



Udvada Atash Behram

Udvada - Step into the Spiritual Heart of the Parsis

Welcome to Udvada, the sacred spiritual capital of the Zoroastrian faith in India. Nestled quietly along the coast of Gujarat, this historic village is the timeless guardian of the Iranshah Atash Behram—the oldest continuously burning, sacred fire of the Parsi Irani Zoroastrians in India. The sacred fire and the Atash Bahram is looked after by a group of nine priestly families who brought the fire to Udvada.

A quaint story tells of how the local raja on enquiring why a group of travellers were resting in the village, was told that they were Parsis from Navsari looking for a place where they could install the sacred fire. The King who was desperate for a son asked the Parsis to pray for him to beget a son. It is said that when the queen miraculously gave birth to a son, the king gave permission to the priests taking care of the fire to stay permanently in 'Unt-vada', a place where camels grazed. While the story may well be apocryphal but it has its own mystique when linked to the Prophet Zarathushtra –whose name means 'he of the golden camels', camels being a symbol of wealth in ancient pastoral cultures.

Over the centuries, Udvada has kept the flame of Parsi culture, tradition, and more important devotion alive. Whether you are a pilgrim come to worship the great fire or are in search of your roots, you can explore and savour the complex history, of the Parsis. There are quaint old streets, lined with homes with sloping roofs built in the vernacular style with signs everywhere of Parsi religious iconography signalling visibly that it is a Parsi home. You can enjoy the welcoming aroma of Parsi food infusing the air, the fragrance of tea made with peppermint leaves a Parsi speciality as you walk by their homes. And you can feel the pulsating heartbeat of a sacred fire that has stood the test of time.



*Iranshah Gate embellishments,
Udvada*

Historical Background

The quiet sea-side village of Udvada in the district of Valsad gained historical importance when the sacred fire of Sanjan was moved from Navsari, its home for over two hundred fifty years, to Udvada in 1742. The fire was first housed in the home of mobed Mehernosh Hormazd Bhatela, a priest who may have already been living in Udvada and could have well invited the Sanjan priests to bring the fire to Udvada. More than a hundred years later in 1894, Bai Motlibai Wadia from the famous shipbuilding family, commissioned a large fire temple premise to house the sacred fire which until then was in a small nondescript house. In recent times this building was extensively restored and refurbished. The meticulous conservation work was completed in 2021, through the generosity of the Shapoorji Pallonji family. For Parsis across the globe the Iranshah, as the Udvada fire is popularly called, is the most revered, oldest, continuously, burning fire in India and Udvada is its most important religious enclave.

Priestly life is the mainstay of religiosity in Udvada. The priests are tasked with keeping its ancient fire rituals alive. For generations, nine priestly families have served as guardians of the holy fire. These priests, known as mobeds, undergo strict purification rituals and dedicate their entire lives to serving the fire temple. They attend the fire during the five time-watches of the day, ensuring it is never extinguished. Through their piety, daily service and spiritual guidance, these priests have preserved the sacred religious heritage that began 3500 years ago. The sacred flame continues to guide and protect the Zoroastrian community worldwide.

Walking through Udvada

As you walk through its narrow, peaceful lanes it takes you back in time into the quiet indolence of a world forgotten. The lanes are lined with vintage Parsi homes fronted by otlas or porticos, with sloping tiled roofs, and intricate wooden carvings. For centuries, Udvada has preserved the unique culture, traditions, and legendary cuisine of the Parsi community. It draws Parsi Irani Zoroastrian pilgrims from all over the world who come here to worship the Iranshah fire. They spend time offering prayers and sweet-scented sandal wood to the holy fire. They light oil lamps to dedicate themselves to the faith and make donations to maintain the holy fire and the priests who look after the fire and ensure the survival of an ancient faith that sought refuge in India.

To preserve its ritual purity and a religious tradition that goes back a thousand years, in India, the Atash Bahram or fire temple building is strictly closed to non-Zoroastrians. Tourists can enjoy the heritage streets, beaches, the Udvada heritage museum and food stalls of the village and can pick up Parsi memorabilia, but only Parsis Irani Zoroastrians are allowed to enter and worship the sacred fire.