

BETWEEN SALT & SKY

An artist's study of Kutch, where geography quietly dictates the forms of living, making, and belonging in a land attuned to the whispers of nature. Words & Sketches by Shikha Shah



As dusk descends on the White Rann, decorated camels stride across the luminous salt flats, their silhouettes merging with the desert's quiet theatre.



Doors and windows of Kutchi homes stand out for their brightly coloured frames, alive with birds, blossoms, and leafy motifs.



Clockwise from above: In Kutch's glistening salt flats, Agariya workers harvest nature's white gold using time-honoured methods, undeterred by the blazing sun—a tradition sustained for over 600 years; in villages like Gandhi Nu Gaam, mud houses burst with colour and intricate patterns, each wall reflecting the artistry of local communities and weaving tradition into everyday life; everyday utensils and household objects line the curved walls of a Kutchi Bhunga, where even the simplest items become part of the home's understated beauty.



Clockwise from above: Few migrations rival the flamingos of Kutch, gathering in the Great and Little Rann in their thousands and turning the pale landscape into a fleeting wash of pink; Mandvi, a historic port town founded in 1580 on the Rukmavati River, once thrived as a gateway for trade with Africa and Arabia. Along its tranquil shores, dotted with wooden boats, this maritime past still lingers; the 17th-century Rani Mahal in Bhuj may have been ravaged by the 2001 earthquake, but its latticed windows and weathered walls still echo the grace of the queen's residence; Ajrakhpur, an artisan village near Bhuj, keeps alive the 4,000-year-old tradition of *Ajrakh* (block printing), where natural dyes and a meticulous multi-stage process create textiles rich in intricate patterns.





Clockwise from left: Known locally as 'Kotaro' and often dubbed the Grand Canyon of India, Kaliya Dhrow is a landscape shaped by wind and water over millennia. Its narrow gorges, emerald pools, and rust-hued rock walls reveal layers of geological history; desert life in Kutch has shaped a cuisine that is seasonal, hearty, and deeply satisfying—rotlas, khichdi, chaas (buttermilk), jaggery with ghee, and garlic chutney, all served with quiet generosity; in the open kitchen of her home, a Kutchi woman shapes bajri (pearl millet) rotlas over the stove, their smoky aroma blending with the rhythms of rural life; in Khavda, near Bhuj, Kumbhar Abdul Ibrahim and his family continue one of the oldest art forms—crafting earthen pots from the region's soft "rann ki mitti", shaped on wheels and hand-painted with nature-inspired designs.

AT DUSK IN THE WHITE RANN, as camels drift across a horizon of salt and sky, it becomes clear that in Kutch, the land does not merely surround life—it shapes it. As a travel writer and sketcher, I've come to see landscapes not simply as backdrops, but as quiet storytellers. They influence not only livelihoods, but also food, architecture, craft traditions, and the rhythms of daily life. In Gujarat's Kutch, a name believed to derive from the Sanskrit *Kachchho*, meaning tortoise, this relationship feels especially intimate. Here, life unfolds in close conversation with nature: its stark beauty, shifting seasons, and fragile ecosystems.

Positioned in the north-western corner of Gujarat, Kutch is defined by striking geographical diversity—from vast salt deserts and seasonal wetlands to expansive grasslands, rocky outcrops, and scattered pastoral settlements.

The Great Rann stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of this region. Extending across the horizon in an almost endless sheet of salt, this otherworldly desert shimmers beneath the unforgiving sun. By evening, the blinding whiteness softens into tones of silver and blush pink.

Elsewhere, the land reveals its past etched in stone. Along the Nirona River, roughly 35 kilometres from Bhuj, lies Mamai Dev Kaliya Dhrow—a remarkable natural formation often compared to a miniature canyon. Hidden within rugged topography, its sculpted sandstone walls appear almost unexpectedly. Shaped over centuries by water cutting through the rocky riverbed, it features deep potholes, smooth channels, and weathered grooves—traces of currents that once surged through this corridor. One of the region's most striking geomorphic features, it possesses a raw beauty that can leave you momentarily speechless.

Across the hamlets of Kutch, people have adapted with ingenuity and grace. In Hodka and Gandhi Nu Gaam, traditional circular Bhungas rise from the desert floor. Thick mud walls and conical thatched roofs keep interiors cool during scorching summers and resilient during tremors.

Craft traditions flourish with equal vibrancy. Home to diverse tribal communities, Kutch preserves a rich artistic heritage. Skilled artisans, or *karigars*, continue age-old practices such as embroidery, weaving, dyeing, block printing, *bandhani* (tie-dye), leatherwork, pottery, woodcraft, and metalwork.

Culinary habits reflect a similar wisdom shaped by the environment. Locally sourced ingredients are preserved through drying or pickling, while legumes, grains, and fragrant spices form the backbone of most staples. Predominantly vegetarian, with occasional regional specialities, the cuisine balances savoury and sweet with inventive simplicity. Yet what makes each meal memorable is the easy warmth with which people welcome you into their homes.

Winter introduces another dimension to the region's character. As temperatures fall, the Little Rann becomes a vital refuge for migratory birds. Tens of thousands of cranes, flamingos, pelicans, and other waterbirds descend upon its seasonal wetlands, creating a striking seasonal transformation. Meanwhile, desert-dwelling wildlife—including Indian wild asses, chinkaras (Indian gazelles), and desert foxes—roam freely across the grasslands, a reminder of the resilience and adaptability of both land and life.

Years of wandering through Kutch have left me deeply inspired. Through these simple, observational sketches, I seek to preserve the moments that moved me—each one an attempt to hold on to a fleeting fragment of a land that is constantly shifting, yet deeply rooted in its identity. 🌍

