



DHOLAVIRA Gujarat

# SALTSCAPIES

Kachchh – a brilliant halfway between a turmeric yellow Rajasthan and the emerald green Sahyadris – offers an upside down version of life. It tells you that seeds of life and civilisation are often hidden beneath the sands of time in inhospitable terrains.

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**K**achchh, a district located in the North Eastern part of Gujarat, dons colours of a different hue in autumn. Scanty monsoon rainfall alters the barren landscape and induces a “dog nosed wetness in the earth”. The greenery neither overwhelms nor disappoints. It merges smoothly into a bright canvas composed of a crispy blue sky and grey asphalt roads, cutting across a warm honey sandstone landscape. Kachchh is a brilliant halfway between a turmeric yellow Rajasthan in the North and the emerald green Sahyadris in the South.

The word Kachchh, as legend has it, has a direct linguistic link with Kacchua. The land mass looks like that of an inverted tortoise. Ancient mariners coming into the ports of Kachchh saw the land mass as an outline of the back of a giant tortoise. In the origin of its name, Kachchh offers an upside down version of life. It tells you that seeds of

life and civilisation are often hidden beneath the sands of time in inhospitable terrains.

One such inaccessible historical gems that Kachchh possesses is Dholavira. The name itself induces memories of yellow dog eared copies of school history books. Considered to be the oldest Indus Valley site left in India, Dholavira flourished 5,000 years ago. Like the more well-known Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, Dholavira also silently disappeared from history. After India's independence, both the major Harappan cities together with the Indus became a part of Pakistan. Resultantly, archaeologists intensified the search for Harappan sites in India. The Archaeological Survey of India undertook a new program of exploration and excavated many sites across Gujarat. The Dholavira site was discovered in 1967-68 by archaeologist J P Joshi and is one of eight large Indus Valley Urban centres in the



Indian sub-continent. However, Dholavira has been continually excavated only since 1989.

Our journey to Dholavira begins from Bhuj, district headquarters to Kachchh. However, Bhuj is not a stopover city. It played a grand host to a curious traveller. The city's central attraction is the 450 years old Hamir Sar (lake). This lake is an engineering marvel made possible through use of ancient wisdom in hydraulics and local geology. It draws in a regular crowd of migratory birds such as pelicans, flamingos and ducks like widgeon, mallards and pintails in winters. The famous Rann Utsav of Gujarat takes place every December around the lake. Adjoining Hamir Sar are lake systems such as Chattri Talao and Prag Sar. All around the lake system are vestiges of Bhuj's royal era, such as the Prag Mahal. This unique building was commissioned by erstwhile ruler, Rao Pragmalji. It owes its design to the famous architect, Colonel Henry Saint Wilkins, who is also credited with the architecture of Pune's Deccan College and the Secretariat at Mumbai. The other mesmerising building is the Aina Mahal. Its hall of mirrors, apart from other attrac-



The fish-eye view of the salt-baked scape of the Great Rann is truly a sight to behold (above). The ruins of the Harappan site of Dholavira (left & below)



tions, was designed by an artist from the forgotten pages of Indian history. Ramsinh Malm had stayed for 17 years in Holland and learnt architecture and clock making apart from a host of other trades. At the end, he had returned to Kachchh to complete his life's masterpiece. As our tour of the "walled city", as Bhuj is popularly known as, came to an end, plans for Dholavira started to take shape. However, the mysteries of Dholavira would have forever eluded us, had it not been for Dr Yogesh Jadeja. Dr. Jadeja is one of

Gujarat's most well-known geo-hydrologists. But his varied interest also led him to write a book titled *Biodiversity of Dholavira – Beyond Archaeology*. He has also worked with the Gujarat Forest Department in conserving a unique Jurassic age wood fossil site located on the north-western edge of Khadir Island and 8 km North East of Dholavira. While discussing Dholavira with him, he offered to join us as a fellow traveller. It was an opportunity of a lifetime and we weren't willing to miss out. So on an early smoky grey morning,

we headed off towards a lost civilisation.

Kachchh is one of India's largest districts in terms of total area. Hence, the distance between two points in the district can be substantial. The total distance from Bhuj to Dholavira is 240 km and takes four-and-a-half hours to complete. However, this stretch goes beyond connecting the traveller to his destination. It also opens one's eyes to the amazing natural history of Kachchh.

From Bhuj to Rapar, muslin roads make the journey less strenuous.

A large salt water pool on the Great Rann of Kachchh on the way to Dholavira





The bridge across the Great Rann of Kachchh, connecting Khadir Island to the Indian mainland

We stop on the way at Samakhiali for breakfast. Freshly prepared orange jalebis and yellow ganthias greet us on Gujrathi newsprint. Though not a wholesome meal, this is the best one can get in the early mornings. Our conversation with Dr Jadeja compensates. We listen in rapt attention as he explains to us the characteristics of surrounding landscape and vegetation.

In another one hour, we reach Rapar. We get off our vehicle and dash off for another round of quick snacks and tea. Grapevine here is that there are no more eating joints

ahead so it's good to stock in advance. Coming out of the tea house, we get our first glimpse of a blue signboard pointing towards Dholavira. It reads, "The Metropolis of Harappan Civilisation" and tells us that its 87 km away. But the distance between us and Dholavira doesn't bother us anymore. For what separates us from our destination is a long drive across the salt desert of the Great Rann of Kachchh.

A sudden burst of brilliant white envelopes us. It's an indication that we have entered the extensive salt

scape of the Great Rann. The region is a gift from the retreating sea, which resulted due to tectonic movement that took place in the Holocene period of Earth's geological history 10000 years ago. Our car increasingly seems like a ship navigating a sea of salt. Crippled power transmission towers and rusty water supply pipelines run parallel to the road. Shelf life considerably reduced by the salty air, their desolate existence shows the power of the Rann over all elements that inhabit its vast expanse. Life forms are almost non-existent.

### Travel Tips

Dholavira is located in the Kachchh Desert Wildlife Sanctuary in the Great Rann of Kachchh.

#### How to get there

**By Air:** The nearest airport is in Gandhidham about 250 km away, where a daily flight between Mumbai and Gandhidham is available. Another airport close to Dholavira is Bhuj Airport about 300 km away, where daily two flights between Bhuj and Mumbai are available.

**By Rail:** Samakhiali is the nearest railhead and is located 160 km from Dholavira on the Palanpur-Gandhidham BG line.

**By Road:** It is advisable to drive from Ahmedabad. The roads are usable until Rapar, from there the road to Dholavira is two lanes.

**The best** time to visit is November to March.





**Petrified wood** fossils from the Jurassic era (200 to 145 million years) are preserved amongst limestone, sandstone and shale layers at Chappari Rakhall

And yet, there is a beauty in this white cruelty. Wherever the pipes have leaked, pools of colourful watery patches have emerged. The white canvas is polka dotted with pink and blue pools of water. And somewhere close to these limpid pools, one can find a dog or a juvenile greater flamingo resting. We get off from our vehicles and walk over the salt surface. A crunchy noise follows every step. However, the hot and dry air soon starts to farm my body for goose pimples. We head back, desperate to get under the hood of our Tata Sumo.

At 11:30 am, we leave the Great Rann behind and enter the *khadir bet*, one of India's larger "inland" islands. During the monsoon, the seawater comes in, cutting off Khadir from the Indian mainland. The summer heat then evaporates the water, leaving behind the salt on the Great Rann. Dholavira is located at the north western tip of the *khadir bet*.

The approach to Dholavira is discreet. Unlike Hampi or any other such historic ruins, a mundane barrenness surrounds the location. The approach road is riddled with potholes and is surrounded by a dense cover of the invasive shrub *prosopis juliflora* locally called *vilayati* or *Gando babool*. Suddenly, it opens up to a vast expanse. The first site one gets to identify is the newly constructed Dholavira Archaeological Museum and office. Generally, the office sells tickets for visitors, but the day we arrived, the gates were open and there was nobody around to guide us either.

We walked in and headed towards the nearest landmark, two gigantic humps surrounded by deep chambers. As we approached closer, Dr. Jadeja took over and an amazing hydraulic history of Dholavira started to emerge. Nearly 5,000 years ago, the city managers in Dholavira realised that the best way to establish their civilisation

was by managing water wisely.

This drove them to develop a complex water system to service the city. As a first step, they constructed 16 giant water reservoirs, the largest of them being 79 metres long and 7 metres deep, to surround the city on the western and eastern sides. This allowed storage of a staggering 2.5 million cubic metres of water. This water allowed the people of Dholavira to grow crops throughout the year. Copious amounts of wheat and barley was produced, which was traded via sea routes as far Mesopotamia, located 3,500 km away.

The eastern reservoirs greet us as we enter the main the city complex. The inner walls are made of both fired and unfired bricks, typical of Indus Civilisation sites. Standing at the bottom of these reservoirs, one tries to imagine how painstakingly each may have been constructed. The high walls leave only a blue sky for an open gaze.



Dholavira was segmented into the upper and lower city. The eastern reservoir entrance takes one directly to the upper one through brick lanes and mud walled streets. Dr. Jadeja tells us that in Dholavira stone and timber was used as building material, unlike any other Indus site. It, therefore, boasts of being the first rock-cut architecture site of the Harappans. The eastern reservoirs filled up first. Then, owing to the upper city being located 13 metres above the lower, the reservoirs in the latter got filled up. Interestingly, long before the Romans, the Harappans had constructed aqueducts to take the water from the reservoirs to the heart of the city using the natural gradient. Dr. Jadeja's vibrant narrative helps us to grasp this engineering marvel. We consider ourselves remarkably fortunate, for visualising Dholavira's layout is a daunting task. Government apathy has ensured that there are no maps or

models on site to explain how each and every part of the city is organically connected to each other. Without a narrative or a visual description, Dholavira may well seem like a meaningless walk through the ruins.

And yet, one gets goose pimples walking on bricks fired 5,000 years ago in ancient kilns. Hazy black and white photos in school textbooks suddenly seem surreal in 3D. As my fingers brush against the mud plastered walls, I find an eerie reconnect with the past. Deep in my heart, I wish that the empty streets come alive again with the noise of cart wheels, raucous markets and children laughing.

Sitting on top of the Northern Gate we watch the sun set over the upper city. In 1999, Dr R S Bisht's team discovered 30 Harappan symbols at the foot of this very gate. It led to national headlines and became the leitmotif of Dholavira, just the way we saw them on the

blue signboard at Rapar. However, the Harappan script is yet to be deciphered, so the secret of these 30 symbols remain unlocked.

By 1800 BC, Dholavira disappeared from historic records, indicating that the civilisation may have come to an end. Experts believe that Dholavira's survival was based on tapping the waters of the Ghaggar River, which was dammed to fill the reservoirs. A powerful earthquake pushed the course of the river more towards the Ganges basin, leaving Dholavira high and dry. The area around became arid and the vegetation changed. The giant reservoirs slowly got filled with earth.

It was time to bid the yellow sun kissed ruins a final farewell. A city which covers 40 hectares and once supported a population of 20,000 had only the three of us, and our shadows, as visitors. It's loneliness a stark statement on the fragility of human civilisation. ■