

EXPERIENCES

TRAVELLERS' TALES, FROM NEAR AND FAR



TUUL AND BRUNO MORANDI/LAMY

The depth of Adi-Kadi Var is said to be about 53 metres.

FROM THE ANNALS OF HISTORY

Sheathed in legends and rife with historical anecdotes, a visit to Junagadh in Gujarat is akin to turning the pages of time. **BY SANDY & VYJAY**

AROUND 70 KILOMETRES from the home of the Asiatic lion at Gir National Park in Gujarat lies the city of Junagadh. While it's thrilling to drive through a forest teeming with lions, the intricate layers of history and legends that Junagadh is wrapped in are no less exciting to explore. In fact, the very existence of the Asiatic lion in what is dubbed as its last wild home is linked to a chapter of Junagadh's history. Lions were once on the verge of extinction, owing to indiscriminate hunting and habitat loss, but thanks to the conservation efforts of the last ruling Nawab of Junagadh, Muhammad Mahabat Khan III, the species got a fresh lease of life.

The Nawab belonged to a dynasty that had ruled over the princely state of Junagadh for around two centuries. After India gained Independence from the British in 1947 and partitioned into two countries, the Nawab saw it fit to accede to Pakistan even though nearly 99 per cent of the population was Hindu. In a dramatic turn of events, a plebiscite led to Junagadh becoming a part of India. The Nawab reportedly fled to Karachi with his entourage of 200 dogs.

FORT FABLES

Our first tryst with Junagadh's fascinating history begins at the entrance of an old citadel. Standing defiantly against the onslaught of time, Uparkot Fort has walls that wear innumerable scars. After all, it has seen 16 sieges—one lasting 12 years!

"This is the spot where the guards were killed through treachery and the fort breached," says our guide, gesturing towards the inner gates. The fort also finds a place in mythology and is believed to



have been built by the Yadava king Ugrasen, better known as the grandfather of Lord Krishna. It was then called Revatnagar, after the hill on which it was built. Strictly historically speaking, it is acknowledged that the first structure of the fort was built in 319 BC by Chandragupta Maurya.

Uparkot served as the seat of power of Junagadh state under different dynasties. For a period of time between 73-70 BC, it was even ruled by the Greeks; a rock edict in Junagadh talks about a Yavana (Greek) king named Tushaspha. Subsequent rulers included the Shakas, or Scythians, and the Gupta dynasty. Following that, the fort lost its importance and faded into oblivion, claimed by the jungle and hidden from the world for almost three centuries.

In the 10th century, a king named Griharipu of the Chudasama dynasty is believed to have reclaimed and restored the fort. The Chudasamas ruled the region from Uparkot Fort till almost the end of the 15th century when the fort was conquered by a Turkic ruler named Mohammed Begada. Then, it was the turn of the Mughals to rule over Junagadh for about 200 years. The last dynastic rule that again lasted for over 200 years was that of the Nawabs of Junagadh.

Uparkot Fort served as the seat of power of Junagadh state under different dynasties.

▲ *Uparkot Fort is believed to have been built by the Yadava king Ugrasen.*

▼ *A woman selling an array of spices inside the fort.*

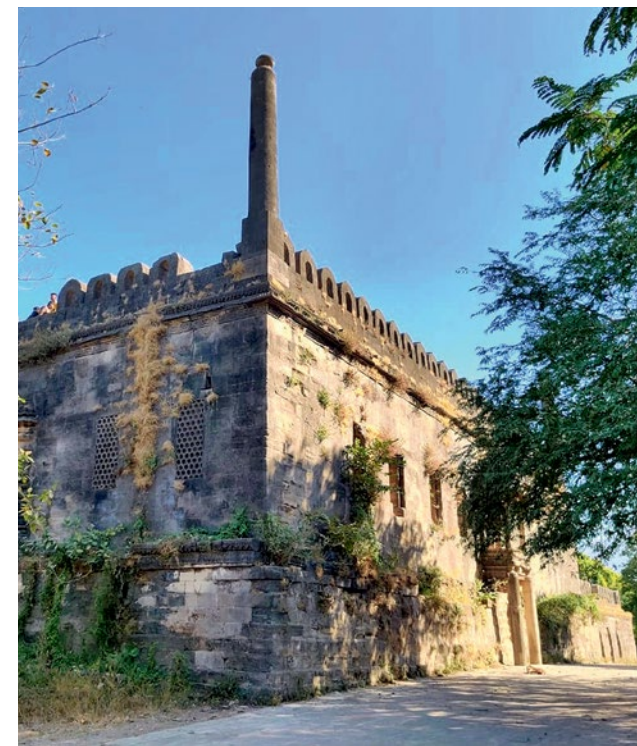


PALACE OR MOSQUE?

A cryptic board in Gujarati reads: ‘Ranakdevi Palace – Jumma Masjid’, with an arrow pointing towards a square structure with slim pillars in each corner. A series of steps leads to its entrance, where a woman sits and sells Ayurvedic oils.

With a dramatic flourish, our guide explains that the structure was once a two-storeyed palace with 16 rooms. It was named after a legendary queen named Ranakdevi, who married the Chudasama king Ra Khengar in the hall where we were standing. This union

FROM TOP: MARKA/CONTRIBUTOR/GETTYIMAGES; SANDY & VYJAY



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: SHUTTERSTOCK; BALAJI SRINIVASAN/GETTYIMAGES; SANDY & VYJAY

was wrought with tragedy. The Solanki king Siddhraj Jaysing was besotted with Ranakdevi and wanted to marry her. It was he who laid siege to the fort for 12 years and finally breached it with the help of Ra Khengar’s nephews. He is then said to have killed the king as well as the two young princes, before abducting the queen. It’s believed that she immolated herself rather than give in to his nefarious designs.

Today, what remains of the palace is a single, large-pillared chamber with an ornamental balcony that opens to the side. This part is a preferred spot for pre-wedding shoots. In the centre of a wall is a beautifully decorated niche—the mihrab, an essential element in a mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca. After the fort was conquered by the then Sultan of Gujarat, Mahmud Begada, the top floors of the palace were razed and the structure was converted into a mosque. Soon after, the palace and Uparkot itself were abandoned, as the Sultan built a town outside the fort.

CANNONS THAT FAILED

Two cannons perched high above the city of Junagadh stand pensively near the Ranakdevi Palace. They are a bitter reminder of defeat. The cannons were used at the port of Diu by the Turkish Naval Force in an attempt to ward off a Portuguese invasion. The help of the Turks had been requisitioned by the then Sultan



▲ *The two medieval cannons in Uparkot Fort were brought from Diu, following a seige in 1538.*

▼ *From left: Ranakdevi Palace was later converted into a mosque; stone pillars inside the Buddhist caves built during the time of Emperor Ashoka.*

of Gujarat. However, the Turks tasted defeat and the cannons were later brought to Uparkot Fort. Interestingly, they have names: Neelam and Manek.

THE BUDDHIST CAVES

A pigeon sits in contemplation on what looks like a flat rock surface interspersed with strange-looking clefts. A series of winding steps leads you down into caverns. This is the site for a group of second-century rock-cut Buddhist caves, built during the time of Emperor Ashoka.

The caves are actually chambers that were made by scooping out rock. They are in three tiers. As you descend into the interiors of these mystical quarters, which were once the resting



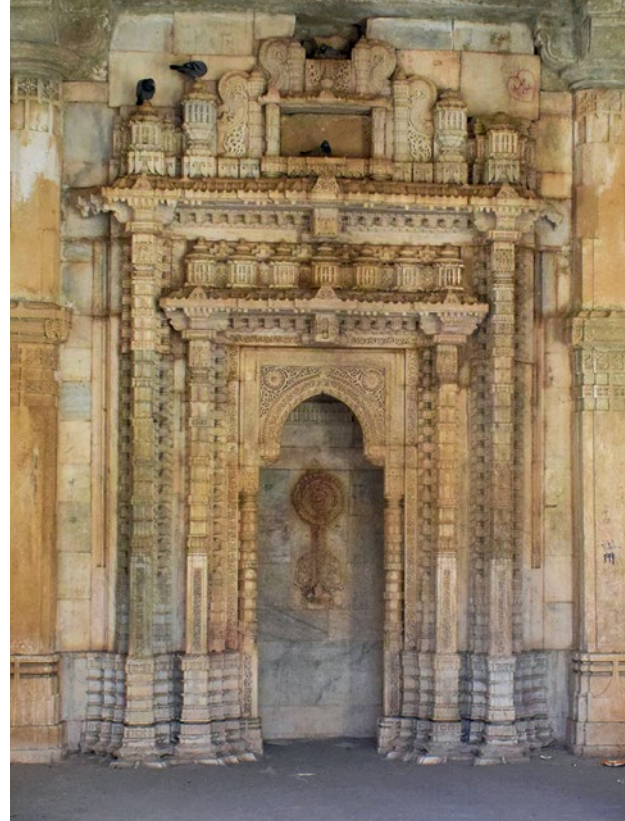
place of Buddhist monks, you are overcome with a sense of timelessness. The first storey housed spartan living quarters and meditation cells. The bottom storey housed the assembly hall. Though time has stripped the place of its artistic ornamentations, there are pillars that remind you of Athens. An ancient example of Graeco-Scythian architecture, they have spiral ridges across their shafts and octagonal plinth bases with ornamented capitals.

An intricate system of vertically-cut cisterns and drains channelled rainwater into a pond, ensuring water supply as well as acting as a natural cooling system down below. With the chambers being open to the sky, natural light flowed into the subterranean quarters.

THE STEPWELLS OF UPARKOT

Water is indeed the elixir of life, and battles have been waged over the resource through the centuries. Wells, and in particular stepwells, were part of the landscape across western India in ancient times. While the stepwells of Uparkot were devoid of artistic elements, they were quite useful in their time.

The Adi-Kadi Vav is associated with a tragic legend—that of two sisters who sacrificed their lives for the welfare of the kingdom. According to local myth, water could not be struck despite digging deep into the rock face. A worried king sought the advice of an astrologer, who told him that water would flow from the well only upon the voluntary sacrifice of two sisters.



▲ Interiors of the Ranakdevi Palace.

▼ Bahauddin Ka Maqbara is inspired by Gothic, Hindu, and Islamic architecture.

Around 170 steps lead to the pond at the bottom. The depth of the well is said to be about 53 metres. The well dates back to somewhere between the 10th and 15th centuries. As you walk down to the water, the different strata of rocks on either side create a colourful pattern. There is another stepwell nearby known as the Navaghan Kuva, named after a king who lived during the early 11th century. The huge well is housed within a large forecourt and reached by wide, winding steps. Skylights ensure ventilation even at the bottom of the well.

The stepwells of Uparkot seem to have been the precursors to the more ornamental and elaborate stepwells seen elsewhere in Gujarat, such as the beautiful Adalaj Ki Vav near Ahmedabad.

ELEGANT RESTING PLACES

On a busy junction in Junagadh, two exquisite structures stand side by side. They seem out of place in the midst of the bustling traffic. At first glance, one of the structures looks like a Gothic cathedral, but the presence of Islamic architectural elements quickly rules out this possibility. It is a beautiful building with onion-shaped domes clustered on the roof. Arches, intricate carvings, French windows, and columns are all blended with perfection. In many ways, the building with its intriguing mix of design elements of Gothic, Indian, Islamic, and European architecture, is

FROM TOP: SANDY & VYJAY; PHILIP BIGGI/ALAMY



The 19th-century mausoleum of Sheikh Bahauddin resembles the Taj Mahal.

a reflection of the chequered and diverse history of Junagadh. The mesmerising structure is the mausoleum of Nawab Mahabat Khan II, who ruled over the region in the 19th century.

It is difficult to take your eyes away from the hypnotic beauty of the centuries-old mausoleum, but you must, as another masterpiece in stone vies for attention just a few metres away. The structure that has an eerie resemblance to the Taj Mahal is the mausoleum of Sheikh Bahauddin, the Wazir-E-Azam or prime minister of Junagadh in the late 19th century. Another excellent synthesis of Gothic and Islamic architecture, the mausoleum, known as Bahauddin Ka Maqbara, stands out for its four unique minarets, one in each corner. The distinctive feature of each minaret is the staircase that hugs it from the outside.

THE KHAPRA KODIYA CAVES

Some distance away from the city centre, hidden behind dusty lanes, stands another gem. The Khapra Kodiya group of caves is deemed to be the most important of the three cave groups that have been found in Junagadh and its vicinity. Chambers have been cut into the rock

FROM TOP: BALAJI SRINIVASAN/GETTY IMAGES; SANDY & VYJAY

GETTING THERE

Rajkot Airport, at a distance of 103 kilometres, is the nearest. The better connected city of Ahmedabad is located around 316 kilometres away from Junagadh. One can travel by road from either of these two cities.

STAY

Bellevue Sarovar Portico, Junagadh is an upscale contemporary hotel located in the heart of the city (*doubles from ₹3,500; sarovarhotels.com*). **Click Junagadh** offers elegantly furnished rooms (*doubles from ₹2,500; subahotels.com*).



▲ From top: The huge facade of Mahabat Maqbara; the Khapra Kodiya Caves are believed to have been built between the third and fourth century.

and are devoid of any decorative trappings. Though there is not much to see, the historical and archaeological importance of these caves is immense. They are believed to have been built sometime between the third and fourth century AD, or even earlier, to serve as a place for rest and meditation for wandering Buddhist mendicants.

The best way to wrap up a visit to Junagadh is to dig into a mammoth Gujarati thali, with an intricate and colourful spread of flavours and aromas—a sensory feast not very different from the city's fascinating and colourful history. ✦

