

# RIVER LIFE

A leisurely boat ride down a holy river in north-east India opens your eyes, and mind, to life-changing sights, writes Tricia Welsh.



Kaziranga National Park in Assam, India, supports the world's largest population of the greater one-horned rhinoceros.

"Tiger!" We are cruising along the eastern edge of Kaziranga National Park in north-eastern India when the alert goes out. Instantly, all eyes scan the tall elephant grass atop the sandy riverbank. And there it is, a feline face that resembles a fabulous mask.

"It's the flash of white eyebrows that gives him away," says Sanjay Basu. As managing director of Far Horizon Tours, he operates the upmarket MV *Mahabaahu* expedition ship that cruises the 2900km-long Brahmaputra river through Assam, a region better known for its strong black tea than its tigers.

I have joined 31 other adventure-lovers on this week-long boat ride between Jorhat and Guwahati, and the anticipated wildlife viewing in this UNESCO World Heritage-listed park is a natural highlight.

Our unexpected tiger sighting is just one of many surprises as we explore this remote corner of India that is so far east (abutting Bhutan and Tibet), many think it should have its own time zone. So few westerners come here that villagers are delighted to photograph or be photographed with us. We visit tea plantations, hear stories about the local Ahom people, whose ancestors came from Yunnan in China and settled in this area in the 13th century, and learn from Sanjay that the mighty Brahmaputra is an essential source of fresh water, power and irrigation for more than a billion people across India and China.

"And it's the only river in the world prayed to by people of four different religions," he says. "Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Bonpos."

It felt like we left the modern world behind when we flew from Kolkata and boarded our 23-cabin floating home at Nimati Ghat. Our first excursion is to Sivasagar, the ancient city of the Ahom dynasty. They left behind beautiful ruins, including what is believed to be the tallest temple to Shiva in India. On the river island of Majuli, local students stage an outdoor performance for us. Nearby, at Uttar Kamalabari Satra, we watch monks of the neo-Vaishnavite Hindu denomination apply make-up in preparation for *gayan bayan*, a traditional devotional performance in which they offer homage to Lord Vishnu in music and dance.

Next, we go to visit simple riverside villages inhabited by the little-known Mishing tribe, subsistence farmers who thrive on a diet of fish, rice and pork in this region of massive floods and monsoons. (With snowmelt from the Himalayas and monsoonal rainstorms, the river can span up to 40km across and rise up to a height of 8.5m.) The villagers put on a warm welcome and schoolchildren proudly count to 10 in English for us. >



◀ Nobody minds a pre-dawn start when we revisit Kaziranga for another safari adventure, this time on elephants. This park is home to more than 2200 one-horned rhinoceros (the greatest concentration of this species in the world) as well as 1300 Asian elephants, plus wild buffalos, deer, otters, various primates and some 100 Bengal tigers.

Later, on a jeep safari through the park, we see seven rhinos in a few minutes. “The beauty of the Indian rhino is its armour,” Sanjay tells us. “It is bullet- and sword-proof. Ancient armies used it for shields.”

Sanjay is passionate about the diverse wildlife and enthusiastic about each sighting. These include a Himalayan squirrel (“Very rare. I’ve never seen one,” he says) and a black-necked stork. (“A carnivore. He uses his beak to spear other birds and eat them.”) Although we don’t spot a tiger this time, Sanjay waxes lyrical about their “sheer hypnotism, power and grace”.

Back on board, we look out for Gangetic freshwater dolphins and glimpses of the Himalaya mountain

range in the distance, while destination manager Shagzil Khan and naturalist Payal Mehta share their encyclopaedic knowledge of Indian culture, religion, lifestyles and festivals.

Our onboard accommodation is laudably comfy. Some cabins have balconies, and all have an ensuite, a mini bar, safe, television and generous wardrobe space. Guests often choose to mingle in the Soma lounge, where they enjoy pre-dinner drinks and play a local board 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 when the vessel is moored. As we breathe and hold, stretch and rest, crew members play pre-breakfast cricket and throw frisbees. It’s a dreamy picture of serenity beside the mighty, fast-flowing river. And that’s the essence of this cruise: it’s an experience that delivers tranquillity and adrenaline in equal measures.



A leisurely elephant safari through Kaziranga.

**OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE**

**FROM TOP LEFT** This 33m-high *dol* (temple) to Shiva draws crowds of pilgrims to Sivasagar. Bengal tigers roam Kaziranga National Park. Sunset over the Brahmaputra. On the island of Majuli, students perform a traditional dance. Water buffalo graze as the morning mist lifts off the Brahmaputra river.

**TRAVEL FILE**

❖ The MV *Mahabaahu* cruises the Brahmaputra from October to March. 10-day packages from \$3750 per person, twin share; 1800 507 777 or [www.cruise-traveller.com.au](http://www.cruise-traveller.com.au).

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- ❖ The Three Big Cats of India tour offers a chance to spot leopards in Bera, tigers in Ranthambore, and rare Asiatic lions in Gujarat; [www.holidaysinindia.net](http://www.holidaysinindia.net).
- ❖ In Madhya Pradesh Bandhavgarh National Park is home to tigers, leopards, Bengal foxes and sloth bears; Kanha National Park, a tiger reserve, inspired Kipling's *The Jungle Book*.
- ❖ Indiatourism offers a free brochure listing the best times to see wildlife. For a copy, email [info@indiatourism.com.au](mailto:info@indiatourism.com.au).

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