out of place and the height of neighboring buildings are identical. Inside are teakwood furniture, painted ceilings, floral motifs in plaster, fine woodwork, a profusion of glass and mirrors, delicate trellises and partition screens, rich carpets and rugs, and patterned tiles.

Attractions: Bindu Sarovar, Rudra Mahalaya, Bohra Vad

Gir National Park

The Only Natural Habitat of Asiatic Lions

Winter is the time when the Gir National Park & Wildlife Sanctuary opens after the monsoon. This is the place for safaris that take you from Sasan to explore deciduous forests, semi-evergreen and evergreen riverine flora, thorn scrub jungle, grasslands and rocky areas. While Gir is best known as the only place to see the lion in its natural habitat outside Africa, it is also one of the best sanctuaries for leopards in India and boasts thriving populations of sambar, chital or spotted deer, chowsingha (the world's only four horned antelope), chinkara gazelle, blue bull antelope, striped hyena, golden jackal, jungle cat, black-naped hare and other mammals. Rusty spotted cats have also been seen and photographed in this wildlife reserve. The sanctuary is also known for its population of vultures and eagles. The Kamleshwar reservoir in the sanctuary yields crocodile sightings.

Devaliya has the Gir Zone where mini-bus safaris offer close viewing of lions and other wildlife.

Somnath

The Eternal Shrine



Somnath, with its legendary temple overlooking the Arabian Sea, is a pilgrimage site of great significance. The Somnath Temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, has withstood centuries and stands as a symbol of resilience and spirituality.

Dwarka

The Spiritual Hub

Nestled on the western coast, Dwarka is a revered destination for spiritual seekers. The Dwarkadheesh Temple, dedicated to Lord Krishna, stands as an architectural marvel and draws pilgrims from around the world. The city's serene beaches add a touch of tranquility to this spiritual haven.

Attractions: Shree Dwarkadheesh Temple, Rukmini Devi Temple, Bhadkeshwar Mahadeve Temple, Shivrajpur Beach (Blue Flag Beach) ■



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The Beginning of A NEW ERA

22nd JANUARY,
2024

By PRIYANKA DESAI, Staff Writer

As India eagerly awaits the Consecration Ceremony of Ayodhya Ram Temple, a look inside what is set to be the world's third-largest Hindu shrine.

Ram Mandir Temple

Temple Area:

10 acres

Temple Complex:

57 acres

Temple Area:

10 acres

Temple Height:

161 feet

Total Column:

360

Total Floors:

3

Total Mandaps:

5 (Kudu, Rang, Nritya, Kirtan and Prarthana)

Width of Stairs:

16 feet

Completion Time:

3-3.5 years

Chief Architect:

Chandraknat Bhai Sompura

Also designed Somnath Temple, Gujarat (after India's independence)

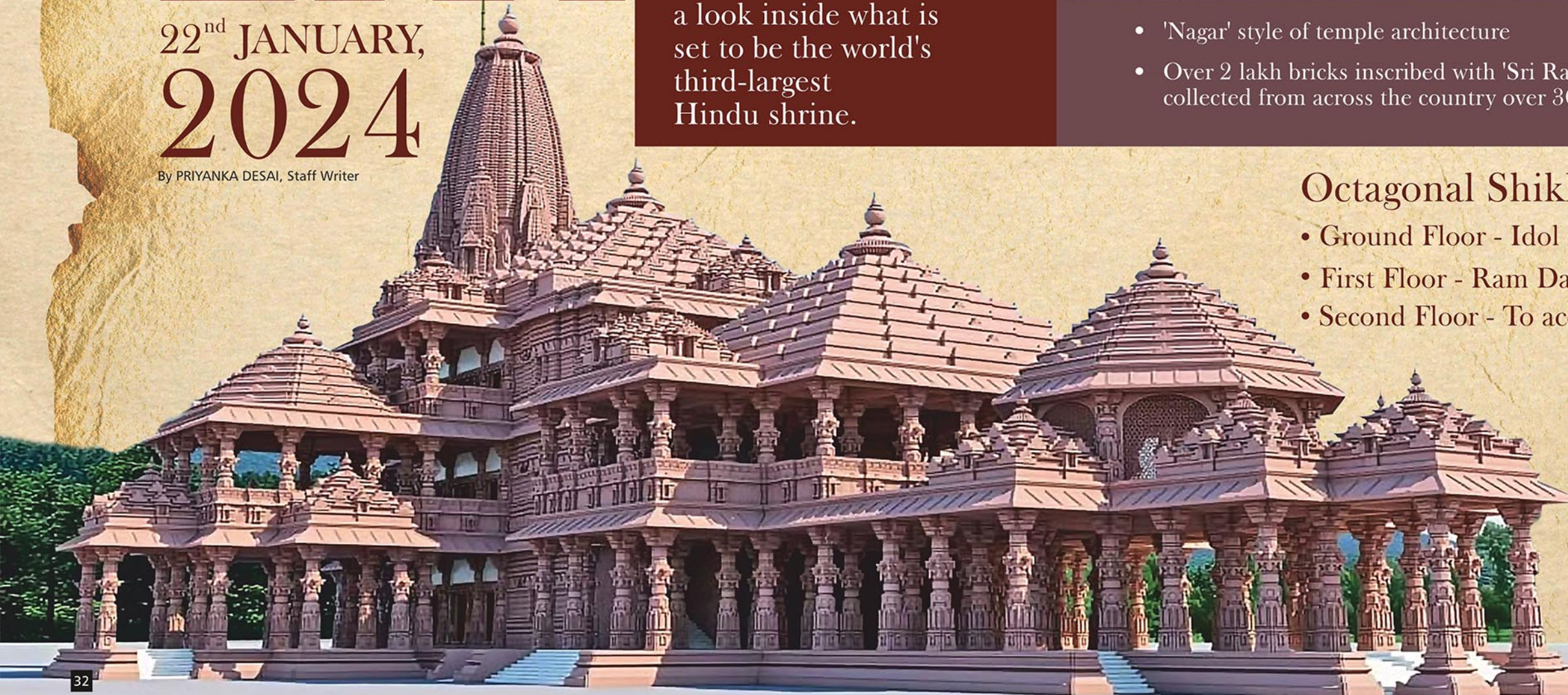
- 'Nagar' style of temple architecture
- Over 2 lakh bricks inscribed with 'Sri Ram' in different languages collected from across the country over 30 years will form the foundation

Octagonal Shikhar (81.5 ft high)

- Ground Floor - Idol of Ram Lalla in the Garbhgriha
- First Floor - Ram Darbar
- Second Floor - To accommodate structure expansion

Temple Complex

- Prayer Hall
- Ramkatha Kunj (Lecture hall)
- Vaidik Pathshala (Education facility)
- Sant Niwas (Saints' residence)
- Yatri Niwas (hostel)
- Museum



Kutch

A Potpourri of Colourful Culture

Thrilling Adventure and Vibrant Life

By JAYESH PUROHIT, Staff Writer

Kutch gives a jubilant welcome to its visitors and guests with a potpourri of colourful culture, thrilling adventure, and vibrant life. It's travellers' season to visit Kutch, the second-largest district in India. In the last two decades, the tourism policy of Gujarat has been revamped to invite national and international guests to go gallivanting the hot terrains. Winter is the perfect season to explore Kutch, which offers myriad destinations and opportunities to satiate your wanderlust.

Kutch, in Sanskrit, means tortoise; if you ask why, look at the map of Kutch upside down, its shape looks like a tortoise hence the name 'Kutch'. The city has vibrant life, pristine locations, religious shrines and adventure spots. It's a perfect place for globetrotters to celebrate extraordinary life for a week or more.

The area of Kutch District is larger than the entire area of states like Haryana and Kerala. Kutch means something which intermittently becomes wet and dry; a large part of this district is known as Rann of Kutch, which is a shallow wetland that submerges in water during the rainy season and becomes dry during other seasons. The Rann is known for its marshy salt flats which become snow-white after the shallow water dries up each season before the monsoon rains.

Must-visit Locations

Kutch can spoil you for choices with its repertoire of amazing locations to leave your footprints on. Whatever the purpose of your journey, Kutch has something for everyone. It is your one-stop destination to explore stunning locations, rich culture, awe-inspiring adventure, spirituality and vibrant life.

White Rann

Jesal Toral Shrines

Anjar

To the east of Ajepal's monastery is a temple known locally as "Jesal Toral ni Samadhi", translating to "The Tomb of Jesal and Toral". It is a small tiled shed with tombs decorated with Muslim patterns sacred to the fourteenth-century couple Jesal and his wife Toral. The shrine is under the care of the Ajepal monastery. Jesal's descendants, known as the Jesar Rajputs, built shrines for the couple in each of the town's twelve villages.

According to local history, Jester (later Jesal or Jesar) was the grandson of Jadeja Ragput leader Jam Rawal. Jesal would later become an outlaw: killing people, destroying villages and stealing cattle. Toral or Turi – a Kathi woman – was famous for composing hymns and for her devotion, as well as her beauty. She lived with an ascetic man named Sāvashir, who did not consider Toral his wife but instead as someone who would bring salvation. The fame of her beauty reached Jesal, who unsuccessfully attempted to abduct her. After being foiled, Jesal returned to the town disguised as an ascetic, but again his plans to abduct Toral were exposed.

Confessing his plans to abduct Toral to a sect that granted a wish to every confessed sinner, Jesal was offered Toral on condition that he became ascetic. He agreed, but eventually grew tired of the constraints of asceticism, trying again to abduct Toral, who foiled his plans and over time changed Jesal into a model ascetic. Permanently settling in Anjar, Jesar died and Turi was buried alive beside his tomb. The story was the inspiration for the 1971 Gujarati film Jesal Toral.



Jesal Toral Samadhi (Tomb)

Bhujodi Vande Matram Show

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Vande Mataram Memorial is spread over 12 acres of land in the Bhuj region of Gujarat, comprising a Parliament Building, India Gate, Yellow Fort and open grounds for all to enjoy. A part of the grounds also houses Hiralaxmi Craft Park, another non-profit initiative by the Ashapura Foundation, which houses local artisans from across villages in Kutch-Bhuj and provides them a platform to hone and showcase their crafts to buyers.



Bhuj Aaina Mehal and Prag Mahal

The Aina Mahal (Palace of Mirrors) is an 18th-century palace that is located next to the Prag Mahal in Darbargadh, Bhuj. The palace was built by Rao Lakhpatji of Kutch State around 1750. Lakhpatji's master craftsman Ram Singh Malam designed the palace in the local style and decorated it in the European style with glass, mirrors and tiles. The palace had two floors; the first floor had the Audience Hall, the Pleasure Hall, the Hall of Mirrors and the State Apartments, and the second floor had the ante-chamber, Darbar (Court) Hall and Marriage Hall. The building has been converted into a museum which includes a "Europeanerie" collection that includes clocks, wares, mechanical toys, paintings and pictures.

Prag Mahal is named after Rao Pragmalji II, who commissioned it and construction began in 1865. Made of Italian marble and sandstone from Rajasthan, this palace was designed by Colonel Henry St Clair Wilkins in what the local tourist office describes as the Italian Gothic style, although it would be better described as a Romanesque architecture twist on the Indo-Saracenic Revival style, and many Italian artisans were involved in its construction. The palace artisans' wages were paid in gold coins. Construction of the palace, which ultimately cost 3.1 million rupees, was completed in 1879 during the regency of Khengarji III (Pragmalji II's son) following Pragmalji II's death in 1875. The local Kutchi builder community (Mistris of Kutch) was also involved in the construction of Prag Mahal along with Colonel Wilkins.

Prag Mahal

- The main hall is filled with decaying taxidermy
- Broken chandeliers and classical statues in Durbar hall
- Corinthian pillars
- Jali work depicting European plants and animals
- A 45-feet high tower with a clock, from where you can see the entire Bhuj city
- A small temple in the courtyard behind the palace with nicely carved stonework



Prag Mahal



Aaina Mehal



Swaminarayan Temple Bhuj

The Gujarat earthquake on 26 January 2001 destroyed much of the city of Bhuj, including this temple associated with the founder of the Swaminarayan sect of the Hindu religion. The saints and devotees in India and living abroad decided to construct a new temple in Bhuj. Fortunately, the idols remained undamaged, and therefore, the temple management shifted the same idols and installed them into the new temple.

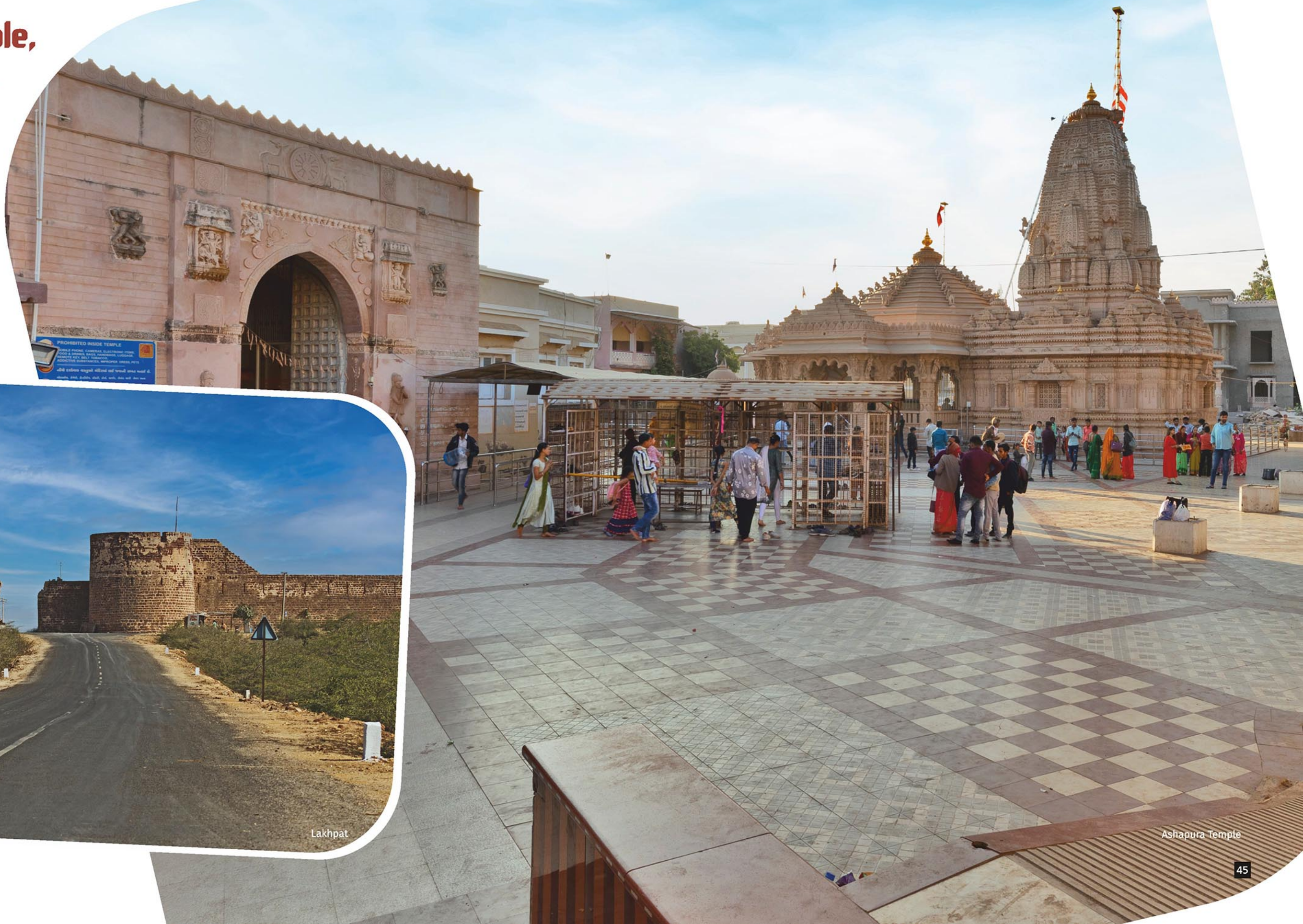
Swaminarayan Temple

Ashapura Temple, Mata no Madh, Lakhpāt

Mata no Madh (seat of a goddess) is a small village in Lakhpāt taluka; known for Ashapura temple, this village is located about 105 km from Bhuj. The temple was built in the 14th century by two Banias - Ajo and Anagor - from the Karad community. Literally means fulfiller (Pura) of desires (Asha), Goddess Ashapura is venerated and worshipped by devotees from all faiths and religions.



Lakhpāt



Ashapura Temple

White Rann

White Rann of Kutch is one of the major attractions among tourists, who visit the district. Spread across the land of 30,000 sq. km, this Rann comprises the Great Rann of Kutch, the Little Rann of Kutch and Banni grassland.

Known for its massive expanse of cracked earth, this desert offers nothingness for miles. For its small oasis of water bodies and shrub forests, pink flamingoes and wild asses made this place their home.

White Rann offers the mesmerizing beauty of flat land, which captures cool beams of full moon and raindrops with equal zest. Here, sunrise and sunset are no less than a miracle, which provides a delicious feast to the eyes of tourists.

To be continued...

Given the number of words, the article is split into two parts. The second part will be published next Issue. ■



White Rann

Desert में क्या हैं?



Stunningly
Kutch



FLAMINGO CITY



KUTCHI FOOD



COLOURFUL CULTURE

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Spirituality that turned me into a traveller

By JAYESH PUROHIT, Staff Writer

Abhinav Singh runs a travel blog at ASoulWindow.com and a YouTube channel at [A Soul Window](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...). He has been listed as top travel blogger of India more than 40 times and has been invited by many international tourism boards such as Australia, Jordan, Uganda, UAE, Kazakhstan etc. Abhinav has written travelogues for National Geographic, Lonely Planet, Mint, Namaste.AI, Village Square, Travel Escapades etc. His Instagram handle is [@asoulwindow](https://www.instagram.com/asoulwindow).

Everest Base Camp, Nepal



Kailash Parvat, Kailash Mansarovar, Tibet

1. You have been listed as top travel blogger from India for 40 times. Your reaction?

When I was fired from my corporate job for traveling too much (Even if it was just weekends!), I had never imagined that one day my name will be counted in the list of top travel bloggers of India. On my notice period, I would Google 'Top Travel Bloggers of India' and would think I will never make it to this list.

Surprisingly, within 6 months of my starting the blog 'A Soul Window' in the year 2015, I was invited by Jordan Tourism Board, interviewed by Times of India and mentioned in many top Indian travel bloggers list. I think it's a combination of my talent, hard-work, dedication, luck and blessing by God! Now I feel being fired from my job was the best thing that ever happened to me!

2. From your profile, it appears that travel has left a spiritual impact on your personality. Please elaborate.

I had turned atheist in August 2007, just a year before I started traveling. A tragedy in the family led to my atheism. When I started to travel solo across India and beyond at a tender age, I was still grappling with my inner demons and was trying to grasp the way this world works! So, in a way it was spirituality that turned me into a traveller.

But destiny had other plans. God found ways to call me back to him/her. There have been many eerie incidents in my life when I thought, "This can't be a co-incidence! This

looks like the work of God." Today, I feel everything happens for a reason! A firm believer of destiny and past life Karma, I feel none of what happens to us is a fluke!

Whether it is Mata Vaishno Devi or Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, I feel that it was only because Maa and Shiv Bhagwan called me, that I embarked upon these pilgrimages in such a privileged manner. I sat on the foothills of Kailash Parbat in West Tibet and suddenly burst into tears.

This started my journey back to being a believer. Today, at a young age, I am a far more spiritually evolved person. I think it's a blessing because I know many people who never evolved spiritually, even in their 70s. Needless to say, travel paid a major role in reviving the faith in me.



Gauri Kund, Kailash Mansarovar, Tibet



Apatani woman with nose plugs, Ziro Village, Arunachal Pradesh

3. What makes you travel more in rural India? Do you think hospitality players have an opportunity to explore that market? Elaborate.

No matter where I go, small rural places attract me. Some of my most favourite rural places where I stayed are the villages of Kutch, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. I still remember the first time I got attracted to rural areas was when I stayed in a village near Little Rann of Kutch in my early days of solo travel.

I firmly believe that hospitality players and Government should help build rural tourism. I would like to applaud Sange Tsering who runs Holiday Scout in North East India.

It's commendable the way he has made personal efforts to not only build tourism economy in nondescript villages of

remote parts of North East India but also helps the local rural people by providing them water supply, geysers, fans etc. and even paint their homes and schools out of his own pocket.

We need more such hospitality players in India who help locals earn via rural tourism, without interfering with their culture or dictating those terms.

4. Three of your favourite offbeat travel destinations in India and abroad. What makes them offbeat?

In India, I have loved visiting the remote corners of North East India. Though I have visited the more famous Mon and Longwa in Nagaland to meet the last surviving headhunters, I was surprised to see that headhunters from the Wancho and Nocte also live in Tirap and Longding district of Arunachal Pradesh.

Similarly, attending Basar Confluence in Arunachal and Dwijing festival in Bodoland is not only offbeat travel at its best but also so much fun!

I also enjoyed visiting the lesser-known temples of Morena in Madhya Pradesh. While Gwalior Fort may not be very offbeat, what most people don't know that the Chaturbhuj temple located near Raja Man Singh palace has the first written inscription of zero in the world! That makes it an offbeat place. On this trip in and around Gwalior, I also visited some amazing offbeat destinations such as Datia palace, Shivpuri, Surwaya Gadi, Sonagiri etc.



Apatani woman in her home, Ziro Village, Arunachal Pradesh



Wadi Rum, Jordan

Even Tanakpur and Champawat were a revelation. Who would have thought you can make a day trip to Nepal from here! But what surprised me the most was when I was invited to visit the lesser-known Rajdhari Devdari waterfalls near Varanasi. What shocked me was my visit to Aurwatand canyon where the beautifully preserved rock paintings left me slack-jawed. Visiting offbeat places like Ratnagiri Monastery, Udaigiri Monastery, Maa Biraja Temple in Jajpur in Odisha was equally satisfying!

5. What more India needs to do for wildlife conservation? How can the blogosphere contribute towards the betterment of wildlife conservation?

I am a wildlife enthusiast and have visited many National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries in India, Nepal, Bhutan and Africa. I feel India is doing a very good job in wildlife conservation. Whether it is the rewilding of tigers, one horned rhinos, turtles, gharials or various species of vultures, some of the best wildlife conservation projects have come from India.

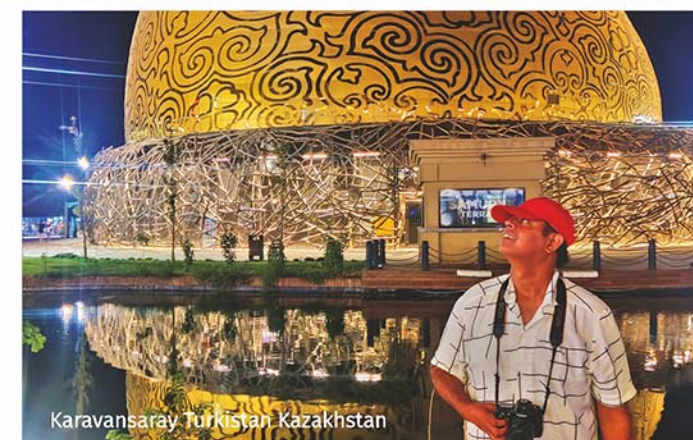
In my blog, I have always spoken against zoos, animal products and use of animals for human entertainment and use. I was therefore heartbroken to see captive elephants and tigers being mistreated for human entertainment in Sri Lanka, India and Thailand during my travels. This needs to change. But sadly, I see many bloggers, Instagrammers and Youtubers promoting captive animal entertainment. I don't

see much hope, but as a blogger and animal lover, I will continue being vocal about it.

Internationally, I have loved every bit of the week I spent in Shymkent, Turkestan and Sayram-Ugam National Park in South Kazakhstan. Located just 2 hours away from Tashkent in Uzbekistan, Shymkent is a gem of a place located away from the crowds. Often overshadowed by Astana and Almaty, I feel offbeat places like Shymkent deserve a lot of love. Turkestan also amazed me with its sacred mausoleum and the amazing boat show and the Flying Theater 8D show in Karavansaray. It's a pity that no one talks about it!



Citadel, Shymkent Kazakhstan



Karavansaray Turkistan Kazakhstan

6. What are the dangers of adventure travel? Where would you like to go to satiate your hunger for adventure travel? Any three destinations (domestic and international).

I have always maintained that no one should ever trek solo, even if it's a day hike. On a trek, it is very easy to get sick, lose the path, encounter a ferocious wild animal, meet an avalanche, get an AMS attack, fall off a hill and what not. I know of many such incidents! You must always trek with trusted partners and friends, who would give you company and not be in a race to complete the trek first. In India, I have loved the Roopkund trek and Darwa Pass Trek in Uttarakhand.

In Nepal, I enjoyed doing the epic Everest Base Camp Trek and Poonhill trek. Both are one of the most picturesque treks I have done so far! Though it is not right to call the parikrama around Kailash Parbat a trek, it is still the most beautiful adventure I have embarked upon ever. It was indeed a yatra of a lifetime!

7. Travelling and photography go hand in hand. But public speaking is a completely different sphere. How did you enter into public speaking? Share your experiences as a public speaker.

Trust me, I detest public speaking and usually avoid such gigs. I even chickened out when I was invited to speak for Ted Talk in one of the IIMs and other talks in leading universities such as Narsee Monjee University, Mumbai and IIT, Kanpur. Anyhow, due to personal issues, I had to turn down these invites.

More than having stage fright, I get bored of talking about my travels when I have already written so much on my blog asoulwindow.com. I would rather have people read my blogs and watch my videos on YouTube (you can search A Soul Window). But the public speaking opportunities never stop and the cycle continues. I have spoken at many travel events before, including the International Travel Writers' Conclave by Uttar Pradesh Tourism Board. 📹



Everest Base Camp Nepal



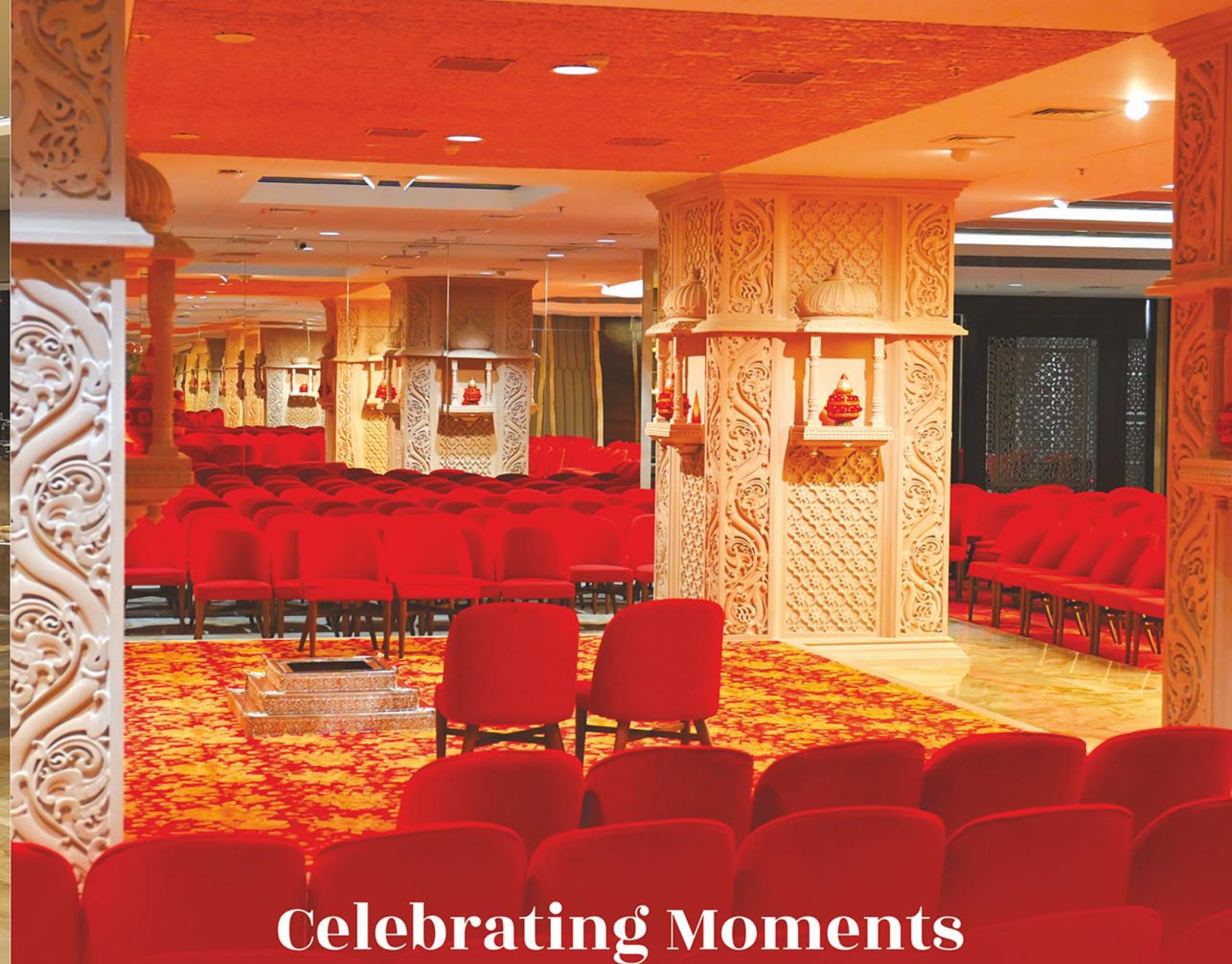
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What's Happening!

Gujarat signs 10 MoUs worth over 770 crores ahead of Vibrant Gujarat 2024



(December 2023) - At the 15th Annual Adventure Tourism Convention 2023, a prelude to the upcoming Vibrant Gujarat

Global Summit, organized at Ekta Nagar, Gujarat signed MoUs worth Rs. 770 crores for the growth of Gujarat's tourism sector. The announcement comes from Gujarat Tourism ahead of the 10th Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit set to take place in January 2024.

A wide range of projects are covered in MoUs such as a culture theme park

and a world-class entertainment zone in Gandhinagar, convention area and a 4-star resort in Narmada district. It is expected that these endeavors will create employment for 450 tribal members. Besides these, two MoUs were signed for cinematic tourism in Gir Somnath and Kutch districts valuing about Rs. 225 crores.

Foreign tourist arrivals up, still below pre-pandemic levels



The year 2023 witnessed an increased inflow of foreign tourists visiting India, from 6.44 million October 2022 to 7.24 million in the same month in 2024. The

numbers suggest an increase of 55.6% as compared to last year.

However, the increase is still below the pre-pandemic level, which was 1.56

million and 10.93 million in 2018 and 2019. During pandemic, there was a dip to 2.74 million in 2020 and further to 1.52 million in 2021.

Helicopter trips to religious destinations of Gujarat

(December 2023) - Travellers can now enjoy helicopter riders to Dhordo, Kutch and seven other religious destinations within the state. The 8-minute joyride to Dhordo, Rann Utsav has started from 27th December, 2023 giving a unique experience of getting a bird eye view of Rann Utsav. The ticket price is Rs. 5900 per person. The first phase of helicopter ride service to religious destinations include destinations like Palitana (1 hour 10 minutes), Sarangpur (50 minutes), Somnath (1 hour and 35 minutes), Statue of Unity (1 hour), Vadnagar (30 minutes), Nadabet (55 minutes) and Nathdwara (1 hour 25 minutes). Ambaji (40 minutes), Mahuva (1 hour 25 minutes) are among other joyride destinations.

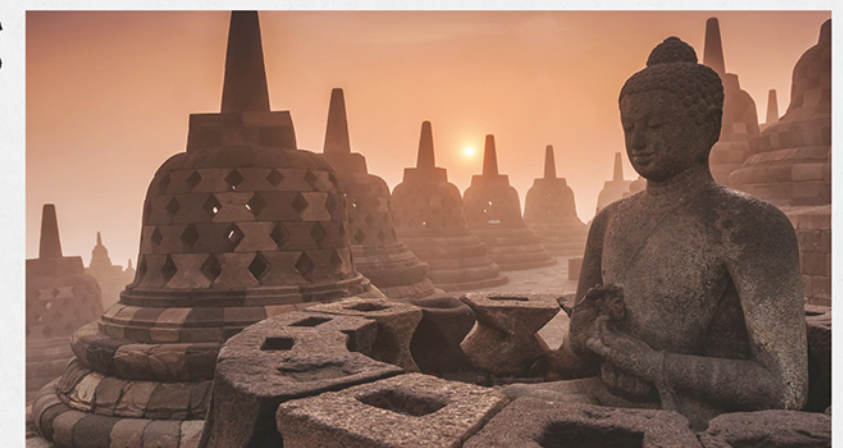


Cambodia to launch e-arrival card next year

(December 2023) - As shared by the Ministry of Interior, Cambodia is planning to launch a trial 'e-Arrival Card' scheme beginning January 01, 2024 for all the travelers from the Southeast Asia country. The advantage of e-arrival card would be the removal of a plethora of paper forms required on arrival. Foreign travelers and Cambodian citizens entering Cambodia through international airports would be benefited from the e-arrival scheme as the immigration formalities and health procedures will be completed in one form.

Indonesia considering more visa-free entry

With an objective to increase tourist arrival and boost economic growth, Indonesia is considering expanding its visa-free entry policy to 20 more nations. The proposed countries for the visa-free entry are: Australia, China, India, South Korea, United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Netherlands, Japan, Russia, Taiwan, New Zealand, Italy, Spain, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and two announced Middle Eastern nations.





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