

Along the Brahmaputra

THERE ARE NOT MANY PLACES IN THE WORLD WHERE TOURISTS ARE AN ODDITY AND HISTORIC RUINS AREN'T OVERRUN WITH CAMERA-TOTING HOARDS. BUT FAR-FLUNG ASSAM IN NORTHEAST INDIA, ABUTTING BHUTAN AND TIBET, IS SO FAR EAST OF CENTRAL INDIA, MANY FEEL IT SHOULD HAVE ITS OWN TIME ZONE.

WORDS TRICIA WELSH



Sunset on the Brahmaputra where we board the MV Mahabaaha at Nimati Ghat.



Villagers entertain us at traditional villages en route.

On a recent seven-night expedition cruise aboard the M/V *Mahabaaha* through the region, apart from our 31 fellow passengers, we see just two other European faces for the entire week.

Mostly Australians and British, we had flown from Kolkata to Jorhat, to board the 23-cabin ship at Nimati Ghat. Our cabins are most comfortable – some have balconies, and all have spacious en-suite bathrooms, mini bar, safe, TV and generous wardrobes. There is a swimming pool, spa with Jacuzzis and huge rooftop sundeck – popular any time of day.

Onboard is Sanjay Basu, managing director of Far Horizon Tours which operates the upmarket ship. He first rafted down the Brahmaputra River in 1984 with a group of friends. Today, he's doing it in style, having accepted the Assamese Government's offer to lead the project, even designing the ship himself and now opening up the region to adventure-seeking travellers.

According to Basu, at 2900km long, the Brahmaputra is the third largest river in the world, feeding nearly half of humanity

(India's 1.27 billion, plus China's 1.38 billion) as it winds its precipitous way from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal. "And it's the only river in the world prayed to by four different religions," he says. "Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Bonpos."

Also the world's siltiest river, it is so unpredictable – sandbanks and islands constantly appearing and disappearing – that we have our own pilot and dedicated dredge to ensure we don't go aground. With snowmelt from the Himalayas and monsoon rains, the river is navigable for only half of the year and can span up to 40km and rise up to 8.5 metres.

Fine and harmonious architecture

Our first excursion is to Sivasagar, the ancient city of the Ahom kings – a Thai-speaking people who came from Yunnan in China and settled in the area in the 13th century. They left a legacy of beautiful terracotta buildings of fine and harmonious architecture; we visit tranquil palace ruins, receive a blessing and pay homage to Shiva at Shivadol temple.

On Majuli Island, the second largest inhabited river island in the world, ►



A visit to Shivadol, the tallest temple to Shiva.



TRAVEL FACTS

Getting About

The M/V *Mahabaahu* cruises the Brahmaputra between November and April. Cruise Traveller has nine-night packages from \$4,779 per person twin-share, including two nights in Kolkata, internal flights and transfers and seven nights aboard M/V *Mahabaahu*. They also offer itineraries that combine the Brahmaputra cruise with pre- or post-tours to Bhutan or the cultural triangle of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur, phone 1800 507 777 or visit [\[@\] cruisetraveller.com.au](mailto:info@cruisetraveller.com.au)

Getting there

Singapore Airlines operates 123 flights per week from Australian capital cities to Singapore, with onward daily connection to Kolkata in conjunction with SilkAir. Visit [\[@\] www.singaporeair.com](http://www.singaporeair.com)

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students stage an outdoor dance and mime performance for us and later, at nearby Uttar Kamalabari Satra (monastery), half a dozen monks treat us to a tremendous drum and dance show while others, devotees of Vaishnavism, don exquisite make-up for a devotional performance to Lord Vishnu.

We call into primitive riverside Mishing villages, the main tribe along the Brahmaputra, who survive on fish, pork and rice in this area where massive floods and monsoons are a way of life. Floods in 2012 affected some 2.4 million villagers, sweeping many villages away but also dumping agriculturally rich alluvial soil into what are some of the richest grasslands and wetlands in the world.

An afternoon trip along the eastern edge of Kaziranga National Park on the

ship's two tenders results in an unexpected surprise – a rare and sudden sighting of a tiger. We are in awe at the fabulous mask-like face. As word goes out on the first tender, over-excited squeals of delight alert the feline who growls, gets up and walks off – leaving those in the second tender to wonder what all the fuss was about.

The full gamut of river life

Another highlight is a pre-dawn revisit to Kaziranga in a convoy of 4WDs for an elephant safari. We climb aboard the patient pachyderms and lumber across the savannah at daybreak. From our vantage posts above the elephant grass, we readily sidle up to some of the park's 2290 Great One-Horned Rhinoceros, the highest concentration of the endangered species



Curious folk from remote Mishing villages flock to get a closer look at us.

in the world. The park is also home to 1300 Asiatic elephants, water buffalo, hog deer, otters, primates and some 100 Royal Bengal Tigers.

We experience the full gamut of river life from manicured tea plantations, lunching colonial-style on delicious Assamese fare under shady trees while tea-pickers toil nearby and visiting Kamakhya temple in Guwahati, one of the most venerated Shakti shrines in India where animal sacrifices are still carried out.

Guests mingle in the Soma lounge for pre-dinner drinks and to play the local shuffleboard game carrom before dining buffet-style on excellent Indian and international dishes in the spacious Mungri Mungram restaurant.

Cruise director Neena Morada takes early morning yoga classes on the top deck, or on sandbanks where we moor. While we breathe and hold, stretch and rest, the crew plays pre-breakfast cricket. •

The writer was hosted by Cruise Traveller and Far Horizon Tours.

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