

SECRETS FROM THE RIVER

The Ganges is revered in India as the mother of the nation, and it is believed that all rivers flow from her. Thus, travelling on the waterways offers a passage into the mythology, history and culture of this deeply spiritual and vastly layered country.

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**GRANDEUR
OF THE RAJ**

A view of the
Colonial-era
Victoria Memorial
Hall in Kolkata.



THE RIVER IS EVERYWHERE

Achingly beautiful and awe inspiring, India's sacred river is once again the venue for pleasure cruising.

The sun has just risen and I'm heading for a yoga class on the observation deck. Sprinkled among the exquisite furniture populating this open deck, yoga mats lie in wait, though many passengers are unwilling to peel themselves from their lavish suites.

The *Ganges Voyager* is already in motion. Energised and calmed by the gentle exercise, we make our way to breakfast, where the dining room staff tend to every wish and whim of the passengers. It is hot water and lemon for some, tea or espresso coffee for others and masala chai for the initiated. The food choices match any five-star hotel.

Pleasure cruising on the Ganges hasn't been done since the extraordinary river parties of the

19th century, when Calcutta was the Imperial capital of British India. They named this section of the Ganges the Hooghly because a Portuguese map showed a village by that name in this area and the name stuck. The governor-general's summer village in Barrackpore was the preferred point of embarkation for the British, while the French used Chandannagar, which we visit.

Today, Heritage River Journeys takes that tradition to a new level with an eight-day cruise aboard the purpose-built *Ganges Voyager I* and identical II, revisiting the era with opulent staterooms, suites and public areas worthy of a maharajah. From Kolkata to Murshidabad and back, this cruise is an exquisitely distilled experience.

Life on *Ganges Voyager* is contemplative for the passengers but intense for the crew. A qualified pilot is always on board to navigate the sandbanks that shift underneath the currents like clouds in the sky. Rudyard Kipling wrote about these elite men in *An Unqualified Pilot*: "Almost any pilot will tell you that his work is much more difficult than you imagine; but the Pilots of the Hugli know that they have 100 miles of the most dangerous river on earth running through their hands." Admittedly, the section of the Hooghly Kipling referred to lies between Kolkata and the Bay of Bengal, a little further downriver, but no precaution is spared here.

The Ganges is surprisingly quiet and devoid of traffic. No commercial vessels ply these waters, perhaps because of the navigational difficulties. Along the shores, European mansions stand crowned now by vegetation sprouting out of cracks, shutters creaking. The French, Portuguese, British and Dutch all came and went from here.

Bengalis have excelled in architecture for centuries and the itinerary singles out the best examples. At Kalna, the famous terracotta friezes depicting scenes from the Hindu cosmology are abundant. Testimony to ingenious architecture is the Krishna Chandra Mandir (1751) and the 108-Shiva Mandirs (1890). Highlights in Murshidabad, the capital of the former Nawabs of Bengal, include the Hazarduari Palace with its 1000 doors and the spectacular ruins of the Katra Mosque (1723), which we reach by local buggies.

Accompanied by highly qualified guides, we make landfall twice a day, returning for lunch on board while the ship advances to the next destination. Seen from the observation deck or your cabin, life's panorama unfolds along the shores in all its vibrancy, including the appearance of river dolphins popping up alongside.

Returning to your suite from excursions to refresh and revive becomes a daily ritual to look forward to, followed perhaps by a visit to the spa or an enlightening cultural talk. Dinners are a special affair with both European and Indian choices.

The cruise conveniently ends back in Kolkata, where guests can continue their adventure with post-cruise extensions to the holy city of Varanasi or head to the golden triangle of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur.

HIGH ALTITUDE CRUISING

Imagine river cruising with the phenomenal sight of the massive snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas as a backdrop.

The Brahmaputra River is remote, unspoiled and unpolluted. Sailing its serene waters, isolated from traffic and big metropolitan conurbations, is a unique experience even for seasoned India-hands. The river is named as the Son of the Creator of the Cosmos in Hindu mythology.

Despite having glanced at it in Tibet and knowing that this river has its source in the Himalayas, I was taken aback when, on a clear morning I was greeted by the sight of the impressive range. The snowmelt from it contributes to the volume of the river, sometimes causing great loss of crops, property and even lives.

From the yacht-like facilities of the *Mahabaahu*, exploration is easy with a convoy of 4WD vehicles meeting the ship periodically to take us to the top destinations that the north-eastern state of Assam has to offer.

Known widely for its tea, a visit to a plantation is a must and as we weave in and out of verdant rows of camellia bushes, the colourful flashes of sari-wearing pickers elicit a rapid clicking of cameras. The experience is topped



INDIAN EXPERIENCE

Passengers alight from the *Mahabaahu* for morning yoga on the shore of the Brahmaputra. Above: Peach trees blossom along the Brahmaputra. Top right: Fishing in Kochi. Opposite page: The *Ganges Voyager*.



by a tea-tasting session and lunch al fresco at the owner's property.

An entire day spent at the Kaziranga National Park, including an early morning elephant safari, is the highlight of the trip. The park has so many wild rhinos, it's easy to become blasé at sighting them. Birds, including hornbills, abound and wild elephant herds and tigers have been sighted from the ship.

Assam has an interesting history – the Kingdom of Ahom was founded in 1228 by peoples from Yunnan, China, who brought the technology of wet rice cultivation. For 800 years they resisted invasion attempts from both Mughal and Burmese troops, finally succumbing to the East India Company in the 19th century. The Ahom dynasty left magnificent palaces and amphitheatres through which we amble in wonder.

Intriguing and unique, this cruise includes little-known areas of India, including Kamakhya, a temple dedicated to lovemaking and fertility, and Majuli Island, the biggest river island in the world, where monks perform sacred dances. Here, locals treated us to a live performance of the Ramayana.

The 2011-built *Mahabaahu* is intimate (taking a maximum of 40 passengers) with an outdoor swimming pool, two indoor jacuzzis and deck with workout equipment, plus yoga sessions every morning on deserted sandbanks along the river.



KERALA STATE OF MIND

Fort Kochi smells ... yes, the most wonderfully head-spinning aromas suffuse the air. Ancient courtyards have ginger drying in the sun ready to be made into powder and exported to the world. Godowns (warehouses) full of pepper, cinnamon and cardamom line the streets backing into the harbour and waiting ships. On Sundays Frankincense clouds waft out of whitewashed churches to join the heady mix.

Fort Kochi is a masala of spices and of cultures – waves of Europeans, from 16th-century Portuguese explorers to the East India Company, have come and gone.

The point of embarkation for river cruises is a two-hour drive away, so it's worth allocating at least two days in old Kochi – look for accommodation in the locality of Mattancherry – to soak up the atmosphere. Dining here is a delight – Oceanos has outstanding Portuguese-influenced seafood. Lilly Street is famous for kathi rolls made with a flaky paratha wrapped around lots of spicy tandoori chicken breast. The lassis are to die for.

The nine-cabin *Vaikundam* courses alongside palm tree-fringed paddy fields where thousands of ducks – herded like sheep – cascade down the embankments and spotless tiny settlements dot the shores. The menu is based around the freshest local produce.

Accommodation is comfortable and air-conditioned and the staff friendly and attentive. The river teams with orioles, river terns, woodpeckers, bulbuls, kingfishers, bee-eaters, kites, cormorants and egrets, making the downtime an aesthetically appealing retreat.

After an uber-romantic sojourn or more privacy if you're travelling with friends? You can book the two-cabin *Sauver Nigam* all to yourselves. MF

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WHEN & WHERE

GANGES RIVER

Heritage River Journeys' seven-night Ganges Voyager Heritage Cruise (Kolkata to Kolkata) on the *Ganges Voyager* operates from September to March. Prices for the all-inclusive (except drinks and flights) cruise start from approximately \$4500 per person/twin share for a Signature Cabin. Book with your local travel agent or go to gangesvoyager.net.in.

BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER

Adventure Resorts & Cruises' seven-night Brahmaputra River Cruise on the *Mahabaahu* operates between October and April. Prices start from approximately \$3100 all-inclusive (except drinks and flights) per person/twin share. Book with your local travel agent or go to mahabaahucruiseindia.com.

KERALA

The Backwaters of Kerala three- to five-day cruise itineraries on the *Vaikundam* with Adventure Resorts & Cruises operate year-round from Totapally near Kochi. Prices start from approximately \$320 per night per cabin, all-inclusive (except drinks and airfares). Book with your local travel agent or go to keralarivercruises.com.