

MEMOIRS OF THE SAURASHTRA TOUR

Paresh (Parya) and I had been planning a tour of Gujarat ever since June '03, but something or the other used to happen which used to prevent us from going. If there was time, there would be my visits to Bombay or his to Valod. Kishor and I did manage to visit a few places in and around Ahmedabad like the Sun temple at Modhera. But Kishor used to get sick and tired of my habit of walking long distances....so much so that these visits also stopped. That's when Jinesh (Jimmy) and Parya came up with the idea of touring Saurashtra, mainly Gir forest, Girnar, and many other places in the district of Junagadh. The first week of June was just the right time to travel as Kishor had some time left before he could leave for the U.K. (via Hyderabad), Parya and Bhavesh (Bhavlo) both were in Ahmedabad. I too had just successfully completed my M.Tech entrance examination and was tension free. And of course, there was the meticulous planning done by Jimmy!

We left for Junagadh on Mahasagar travels - Volvo, on the 5th of June at 0000hrs. The movie shown on the bus was "Run" starring Abhishek Bachchan and Bhumika Chawla (Current in Parya's words!) The halt was at Limbdi at 0230hrs where we had superb tea and fafda. In spite of it being quite cold in the bus, the a/c was not switched off due to opposition from many other passengers. We reached Junagadh at 0530hrs and took a rickshaw to the Government circuit house. We rested for a while and refreshed ourselves.

We left for Gir along with Rajubhai who had come to pick us up. We had tea opposite the main traffic garden....the first of the many chaays served in the steel saucer. The steel saucer is in which entire Saurashtra has its tea. We reached Mendarda at about 0900hrs, where a sumptuous breakfast awaited us.....we gorged on the jalebi, fafda and dahi and immediately left for the Gir protected sanctuary. We boarded the mini buses provided by the protected park which took us through the park. We saw lots of deer, neelgai, peacocks and mainly 2 lionesses with their cubs.



We then went to the dam on the Madhuvani river to have our lunch. It was a earthen dam on which we took a lot of snaps. Kishor in his red shirt, capri's and goggles was the real highlight of the moments captured.



We then came to the maintenance and wireless room of the dam site where we had fantastic Kathiawadi lunch which included rotla, mirchi, gobi ki sabji, teekhi chutney, papad and of course Junagadh mangoes.....my mouth has started watering already....I can't type on now....need sometime to cool down...its like an orgasm you know....food is the ultimate stimulant.....what say guys? And that too Kathiawadi food.....it is the ultimate.....!

We rested for a while in the same electric house and started off for our journey of the jungle at about 1530hrs. The grasslands were of totally dried Savannah type vegetation, exactly like the African Savannahs.



We first went Northwards from the dam on a Trax station wagon towards the water dispensers where the thirsty lions are known to come to drink water during the evenings. Later a group of lion stalkers stopped us and led us on a different direction. We then got off our jeep and followed a jungle path. On our way we encountered a carcass of a neelgai which had been preyed upon not more than 15 minutes before by a lioness. We therefore followed the pugmarks of the lioness, but found that she had gone out our walking range. We therefore cut short the trek and again boarded our vehicle to explore the forest region near Babra. We arrived at Babra after about an hours drive at about 1730hrs. We joined a bigger group here which also included a Kathiawadi Masai family. We had some 'Kurkure' munchies near the water dispensers. The main stalker here was a middle-aged man along with a young, overenthusiastic man. We now divided ourselves amongst 2 groups – the first one was led by the middle-aged stalker and contained most of the people while the second group, led by the young guide had just the driver of the other vehicle and me. We followed a certain trail and as we went along it, our young, brash stalker was making all sorts of jungle signals to attract the wildlife. The driver with me was a real fattu, he started giving me all kinds of talks of going back to the starting point....but how could we? I didn't even remember the trail which ran through the grass. By God, meri gaand bhi tabhi toh fat gayee thi. But it was thrilling. Suddenly, the birds started making high pitched noises. We were now sure that a lion was close by. There was a ruffling sound of trees.....and suddenly a pack of about 10 wild boars (sooar) ran past us. It was a relief.....



As I reminisce, if a lion had come our way I'd probably have died off joy and a heart attack, both simultaneously! It was 1830hrs and light was already fading by now. Both groups then met at a point. The middle-aged leader was now sure that there was a big cat somewhere in the vicinity....he could almost smell it. The young stalker then went out alone towards the West. After a while we heard his signal and ran towards him. As we approached him we saw a glimpse of the lioness, darting away from us. The stalker then explained that the lioness had a few cubs along with her, due to which she was extremely aggressive. It would have been dangerous to stalk her further as the darkness was now on her side. He kept reiterating that just a week ago a farmer had been attacked and killed by a lion in this same Babra jungle.

We then started for Gadu which is 26km from Somnath which is on the coast of Junagadh. On our way, we met our sponsor, the contractor (Don't remember his name) at Khorasa. At Gadu, we stayed at the Government circuit house. We had 2 rooms with Parya, Jimmy in one and Bhavlo, Boddu and me in the other. I remember using Boddu's shampoo....it was in a very diluted state....so when I came out from the bath, I apologized to Boddu, "Sorry yaar, I think nahaate waqt shampoo bottle mein paani gayaa." And Boddu replies, "Yaar, usmein paani maaine hi daalaa thaa. Shampoo bohut concentrated thaa, aur mera baal jaa rahaa tha!" I'll never forget this.....After refreshing ourselves, we went to a restaurant to eat. It was actually a dhaba on the highway, "Nandanvan". As soon as we were seated, the waiter who had come to take the order

placed 3 bottles containing a white liquid on the table. I thought that it was beer.....but wondered whether liquor was available in Gujarat with a prohibition law enforced? The waiter enlightened us that it was “chhaas” and not beer! Had a sumptuous dinner with “ringan masala” and rotla at its best and of course bottles of chhaas to wash it down. Came to an end of an eventful day.....ZZZZZZ.....

On the morning of 6th June we started off for Somnath at 0930hrs. The temple which is one of the 12 jyotirlingas of Lord Shiva, was looted and destroyed 17 times by Mahmud of Ghazni. And also umpteen number of times by the Portuguese and the British. The main garbha griha of this temple has been installed 5 times earlier. The present one is the 6th installation done by Sardar in 1956. We took darshan at about 1100hrs and then headed for the beach which was inviting us with all its occupants (literally).



We frolicked on the beach till 1300hrs, Parya, Bhavlo and Kishor even cooled off their eyes....you ppl know what I mean.....We then came back to Gadu for lunch, again at Nandanvan. After a siesta, we started off for Chorvaad, the birthplace of Dhirubhai Ambani. The holiday home on the beach, which used to be inhabited by the Nawab of Junagadh, lay there, absolutely torn down and barren.





The sea here was really rough, in fact, its force almost pulled in a young girl standing hardly a few feet away from us. That's when we pulled out from the waters. The worst part was that I had not removed my mobile from my pocket.....and it was drenched by the time I removed it. It was vibrating as though it had a malarial fever....no jokes.....That was the end of my Nokia 3315. We returned to Junagadh directly from Chorvaad. On our way back there was a place where there were a lot of vintage cars.....I don't know the name of that place, but I'd love to visit it once. As soon as we reached Junagadh, we booked Kishor's return ticket....he had to immediately leave for Hyderabad and to UK subsequently. We had dinner at a small restaurant.....it was a Sunday and I think all of Junagadh was eating out.....we had to wait for almost an hour to get our seats. We had planned to go to Girnar the next day, Girnar is the tallest peak in Gujarat and also an important pilgrimage as it has many shrines.

We arose early on 7th June and started for Girnar at 0630hrs. We took a rickshaw from the main Sardar chowk to the base of the Girnar hill. Had tea and biscuits and started off on the climb. The Girnar being an important pilgrimage has comfortable stairs....I mean we being Civil Engineers were impressed by the average dimension of the risers, about 175mm and that too in stone...hence perfect.



Apna Parya was the first to bite the dust after around 400 steps.....he sits flatly on the stairs, removes his mobile and calls up his uncle (who was in the Institute of Agriculture, Junagadh).....and guess what, he arranges to see a few girls that afternoon! ☺ ☺ ☺ This was before his marriage and he was on a “ladki dek hing” spree!! Jimmy, Bhavlo and I continued upwards. Our first halt was at a small plateau on the side of the hill with clouds all around us and from where we could see almost the entire Junagadh city.



As we went further up there came the exquisite Jain derasar at about 1000hrs. Bhavlo was in his shorts and the watchman was unwilling to let him in, but finally he did agree to let him see the complex. It was one of the most beautifully planned complex of shrines I have been to. Jimmy explained each and every detail of the derasar....the white, spotless marble....to the carved doors and arches.....everything.



We moved further upwards and finally came to the first peak on which there is the Bhairav mandir. Just before the mandir arrives there is this beautiful arched bridge walkway.....its awesome.



The sadhu at the temple, after the pooja and aarti, applied a trishul tikka on the forehead and a saffron stamp on the shirt, really unique! I still have got that mark on my shirt. This is where Jimmy and Bhavlo stopped. I had bought a few mangoes on the way up....tried to refresh them with it...but they were fatigued and really tired. So I had to continue to the Dattatray mandir all alone. Luckily there was this group from Kolhapur, Maharashtra whom I joined. The distance left to be covered wasn't much now but I was already half dead.



The Bhairav mandir and the Dattatray mandir are on 2 peaks facing each other separated by a 400ft deep valley. So there was the descent and then the ascent. There was a nimbu pani stall on the way, which provided me with the energy to move ahead. Surprisingly the radio in the stall played FM channels beamed from Bombay i.e. not 98.3 MHz (beamed at Ahmedabad) but 91.9MHz Times FM! The Dattatray mandir on the peak was under construction and would have taken a few months to complete. It felt satisfying to reach the top, since I had not trekked ever since I'd moved to Ahmedabad.

After descending from Girnar at about 1330hrs, we had our lunch and directly went for our siesta at the circuit house. Parya wasn't there....we didn't want to disturb him when he was on his "wife finding" mission, so didn't even call him. But the limit was that our bus (again Mahasagar travels but not Volvo) was to leave at 1730hrs and Parya calls at 1600hrs and tells us that he'd meet us directly at the bus stop! Luckily he arrives just in time. The bus leaves for Ahmedabad at 1730hrs. Main Hoon Naa (Sushmita Sen, Amrita Rao...who the hell is bothered about the actors!) was shown this time....We finally reached Ahmedabad at 0000hrs on 8th June.

Truly, this was one of my most memorable trips!