

Brahmaputra River Cruise Tips

By Maria Harding, Cruise Critic contributor



Although it's associated with India river cruises, the Brahmaputra River passes through several countries and has been given many names.

It is known as the Yarlung Tsangpo where it arises in Tibet's Angsi Glacier on the north side of the Himalayas; in the Arunachal Pradesh region of India it's called the Dihang and the inhabitants of Bangladesh know it as the Jamuna River.

It is only when it passes through the lush Assam valley in the northwest corner of India that it becomes the Brahmaputra, or 'Son of Brahma,' in tribute to one of the greatest Hindu deities.

Being named after a male god gives this rather special river a most particular distinction; it is the only 'male' river in India and a potent counterpart to the Great Mother Ganges, with which it conjoins toward the end of its 1,800-mile journey, just before both rivers spill out into the Bay of Bengal.

While not as famous as 'Mata Ganga,' the Brahmaputra River can also take cruise passengers to historic palaces, forts and temples, and offer them a fascinating glimpse into the daily lives of remote tribes whose customs have prevailed for centuries.

But on top of all that, its shimmering sandy banks offer peace, tranquillity and access not only to verdant tea plantations but also to one of the world's great wildernesses, Kaziranga National Park, where placid elephants carry travelers through shoulder-high grass to watch wild swamp and hog deer and white rhinos grazing with their young and, occasionally, to spot -- if their eyes are sharp and they're lucky -- a magnificent tiger or leopard hiding in the foliage.

The secret when sailing along the Brahmaputra is to look up as well as down, for the vivid colours of Assam's birds must be seen to be believed; they flit overhead like feathered jewels, in flashes of gold, ruby red or sapphire blue – and it's easy to see what inspires the local weavers to produce such colourful and brightly embroidered bolts of fine silk.



t Best Time for Brahmaputra River Cruises

The Brahmaputra River cruise season runs from November to April, when the monsoon rains are over and the floods (and humidity) have receded, leaving the landscape lush and the temperatures warm but bearable.



Brahmaputra River Cruise Lines

A handful of U.K. and U.S. tour operators offer Brahmaputra river cruise; it's not as popular or mainstream as the Ganges. No matter who you book with, including Saga Cruises, International Expeditions, Fred River Cruises and Pandaw, you'll likely use the Brahmaputra's largest vessel, [M.V. Mahabaahu](#). The 46-passenger, five-deck riverboat was introduced in 2012 and offers 10 balconied cabins as well as an open-air swimming pool and a Ayurvedic spa.

An older (1973-built) 24-passenger vessel, Charaidew, also operates along the river and a few operators -- including Audley Travel -- feature both.

Brahmaputra River Cruise Itineraries

Most popular options are seven-night Brahmaputra cruises, which are often combined with tours of India's 'Golden Triangle' cities -- Delhi, Agra and Jaipur -- or, for a more unusual option, with stays in neighboring Bhutan.

Pre- and post-cruise stays in Kolkata -- a fascinating city in its own right, and the international gateway to the Assam region -- can also be arranged; most itineraries include at least one overnight there. Almost all cruises include a night or two at a lodge in Kaziranga National Park.

The basic Brahmaputra seven-night itinerary takes you either downstream from Jorhat to Guwahati, or upstream the other way. Both are only a short flight away from Kolkata (local air services fly to Jorhat with a 'drop down' call at Guwahati). Both itineraries visit the same places, so there is not much to choose between them -- which one you get depends on the date of your trip.



Brahmaputra River Cruise Port Highlights

Kaziranga National Park safaris: For animal lovers, an elephant-back safari through this beautiful park (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) is the undisputed highlight of a Brahmaputra river cruise. It means an early start (and we MEAN early -- 3.45 a.m.) but it's well worth it to watch dawn break over the forest, and enjoy the sight of baby elephants and their mothers strolling casually through the long grass, tearing out swathes of it to gobble as they go, and passing within hailing distance of white rhino and herds of deer and bison.

After breakfast, the adventure continues with a jeep safari to spot birds -- like the green-billed malkoha, the blue-throated barbet and the red collared dove -- whose names reflect their colorful plumage.

You can also spot birdlife -- as well as water buffalo, roofed turtles and water lizards -- on a boat safari along the Dhansiri River, a tributary of the Brahmaputra, which runs past the edges of the park.

Sibsagar: This ancient city, whose name means 'Ocean of Lord Shiva,' is a former stronghold of the Ahom Kings, who came to Assam from Yunnan in China during the 13th century and ruled there for more than 500 years.

Dominated by an Ahom palace and a vast, 200-year-old water tank, Sibsaagar is also home to the 18th-century Shiva Dol, India's highest Hindu temple.

Majuli: Majuli is the world's largest river island (though it is now shrinking, thanks to the Brahmaputra's fast-flowing waters, which constantly move sand and silt about to re-shape the local landscape).

The island has been at the heart of Assamese culture since the 15th century, and is home to a number of beautiful, white-painted monasteries called Satras, where monks perform the Matia Khora -- a traditional dance with drums -- as part of their daily devotions.

Also worth seeing here is the Mukha Bhavana, an open-air enactment from the Indian epic Ramayana performed on the riverbank by actors wearing elaborate -- and locally made -- traditional masks

Silk villages and stilted houses: One joy of cruising the Brahmaputra is that you regularly head ashore to meet local tribespeople, many of whom live in Borneo-style stilted houses for protection against the floods which afflict their villages during the monsoon season (May to September).

Many support themselves by creating silk products, and they are happy to demonstrate how they weave the fine material on basic wooden looms. You can take home a substantial piece of beautifully embroidered silk for about 1,000 rupees (roughly U.K. £12 or U.S.\$14) -- or have it made into an outfit by a tailor who travels onboard the riverboat.

Silghat: This river stop is gateway to a vast and elegant plantation, where you can join the owner's family for lunch and a talk on the history and different varieties of Assam tea (including some helpful hints on how to make the perfect cuppa).

Brahmaputra River Cruising Tips

Pack plenty of sunscreen; mosquito spray (though they are rare in the winter months); a hat to defend against the heat of the midday sun; and some 'just in case' anti-diarrhea pills and rehydration sachets (though medicines should also be available on your riverboat).

Take sturdy, comfortable shoes for walking ashore, and a warm wrap for evenings and to counter the air conditioning onboard.

Wash your hands often, particularly during trips ashore. And drink only bottled water on which the seal is intact.

A collapsible walking stick to help you clamber up the sand dunes that line the riverbanks could come in handy.

Be prepared to go barefoot or in stockinged feet when visiting temples and mosques (though tour guides should carry slip-on plastic foot covers and wet wipes for cleaning your feet.)

Carry small-denomination rupee notes for (moderate) onboard tips, and to buy goodies like bolts of silk from villagers ashore

Be aware that riverboats do not operate at night, which is good for those who want uninterrupted sleep but can limit activities in the depths of winter, when sunset comes early.