

“We are people of the Peninsula,” reflected the Maharani of Gondal as we sat drinking tea in her London flat and charting my upcoming journey through Gujarat, her home state. Between tales of selling kilim rugs on the Welsh Borders, hosting Mark Shand, and restoring tropical-baroque opera houses, her effervescent highness thrust me towards ever more remote-sounding desert palaces and artisan villages. She offered introductions to various cousins and childhood friends across her ‘tribal’ corner of western India. An irresistible start to any adventure.

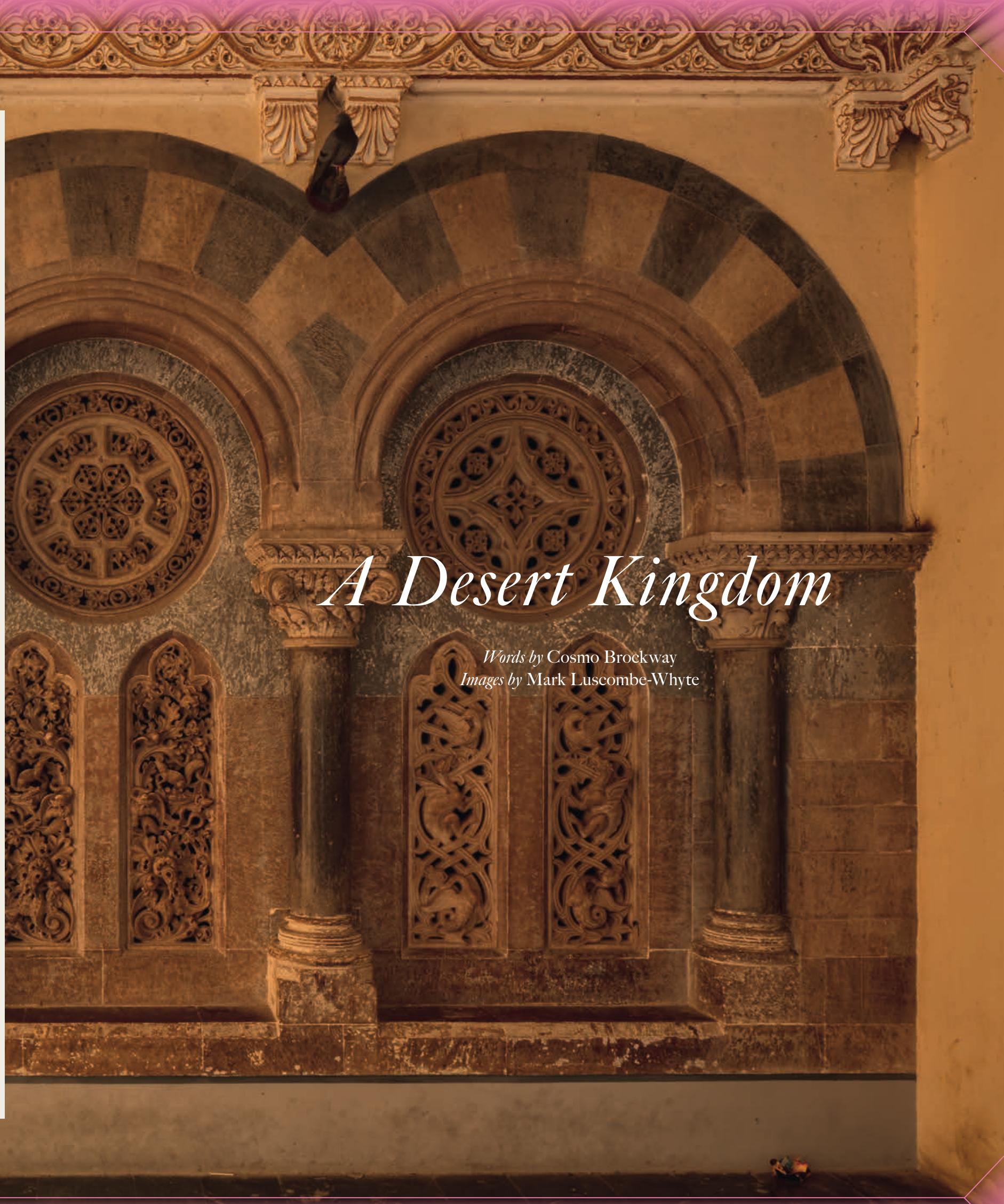
As we pored over a map, it was Gujarat’s peninsular regions of Kutch and Saurashtra that held a siren call. Lands of mud huts decorated with bidri (mirror) work and murals, Italianate durbar halls, one of the largest salt deserts in the world, aflame with flamingos in the monsoon, earthquake-scarred mosques and a mercantile culture swathed in hand-loomed cotton. Delving into the hustle of the capital city Ahmedabad, we gazed at the delicate minarets of Rani Sipri Mosque, built by the Hindu wife of a sultan, and ate thalis from brass platters under the moon at the House of MG. As we headed west towards the frontier country, the landscape mottled into a medieval tapestry stitched by the hand of a nomad, the neem trees turned into angular shapes, the sky grew brooding, and, here and there, palanquined camels would appear on the shimmering horizon, led by Muslim tribeswomen draped in black chadors and silver-belled anklets. Arriving into the ancient walled city of Bhuj was a tumult of sounds and scents after the serenity of the open road. Here, we sat in the frangipani-shaded courtyard of the Parsi-owned Bhuj House, its latticework verandah lined with sepia portraits of family members, their features bearing slivers of Persian Zoroastrian ancestry. Rising above the town is the Romanesque clocktower of Prag Mahal Palace, still bearing the cracks of the deadly tremors of 2001. Divided into two parts, the Victorian side is a confection of Italian marble and sandstone. Jubilantly restored after the disaster, it has lost much of the original faded patina, but slivers of magic remain undisturbed, the joy of opening a random door into a ghostly cloister fluttering with parakeets and an untouched chamber filled with discarded rocking horses from the royal nursery.

The jaali-screened 18th-century casket of curiosities, Aina Mahal, lies across the courtyard. It is a moment of rapture to walk through the pillared hall onto azure-blue tiled floors beneath walls lined with smokey gilded mirrors, glass paintings depicting 17th-century ladies of Queen Anne’s court, and Mughal poppy-strewn hangings, kept vibrant by the shifting shadows. A sort of Hindustani Versailles in the desert scrub—it is a miracle of survival, languidly decaying, but, as everything in India, in no rush.

Dust cloaked the following morning as we jeeped along a goat-littered track in search of an elusive village, or jheel, we had been told by the palace architect to visit for its tribal decorations. We were welcomed by a lithe young herder who invited us in as, fortunately, the womenfolk were out with the livestock. Originally from Sindh, across the border, this Islamic tribe is not open to outsiders, so these domestic glimpses were all the more intriguing. In the first, a solitary bed stands, its metalwork giddy with gaily-painted hearts and motifs, in contrast to their sober way of life, while other huts sport rainbow-colored string beds piled high with floral kanthas below clay shelves hung with beaded borders and holding artfully arranged steel and enamel utensils—the poignant ephemera of the settled nomad. The fantastical sight of the leviathan Ranjit Vilas Palace in Wankaner as we wound our way up a bouldered hill was the opening trumpet to the next act. Here, the erstwhile Maharana and Maharani, a charismatic young couple, have dedicated themselves to restoring their inheritance. The Minton-tiled portico leads into a startlingly complex staircase hall made from Tuscan marble in shades of ivory—the creation of the Edwardian Maharana Shri Sir Amarsinhji, who also collected the vast Venetian chandeliers swinging above the largest gathering of hunting trophies in India. Here the Art Déco bathrooms, a spartan symphony of line and form, steal the eye away, almost classical in their purity. Aside from an ambitious painting project led by the Maharani in the staterooms, Wedgewood blues, and Egyptian reds, nothing is touched; one locked door in the zenana opens into a mirrored room, the mercuried glass covering the floor, ceiling, and walls, mesmerizing in its pre-war glamour. Here, on this remote peninsula, the veil between past and present feels as thin as a fluttering sheet of gauze, and lives are led in the humming between the two.

A Desert Kingdom

Words by Cosmo Brockway
Images by Mark Luscombe-Whyte





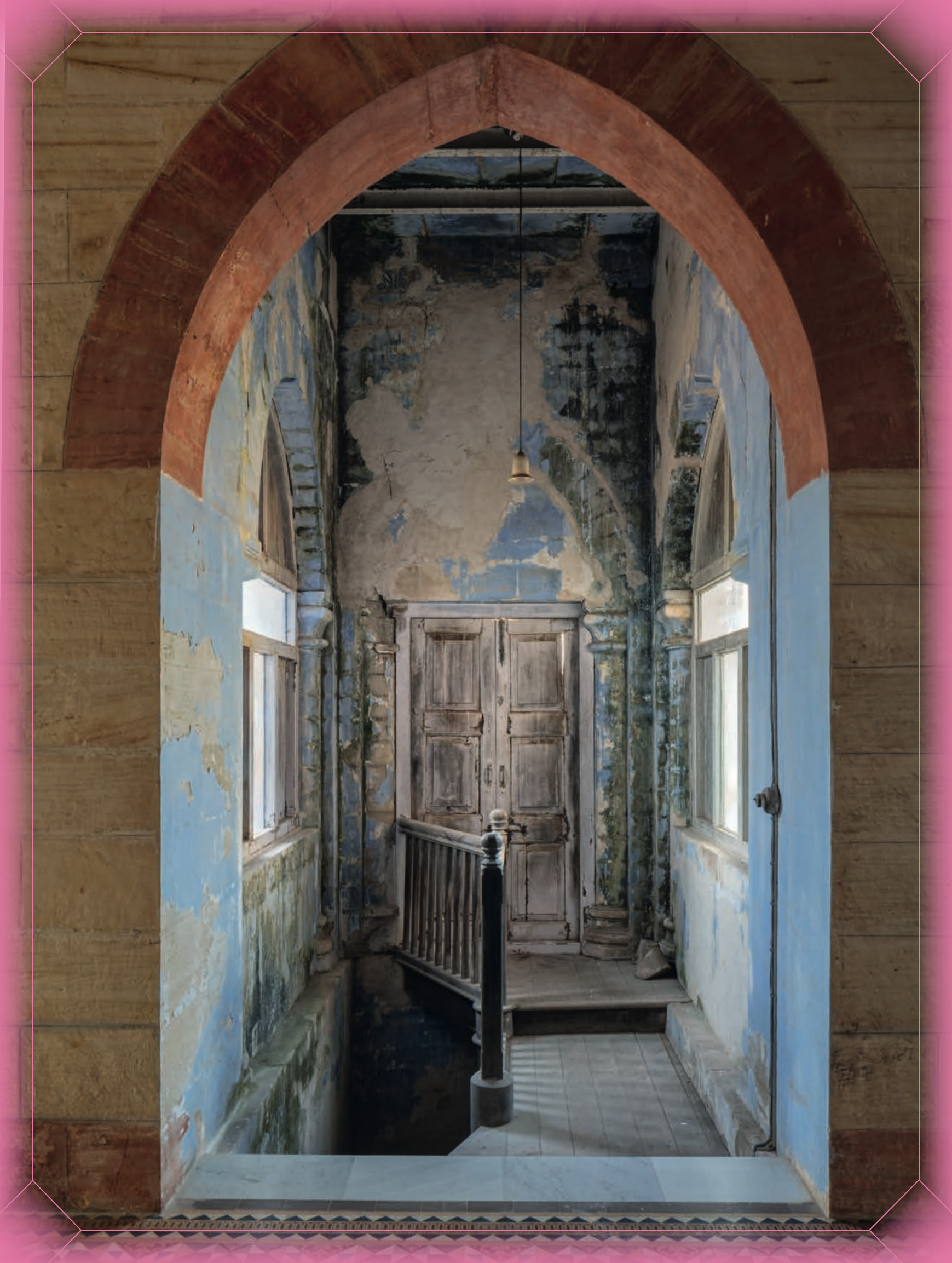
















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