



Inside the potters' studio.

KITH AND KILN

An artistic retreat offers an up-close—and better yet, hands-on—welcome to a historical craft capital of India.

BY RACHEL MOSELY

Bhuj, a city on the western edge of India, is not particularly massive—at 27 square miles, it's roughly the size of Manhattan. But it's home to a mammoth legacy: a rich heritage of specialized craftsmanship stretching back at least 5,000 years to the ancient civilizations of the Indus Valley. Historically, various pockets of the region were known as the domains of particular handicrafts—woodcarving in one district, embroidery in another, ceramics the next village over—and today many of the same techniques endure, passed down across generations within local artisan families.

For Yesha Bavishi, this corridor of craftsmanship was also the setting for some of her first and most indelible memories. The user-experience designer, born and raised in the area, grew up admiring the handiwork of her friendly neighborhood virtuosos. "I liked working with my hands, so I felt connected to them," she says. After she moved to the Bay Area in 2010, her appreciation only deepened. "When I go to a farmers' market and see pottery here, it's given so much value because it's handmade," she explains. "Back home, people always did things with their hands—that was the norm. It wasn't valued in the same way. But after spending a good amount of time in the U.S., I realized how powerful the different craft forms in Bhuj are."

In 2018, Bavishi turned that realization into a career move. She launched a new company, and Crafted, which offers retreats focused on the artistic legacy of her home region. One of the excursions centers on terra-cotta pottery, and in fall 2019, Bavishi partnered with



From above: At the potter's wheel; outside the Bhuj House.



Airbnb to launch a three-day Adventure that allows guests to learn about the ceramicists' millennia-old techniques.

Guests meet artisans like Ramzubhai Kumbhar, who's known as "the master potter" in the community. "I once asked him how long he's been making these pieces," Bavishi recalls. "He said, 'Since I've known this world, I have been doing this.'" Visitors also learn from painters like Hoobai Kumbhar and Jenaben Kumbhar (in the local dialect, Kumbhar means "potter," and many of the artisans in the area share that last name, even if they aren't blood-related). They practice traditional hand-painting using bamboo brushes and local clay- and stone-derived paints, primarily in three colors: black, white, and red. As more modern—and often, more lucrative—career paths call, so looms a sense of urgency to preserve these age-old arts. "A lot of their kids are leaving their traditions and going to different trades," Bavishi says of the potter families. "These artisans have been keeping the craft alive."

That ethos of living history underscores the Adventure, right down to the accommodations. Guests stay in the 126-year-old Bhuj House, an airy four-bedroom property situated in a historically Parsi enclave. Airbnb Superhosts Jehan and Katie Bhujwala inherited the home (Jehan is a descendant of the original owner), renovated it, and opened it to guests in 2015. "We felt pretty confident that we would receive some guests, but we were overwhelmed to see how quickly the rooms filled," says Katie of the heritage homestay.

Immersion in the local legacy has proven to be a big draw for visitors, Bavishi agrees. Many describe the ancient pottery techniques as meditative. Teaching the craft to outsiders is a relatively new experience for the artisans, she adds, but one that they've quickly warmed to. "The potters start learning the craft from the moment they begin making sense of the world, whereas we learn it very intentionally," she says. "But they're very open. If someone comes to their studio and wants to learn, they're happy to explain. Passing it along to an outsider, it's almost like that person becomes a part of the family."

Location
Bhuj, Gujarat, India

Superhosts + Home
Jehan and Katie Bhujwala
abnb.co/bhujhouse



Clockwise, from above: A breezeway at the Bhuj House; painter Jenaben Kumbhar at work on terra-cotta bowls in the artisans' studio; master potter Ramzubhai Kumbhar shapes clay vessels.



"Meeting the artisans and learning their stories was mind-blowing. Most of them are very humble people. I see myself being a bridge between these local, traditional artists and the global world."

—Yesha Bavishi, Airbnb Adventure host
abnb.co/indusvalleypottery



MAKERINTEL In Bhuj, ceramicists employ a technique called *ghadai*, which involves repeatedly tapping the pottery to divide the weight of the clay evenly and make the piece porous. Once fired, the ceramics are used as water jugs, dishware, cooking utensils, and *diyas*—miniature lamps that are a hallmark of Diwali.