



Sunsets & Safaris

Regular *Expat Living* contributor and cruise specialist HEIDI SARNA spends a unique week on India's Brahmaputra River.

PHOTOGRAPHY FAR HORIZON TOURS (BELOW)
& NONI CHAWLA (FROM NEXT PAGE)





Our convoy of taxis stopped at the top of the muddy riverbank, a few steps from the creaking bamboo gangway that

connected us with our home for the week, the 46-passenger *Mahabaahu*. Not sleek like Europe's riverboats, this one was appealingly quirky with its stubby funnel and red cargo davits poking out from the stern, and a hull cluttered with a necklace of tires. I loved it already.

The 2011-built boat, owned and operated by India-based Adventure Resorts & Cruises, was moored below us along the Brahmaputra River, one of India's most important inland waterways. Named after the son of Lord Brahma, it's India's only "male" river, and the *Mahabaahu* is one of only a few tourist riverboats sailing on it.

Our upstream journey would begin in **Guwahati** and end 374 kilometres later in **Jorhat**, both in the state of **Assam**. Neither city is particularly attractive, but what's in between them is magical. From its glacial source in southwestern Tibet on the slopes of the Himalayas, where it's called the Tsangpo or "Purifier", the river surges east cutting through deep canyons and gorges before making a sharp U-turn and entering India and the Assam Valley en route to the confluence with the Ganges River before emptying into Bangladesh's flood-prone Bay of Bengal. In the state of Assam, the Brahmaputra widens greatly – some five miles at its broadest – and redistributes an enormous amount of sediment collected along the way, resulting in a river system braided with islands of sand.



Walking down the bamboo gangway on **Day 1** and into the *Mahabaahu*'s homey, wood-panelled reception area, we were greeted by our smiling cruise director Neena and a glass of refreshing juice. Our cruise had just 25 passengers (the average is about 30), a mix of mostly 60-plus adventurous folks from the UK, Australia, the US, Canada and India. We'd have the chance to meet some of them at lunch, where a delectable buffet of flavourful seafood and other curries and Indian-style eggplant, chickpeas, spinach and breads had us going back for seconds and thirds. Continental options were also offered.





Late afternoon, we were off on an exploration via the *Mahabaahu's* pair of comfortable open-air excursion boats. We headed to a nearby island for a look at a hilltop temple and the resident golden langur monkeys, a rare and endangered species, and we collectively oohed and aahed at the glowing orange sunset on display for the short ride back. (Almost every evening the sunsets were stunners.)

Dinner on the first night was convivial, with assigned seating to encourage mingling. It worked and we had a lovely time meeting new friends and drinking Indian-made Sula wine; not the best I've ever had, but good enough. Dinner was at 7pm and the menu always offered a Western choice along with a yummy Indian medley often served on a *thali*, a metal plate holding several small bowls – the original tasting menu. The rest of the week we were free to sit where we pleased.

Though the comfy Soma bar was an option for pre- and post-dinner drinks, we saved a visit for another evening. My travelling companion Sue and I were back in our cosy cabin by 9pm (as were most of the passengers), ready to sink into our comfortable twin beds after a long fulfilling day. Our Deck 2 cabin had large windows, while some have balconies, and all have mini fridges, TVs, and roomy bathrooms with showers.

Most of **Day 2** was spent lounging on the top deck, getting familiar with the river and watching local crews dredge and build basic bamboo fences in the river to help keep silt from getting into the navigable channels. After lunch, we went ashore to visit a tiny settlement of migrant families from Bangladesh tending fields of peanuts along the river. We scaled the dusty banks, grabbing onto bamboo poles that crewmembers held between them like a railing, greeted at the top by a few children and their mothers as fascinated with us as we were with them.

A drive to the Kaliabor Tea Estate on **Day 3** included a stop to examine the large bright green leaves of the Assamese tea plants (Chinese tea leaves are smaller), one of the world's principal varieties. Next





was a visit to a Victorian-era jute mill straight out of a Dickens novel. Jute fibre dust hung in the air as we walked through the aisles of the large dimly lit factory between rows of workers operating the ancient clanking machines that turned the fibres into coarse threads and then into ropes and grain sacks.

Day 4 was the week's highlight, an elephant safari in Kaziranga National Park, a UNESCO world heritage site and the world's largest habitat for endangered one-horned rhinos. Current numbers have the population at more than 2,000. Sue and I were sandwiched between a *mahout* and a park guard toting a shotgun, and following along behind us was our female's adorable baby (a sign, we were told, that these elephants were

well treated and not separated from their young). Within minutes of tramping through the tall grass in the early morning mist, we spotted wild water buffalos with their impressive arc of horns and, soon after, several large rhinos, swamp deer and wild boars. By the end of the one-hour safari, the sun had risen on a beautiful blue-sky day. After a breakfast of delicious *dosas* at a nearby hotel, we were back in the park for a two-hour jeep safari, seeing many more animals, including wild Asian elephants.

Excursions over **the rest of the week** entailed walks through villages with Venky, our guide and naturalist, peaking inside basic wooden houses on stilts and shopping for inexpensive hand-loomed saris and fabrics slung over fences and

washing lines for our visit. We also visited a monastery for a mesmerising performance of chanting and drumming by a group of young priests; and, in the ancient city of Sibsagar, we explored the 18th-century Shiva Dol temple and the Rang Ghar royal sports pavilion with their spare elegant Assamese lines. Folk dances, music performances, and a riverside play enacting scenes from the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, added more colour and culture to the ports.

Back on board, when we weren't soaking up the river views and looking for Gangetic dolphins – I saw several leaping out of the water! – some of us hit the mini spa for Ayurvedic massages. The classic Indian-style treatments incorporate generous amounts of herb-infused mustard oil and





firm kneading and were extremely relaxing and renewing, not to mention cheap compared to large cruise ships.

The *Mahabaahu* has one stationary bike for exercising and a small outdoor pool that didn't get much use, I suspect because of its location in the shadows of the ash-spewing funnel. A daily ritual for about a dozen of us was a relaxing morning yoga session led by Neena, typically on deck, and once on a sand bar next to the boat. Informative port talks from Venky were also a daily affair and so were pre-dinner "happy-hour" bonfires set up in the sand (the boat never sails at night) where passengers would chat and sometimes even sing. This was a cruise of simple but profound pleasures.

Know Before You Go

Fares:

Seven-night upstream or downstream cruises between Guwahati and Jorhat range from around \$3,300 to \$5,200 per person (double occupancy) and include meals, excursions and coffee and tea. Wine, beer, spirits, soda and tips are additional, as are popular land extensions to Bhutan, Calcutta or the Golden Triangle. Two fleet-mates, the two-cabin *Sauver Nigam* and nine-cabin *Vaikundam*, offer cruises in the backwaters of Kerala, on India's southwestern coast.

Weather:

Cruising season is October through April, with November to February the best time to cruise; daytime temps reach 27 degrees Celsius or so, and dip to 7 or 8 degrees overnight. (Heavy monsoon rains fall between June and early October.)

Info:

Visit adventureresortscruises.com; also, check out quirkycruise.com, Heidi's website covering small-ship cruises. *æ*