

Tales of an Ancient Fort City

Home to a fourth-century fort, grand Indo-Islamic structures and elaborately carved mausoleums, Junagadh, in Gujarat's Saurashtra region, is a hidden gem waiting to be explored.

WORDS Edwina D'souza

02
20



1

India is a treasure trove of surprises with stories in every nook and corner. I discovered some of these when I took a detour to Junagadh on my way to the Gir National Park, which is home to the Asiatic lions and draws a large number of tourists to the Saurashtra belt.

An Eventful Past

Walking around Junagadh is a history lesson in disguise. The ancient fortified city was ruled by several dynasties including the Maurya, Greek, Gupta and Chudasama. In the latter half of the 16th century, Junagadh came under the Mughal rule, when Mohammad Sher Khan Babi, the founder of the Babi dynasty, took over the reins of the city. Thereon, Junagadh was ruled by the Nawabs of Babi till India's independence. Interestingly, when India was ready to gain freedom from the British, all the princely states were asked to combine and form a democratic India. The incumbent Nawab, Muhammad Mahabat Khan III, wanted to merge with Pakistan but the inhabitants opposed his decision. He abdicated the throne and left for Sindh (in Pakistan), and Junagadh joined independent India on November 9, 1947.

Regal Living

The 19th-century city palace near Diwan Chowk stands to tell the tale of the city and its crowned heads. In its Durbar Hall, which has been converted into a museum, on

display is a fine collection of arts and artefacts that belonged to the Nawabs of Junagadh. Amongst the arms, artillery, fabrics and furniture, is an outstanding wall painting of Muhammad Mahabat Khan III with his dogs wearing jewelled collars. The Nawab was famed for his extravagant lifestyle and enduring love for animals, especially dogs. It is said he crossed over to Pakistan with his dogs in tow!

Magnificent Mausoleums

I visit the Mahabat Maqbara next, which is the mausoleum of Nawab Mahabat Khan II and Junagadh's

Take a Detour

As a side trip, head to the Jambur village in the Talala taluka near Gir, on the outskirts of Junagadh. The village is home to the Siddi tribe who are of Bantu origin, believed to have originated from southeast Africa. It is theorised that the Nawab of Junagadh had brought the Siddis of Africa to Gujarat as labourers.



2



3

1. The Uparkot Fort boasts of pillars, an assembly hall, water cisterns, horseshoe-shaped windows amongst other architectural features. For detailed accounts of the fort's history and lore, sign up with a local tour guide.

Image Alamy **2.** The intricate detailing and silver *jaali* windows as visible on the Mahabat Makbara, with a clear distinction between the Indo-Islamic and Gothic styles used. **Image** Pradeep Chamaria

3. The Bahauddin ka Maqbara is instantly recognisable with its one-of-a-kind external staircases on the minarets.

Image Divyakshi Gupta

most famous landmark. Built in 1892, its architecture is a glorious blend of Indo-Islamic and Gothic styles evident from its onion-shaped domes, marble tracery work on the French windows, marble *jalis* and elaborate carvings. Sitting alongside is Bahauddin ka Maqbara, built for Wazir Bahaduddinbhai Hasinbhai, one of the chief nobles in the court of Nawab Mahabat Khan II. Its most striking feature is the helical staircase wrapped around each of the four minarets. The access to this ground is free, but the Mahabat Maqbara is explorable from the outside only. However, it is said that the keys can be requested from the adjoining Jami Masjid.

That afternoon, we happened to be the only visitors to these three impressive monuments standing on a busy street in the heart of the city.

An Ancient Bastion

Junagadh literally translates to 'Old fort' and Uparkot Fort is one of the oldest structures amongst the forts, monuments and architecture that dot the city. Believed to be built during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya, the Uparkot Fort sits on a plateau in the centre of the city. We drove through narrow winding lanes from the base of the fort towards the main entrance. The serpentine roads were a strategic feature to slow down the enemy's army, in case they invaded through the ramparts. The fort's inhabitants would thus get time to attack the enemy from above.

Overlooking the city are two huge cannons named Neelam and Manek. These were forged in Egypt and brought by the Ottomans, who were invited to aid in defending Diu from the Portuguese invasion.

Within the fort complex are a magnificent mosque, Buddhist



1. The city of Junagadh is a mélange of historic structures and bustling local life, lending it a quaint charm. **Image** Shutterstock 2. The man-made Buddhist caves within the Uparkot Fort are a part of the Junagadh Buddhist Cave Groups, which are three separate sites of rooms carved out of stone to be used as monks' quarters. **Image** Shutterstock

caves and two *baolis* (stepwells). I walk into the main hall of the fort to see about 140 pillars with weathered carvings and inscriptions. The two *baolis* have their own stories to tell. Legend has it that the *Adi-Kadi Vav*, that descends 100 feet into the ground, is named after two royal maids who used to draw water from this 15th-century well. Locals tie bangles and cloth to a nearby tree in memory of the two women. The *Navghan Kuwo* is 170-feet deep with rock-cut circular staircases leading to the underground water cistern.

A Spiritual Site

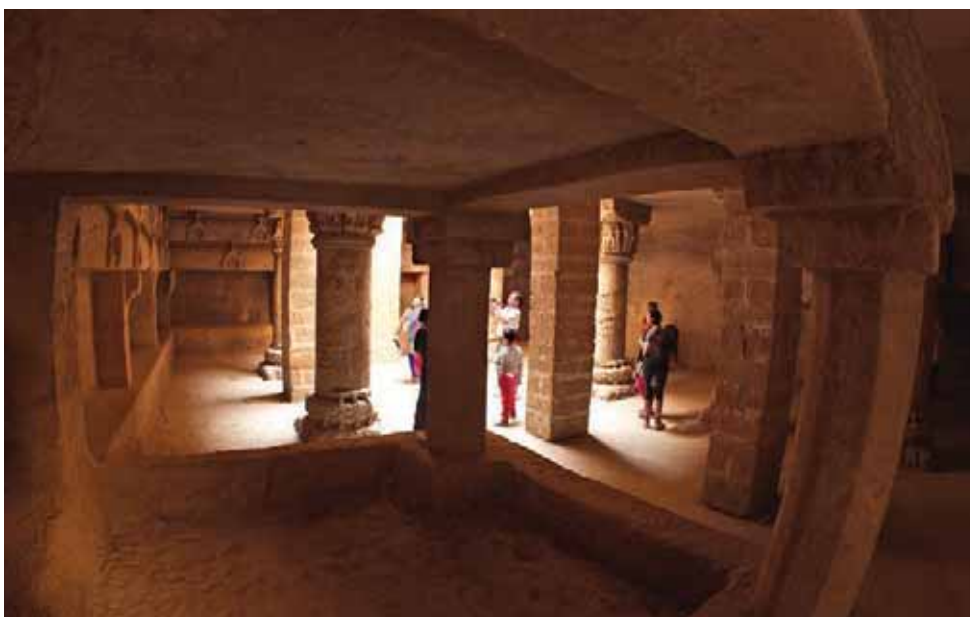
Junagadh is located at the foot of Mount Girnar (a group of mountains), an important site of

worship. Jain pilgrims consider it auspicious to climb the 10,000 steps to reach the 12th-century Neminath Temple. When Emperor Ashoka converted to Buddhism after the battle of Kalinga, he traversed the length and breadth of the nation to spread Buddha's word. Fourteen of his edicts that bear moral codes based on the teachings of the Buddha, are scattered across the Indian subcontinent. One of the edicts is on a granite rock enclosed in a manor at Mount Girnar.

Like me, if you want to pay obeisance to the mighty mountain and the temples that dot the range from up close but cannot muster the courage to climb 10,000 steps, avail the *darshan* (praying) service for a nominal fee at the Uparkot

Fort. Look through binoculars mounted on a tripod stand, adjust the dioptre and be ready for stunning views of the range and the temples.

From a distance, Mount Girnar is said to resemble the face of a sleeping human. As I looked through the binoculars, the gentleman who owned it provided a rushed commentary, "Can you see the mountaintop? Can you see the nose? His smiling face?" I exclaimed, "Yes, yes!" rather excitedly – satisfied with the view; and perhaps, Junagadh. The city had after all, caught me by surprise with its quiet charm. 📍



Into the Wild

Extensive game hunting during British India resulted in the Asiatic lion population almost reaching the brink of extinction. The Nawab of Junagadh is credited with pioneering conservation efforts to protect the last few Asiatic lions in his private hunting grounds, now the Gir National Park. Today, Gir is the only place in Asia where one can find the Asiatic lions in the wild.



GETTING THERE

Junagadh is easily connected via Ahmedabad. AirAsia India flies to Ahmedabad from Bengaluru and New Delhi. airasia.com