

INDIA’S HISTORY ALIVE IN AHMEDABAD

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For The Sun Times

Ahmedabad, the former capital of Gujarat and the largest city, is the best place to learn about India’s pre-independence history and later struggle leading to the creation of India as a nation.

Named by Sultan Ahmed Shah I, Ahmedabad has historical importance as the birthplace of Indian independence movement when Mahatma Gandhi established the ashram on the banks of the Sabarmati River, which became a centre of nationalist activities. In 1930, Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, initiated the salt satyagraha (salt boycott) from Ahmedabad.

Gandhi was born in Porbandar, Gujarat, 395 kilometres from Ahmedabad, where the house in which he was born, called Kirti Mandir, has been converted into a museum with a photo exhibit on his life and times, a library, a prayer hall and other memorabilia. The most important centre from where Gandhi initiated his non-violent struggle for India’s independence is the Gandhi Ashram in Ahmedabad. One can visit the Satyagraha Ashram on the banks of the Sabarmati River from where he launched the historic Dandi March in 1930 which ultimately ended British rule in India.

For any history buff, it would be worthwhile to take the Gandhi Circuit, which goes through places of historical importance, charting Gandhi’s time-machine struggle for independence.

The river Sabarmati divides the city into two distinct eastern and western regions; the eastern portion houses the old city, packed with bazaars and numerous places of worship while the western section contains modern buildings, educational institutions, shopping malls, residential areas and new business districts.

Ahmedabad, apart from having historical significance, later became a seat of higher education, science and technology and established heavy and chemical industry. Today, it’s an important centre as one of the largest exporters of gem stones and jewellery in India and a leading automobile manufacturing centre. Tata’s chemical plant and Nano vehicle assembly plant are located in Ahmedabad, supplemented by assembly projects by Ford, Suzuki and Peugeot.

The city has remarkable buildings, fine restaurants and fabulous night markets. Gujarati people are considered colourful and their tastes, multicolours and fashions are reflected in the Law Garden Night Market. Every evening, stalls open offering shopaholics everything they need, displaying the vibrant colours of Gujarat. And bargaining is allowed and encouraged.

The night market is worth a visit but caution must be exercised as visitors have to contend with the hundreds of motor bikes and cars that pass through crowds of shoppers. The constant honking and traffic is the only nuisance at this otherwise enjoyable shopping experience. I would venture to suggest that they should be banned to ensure an enjoyable shopping experience.

You are bound to find temples, mosques and other institution of worship in any part of India you visit. Religion in India is characterised by a diversity of religious beliefs and practices as the subcontinent is the birthplace of some of the world’s major religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. As religion plays an important role in the country’s culture, there is abundance of temples to visit for tourists as Ahmedabad has 568 temples.

One of the most important temple near Ahmedabad, located in the of the town of Dwarka, is Dwarkadish Temple, dedicated to the Hindu god Krishna, who is worshipped as Dwarkadish or “King of Dwaraka.” Dwarka is considered to be one of the most sacred pilgrim cities across India. Thousands of devotees gather at the temple to worship and pay homage to Lord Krishna, armed with garlands, flowers and offerings.

The five-storey high temple is built on 72 pillars and has a temple spire towering 78.3 metres into the sky. On top of the temple dome waves an 84-foot-long flag with symbols of the sun and the moon, which can be seen as far away as 10 km.

When visiting Dwarkadish temple, cars, buses and private vehicles have to be parked in assigned areas and visitors are not allowed to take their cameras, videos, leather handbags and belts. Everyone has to leave their equipment and bags at a special booths provided and tourists have to walk quite a distance barefoot before they enter the temple. Here, tourists are ushered from one room to



PHOTOS BY MANSOOR LADHA

A shop sells colourful beads and necklaces in the bazaar.

another while devotees continue chanting.

Approximately 410 km from Ahmedabad is located the Somnath Temple, an important pilgrimage and tourist destination. Hindus believe that Somnath is the place where Krishna ended his life on Earth and left for his heavenly abode.

At the end of my journey, we visited the Gir National Park, one of the oldest protected areas in India, which is the only place in the world outside of Africa where one can observe lions in their natural habitat. Our group, which headed in a special jeep into the park early in the morning, was fortunate to see a group of lions, including a lion family which appeared to be going on a Sunday walk in the woods. Other animals residing in Gir include leopards, deer, antelopes, peacocks and a variety of birds.

Photographers should be aware that cameras and video equipment are subject to a special fee when visiting Gir national park. For some unexplained reason, foreigners have to pay double the fee that Indians pay for the same privilege of taking pictures in the national park. The same rule also applies to entry fees in parks and monuments.

First-time visitors to Gujarat should note that Gujarat is a dry state which means that alcohol sale is prohibited except by special permits. This has been the case since 1949 when the Bombay Prohibition Act was introduced following the demise of Mahatma Gandhi. It came into force during the period of national sorrow, and is so intricately associated with the Mahatma that it has become a sensitive issue which local politicians are reluctant to overturn.

However, tourists are expected to get a letter from their hotels certifying their stay and go to a government permit office with their passports to obtain their quota of booze. Restaurants even in five-star hotels do not serve liquor with meals, forcing patrons to drink in their rooms. Gujarat is also the only Indian state with a death penalty for makers and sellers of home-made liquor where fatalities are caused, but prohibition has done nothing more than drive liquor



Temples are favourite place for beggars to line up outside every temple asking for alms.

underground. The legislation was prompted by numerous deaths resulting from the consumption of methyl alcohol. Liquor is widely available on the black market. Even our friendly tour bus driver offered to obtain liquor for a friend from one of his “contacts” but since we had the permit, we had to politely decline the offer.

Despite this, Gujarat is a great tourist destination offering varied cuisine, colourful costumes, folk dances, historical

sites, temples and vibrant culture. I agree with the prime minister of India, Narendra Modi, who has said, “Terrorism divides the world; tourism unites the world.”

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The birthplace of Mahatma Gandhi.