

# WHERE HISTORY MEETS THE FUTURE

A 48-hour discovery of why the city is the perfect tourist magnet, seamlessly blending the new and old.

Text **Supriya Sehgal**

The elaborately-designed stepwell Dada Harir ni Vav is a major attraction.

If you are an art aficionado, you'll be able to spot MF Husain's signature horses anywhere. He was known to be generous with his artistic stamp, especially to restaurants where he ate often. I was excited to get a cup of tea at Ahmedabad's New Lucky Restaurant, well-known for having stoked the appetite of numerous art lovers. Only, I was in for something more than Husain's genius. It was a perfect plate of soft *bun-mask* (battered bun), his elegant piece featuring camels on the wall in front and indifferently-strewn tombstones all over the restaurant. The restaurant in the Lal Darwaza area is one of those *kitlees* (tea

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Clockwise from left: Tombstones inside the New Lucky Restaurant; An aerial view of Bhadra Fort and the markets around it; Teen Darwaza is the oldest as well as the longest gateway in the city.

shops) that assures the patron that a hot cup of tea goes down well when you're seated next to the departed. While regulars didn't bat an eyelid, for me, starting a trip in a former graveyard left my jaw dropped. I only picked it up at the end of the next 48 hours.

It was a cinch to get around on foot in the old part of town, especially since we had started early in the morning.

I followed in the footsteps of Bhai Lal Ji my guide, who thought it was prudent for me to first get a bird's-eye view of the area that we would be treading on. It felt ludicrous to compromise on climbing up the Bhadra Fort ramparts and getting a sweeping view. Built in 1411 by Ahmed Shah, the founder of the city, the gate of the fort formed the eastern entrance of the Ahmedabad citadel. The roof of the

formidable structure offered perfect photo opportunities. Between the fort and the Teen Darwaza (Triple Gateway) to its east, was the Maidan Shahi (Royal Square), where royal processions and polo games once took place. Today, a market was starting to stir into action, with the promise of becoming a full-fledged mesh of disorder and commotion in a matter of few minutes.

We walked down the street and peeked into Jama Masjid's sprawling courtyard. Then we stopped under one of three arches that lead the mosque to chat with a local about an oil lamp here that has not been extinguished for the last 600 years!

We later strolled to Chandravilas Restaurant, a place where the dream of having a meal in the hippest restaurant of town for Re. 1 could once come true. Despite its crumbling walls, the *fafda-jalebi* (a combination of a crunchy savoury snack and a sweet syrupy one) is still the standout dish. For me, the charm lay in the fact that the Iron Man Of India, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, often snacked here. Mr Joshi, the owner of the restaurant told us about the long queues during Dussehra that still keep the business strong. The *fafdas* were testimony enough to why this establishment has sustained for so long.

Since there was time enough for only a sample of the old city, we moved swiftly to the new part of town, where the 15th-century Ravivari (Sunday Market) was on. A constellation of clothes, utensils, books, stationery, antiques, dumb-bells, bikes, fruits and veggies, luggage and more lay sprawled along the Sabarmati River. It was a heady mayhem of kitsch with the buzz of bargaining a constant background score.

Since I had only two days, Bhai Lal Ji insisted that I not leave without visiting the Sabarmati Ashram, a befitting homage to commemorate the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi. Here, at the banks of the namesake river, his erstwhile cottage has been converted to a muted museum. Fragmented in two sections; where he actually lived and the modern section conceived by architect Charles Correa, the ashram has a unique energy about it. This is the place where Mahatma Gandhi started the satyagraha movement. I picked up a *charkha*



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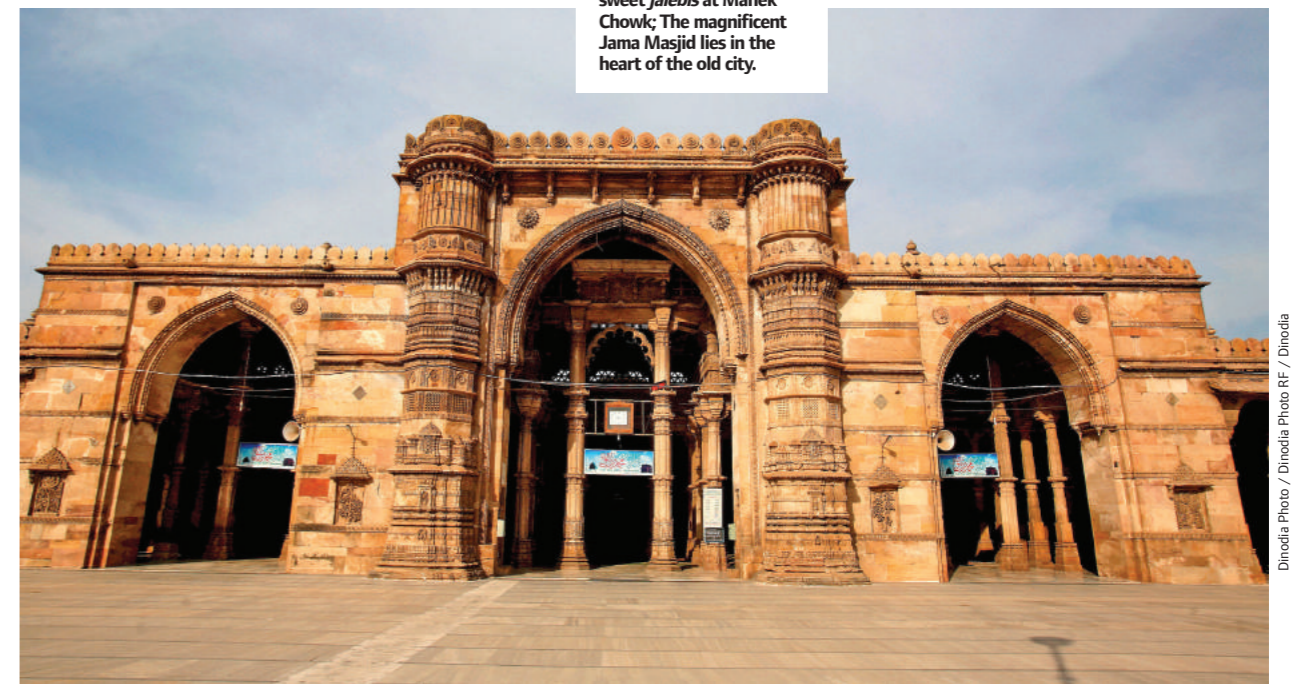
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Clockwise from left: The bustling Ravivari set along the Sabarmati River; Relish crunchy *fafdas* with sweet *jalebis* at Manek Chowk; The magnificent Jama Masjid lies in the heart of the old city.

(spinning wheel) memento from the curio shop and sent a postcard from the in-house postbox. I knew that the next time would be devoted to the tan-coloured Dandi Kutir, a salt-mound-shaped museum that lies in Gandhinagar. The three-leveled museum is the latest addition to the tech-savvy platter of exhibitions. It emulates some of the best international experiences with its excellent audiovisual exhibits of Mahatma Gandhi's life – his childhood, youth and political career as the backdrop.

As the day closed in, there was time enough for Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel National Museum. The museum is a rich repository of Sardar Patel's trajectory as a political leader. What trumps everything is numerous technology-backed interactive exhibits. Concise and well-researched audiovisual displays are a breakthrough for Indian museums. A 3-D light and sound show was to start in an hour but we had to hit Manek Chowk, a notable city square in old Ahmedabad.

Wending down the narrow alleyways, we spotted the old bird feeds in the middle of the *polis* (residential colonies divided by trade) and marveled at the intricate woodwork in the old havelis. The walk ended



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Image courtesy of Gujarat Tourism



Clockwise from left: Once the home of Mahatma Gandhi, Sabarmati Ashram has been converted into a museum; Devotees through the Akshardham Temple; The Central Hall at Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Museum.

in a small 1st floor room, propped above the entrance gate of Badshah no Hajiro (King's mausoleum). A 15-minute concert of the *naubat* (orchestra of *shehnai* and *naqqara*) musicians was the perfect way to end the sightseeing. The Amdavadis' version of nightlife was still pending.

Manek Chowk is culinarily blessed. It was crammed with chairs and tables arranged for nocturnal foodies who recommend Bastiram's *rabri kulfis* and Imtiaz Sheikh's outrageous chocolate and pineapple pizza. While there were dozens of other stalls selling savoury and sweet snacks, I could top up this meal only with a food-coma-inducing *shrikhand* (a sweet dish made of strained yogurt) at Girish Cold Drinks.

Admittedly, it was difficult to get up the next morning, but I was eager to shed some calories with the help of the 'Trin-Trin Green-Green' (TT-GG) Project at Gandhinagar, the satellite town to Ahmedabad (about 25 km away). I hired a bike for ₹5 an hour and headed straight to the Pethapur Village close by to meet Mr Dayabhai Prajapati. Feeding the textile industry, this settlement has only a few families that have constantly nourished the craft of making wooden blocks with intricate designs. Block making came about almost three centuries ago when women dipped broken bangles in colours to make designs on fabrics. This sparked an interest in the masons of the region who started using wooden casts instead. The community also struck great business by offering their services to make Saudagiri fabrics, which were a rage in Siam (now Thailand). I spent an hour looking at



Image courtesy of Gujarat Tourism

the blocks in Prajapati's home and his achievements encased in a honey-tinged photo album before heading to the famous Akshardham Temple.

The elaborately-carved main temple, built by nearly 1,000 artisans and opened in 1992, is constructed of 6,000 tonnes of pink sandstone and surrounded by manicured gardens. Three underground exhibition areas have hi-tech multimedia presentations on the Swaminarayan movement, Vedic philosophies and other spiritual matters. At sunset, a 45-minute water show presents the story of the Upanishads through fountains, music, fire and lasers. I had one last stop to make at Ahmedabad.

Dada Harir ni Vav is a stepwell that epitomises the profound significance of water in the drought-prone districts of Gujarat. Built in 1499 by the supervisor of Sultan Begada's harem,

this has steps down through five levels of carved stone columns to two small wells, now bone dry.

It was a soothing end to the day as I sat at the steps of the well, taking in the city's vivid paradox of holding onto the old and paving a way for the new.

#### Fact File

##### Getting There:

Jet Airways operates daily flights to Ahmedabad from Mumbai and New Delhi.

##### Accommodation:

Ahmedabad offers a variety of hotels. For a heritage stay, opt for The House of MG located on Bhadra Road.

##### For more information:

Visit [www.gujarattourism.com](http://www.gujarattourism.com)

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