

New coach adds to Murray magic

SPIRIT Australia Cruises, operators of the Murray River Run and Gippsland Lakes cruise programs, have bought an all-terrain 27-seater Mercedes coach to offer a new range of tour and cruise packages.

Captain Jock Veenstra described the new packages as "ideally suited to our small group personalised travel philosophy".

"We have a reputation for operating Murray River and Gippsland Lakes cruise programs that are different to traditional cruises," he said.

"The touring coach will allow us to further develop the unusual aspects of our cruises."

The first offering is the six-day Five Rivers Outback Safari in October, which includes sections of the Murray and Darling Rivers as well as the Murrumbidgee, Wakool and Edward Rivers. Travel from Adelaide is by coach with a day exploring Mungo National Park, three days of river cruising, accommodation, meals and entries.

Planning is under way for an Adelaide to Alice Springs coach tour via the Oodnadatta Track with options to extend in Alice Springs or return by The Ghan or by air.

Another tour to the recently-opened Maralinga nuclear test site, returning via the rocket range township of Woomera, is under consideration.

■ 1800-442-203,
www.murrayriverrun.com.au

Tiger, tiger... and many more surprises as we float along

by TRICIA WELSH

CRUISING quietly on the Brahmaputra River in India is not where you might expect to sight your first tiger.

I'd been to tiger camps before but sadly all I ever saw was evidence of where they'd been: claw scratch marks on trees, scats and even paw prints on dusty roads.

But while cruising the eastern edge of Kaziranga National Park in north-east India, the alert goes out: "Tiger!"

All eyes onboard scan the tall elephant grass atop the sandy riverbank. The fabulous feline face resembles a mask like Tony the Tiger of cereal-pack fame.

"It's the flash of white eyebrows that gives him away," says Sanjay Basu who, as managing director of Far Horizon Tours, operates the upmarket *M/V Mahabaahu* expedition cruise ship which cruises the 2900km-long Brahmaputra through Assam – a region known more for its strong black tea than its tigers.

I have joined 31 other



adventure-lovers on this week-long cruise between Jorhat and Guwahati, and the anticipated wildlife viewing in this UNESCO World Heritage-listed park is a natural highlight.

This unexpected sighting is just one of many surprises as

we explore this remote and untouched corner of India that is so far east (abutting Bhutan and Tibet), many feel it should have its own time zone.

So few westerners come here, that villagers want to photograph or be photographed with us; we learn about the Thai-speaking Ahom people who came from Yunnan in China and settled in the area in the 13th century; visit tea plantations; and discover that the Brahmaputra is not only the world's third largest river but, according to Basu, feeds nearly half of humanity (India's 1.27 billion plus China's 1.38 billion).

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

We had earlier flown from Kolkata and boarded our 23-cabin floating home at Nimati Ghat where our first excursion was to Sivasagar, the ancient city of the Ahom dynasty who left behind beautiful ruins including Shivalol, believed to be the tallest temple to Shiva in India.

On Majuli Island, the second largest inhabited river island in

the world, students stage an outdoor performance for us, while at nearby Uttar Kamalabari Satra, we watch monks apply make-up for devotional performances of Gayan Bayan. These devotees of Vaihnnavism believe in only one god, Lord Vishnu, and take on the attributes of females when offering homage to him in dance.

We visit primitive riverside villages of the little-known subsistence-farming Mishing tribe who thrive on fish, rice and pork in this region of massive floods and monsoons.

Their houses are built of bamboo and are on stilts because of the annual flooding.

With snowmelt from the Himalayas and monsoon rains, the river can span up to 40km and rise up to 8.5 metres.

The villagers are delightful and welcoming; school children in neat uniforms proudly count to 10 in English for us.

Whenever the boat moors, whole villages come to watch. Schoolchildren come running across the fields; other people ride their bicycles full-tilt just to stand and watch. We are clearly quite a curiosity and

More of the World for Less

GATE 1
TRAVEL™

1300 653 618

www.gate1travel.com.au

34 YEARS IN BUSINESS

FREE Upgrade on Danube River Cruises

Enjoy a deluxe river cruise in a top cabin with your own French balcony, at no extra cost! Book in March and quote promo code **ASMDR620A** to receive your free upgrade*

Choose from affordable First Class tours:

- 12 day Danube River Cruise with Prague from \$3975 pp
- 14 day Danube River Cruise with Warsaw, Krakow & Budapest from \$4449 pp
- 15 day Danube River Cruise with Berlin, Dresden & Prague from \$4999 pp

Include sightseeing, all meals while cruising, unlimited wine or beer with dinner, plus 4 & 5 star hotels.

See www.gate1travel.com.au for more cruising options

Subscribe to WIN

Sign up for our free weekly email to receive exclusive travel deals & you could WIN a Danube River Cruise for two!

Enter today at www.gate1travel.com.au

*Offer is valid until 31 March, 2015, subject to availability & applies to Danube River Cruise packages of 12 days or longer. Quote promotion code **ASMDR620A** at time of booking. Not valid on existing bookings & cannot be combined with other offers. Prices based on twin occupancy. Single prices available. Prices subject to change without notice & exclude international airfares. Booking conditions at www.gate1travel.com.au or call 1300 653 618. ABN 74 169 034 575 ATAS A11423

MURRAY RIVER & GIPPSLAND LAKES Available Cruises



All cruises are personalised small groups & include one way cruise to maximise scenic experience, most with coach return to boarding port, all meals, river-side town hotel/motel accommodation, expert captain's commentary, and specified on-shore excursions

MURRAY RIVER RUN

Wellington to Border Cliffs

5 days & 4 nights, 558 kms

Departures

2015:

Apr 09, May 01, 25, 29, Sept 13, Oct 12, 16

Goolwa to Mildura

8 days & 7 nights, 876 kms

Departure

2015:

Sep 01

Echuca to Tooleybuc

5 days & 4 nights, 395 kms

Departure

2015:

Oct 20

Albury to Echuca

6 days & 5 nights, 486 kms

Departures

2015:

Nov 02, 23

Echuca to Mildura

8 days & 7 nights, 826 kms

Departure **2015**

Nov 29

GIPPSLAND LAKES

Sale to Lakes Entrance

6 days & 5 nights, 240 kms

Departures

2016:

Feb 04, 14, 24



SPIRIT Australia
CRUISES

TOLL FREE: 1800 442 203

www.murrayriverrun.com.au

www.gippslandlakescruise.com.au



IF YOU GO...

SINGAPORE Airlines operates 122 flights per week from Australian capital cities to Singapore, with onward daily connection to Kolkata in conjunction with SilkAir – 131-011, www.singaporeair.com

The *M/V Mahabaahu* cruises the Brahmaputra between October and April. Cruise Traveller has nine-night packages from \$4125 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. 1800-507-777, www.cruisetraveller.com.au

MORE: www.incredibleindia.org

LEFT – An elephant safari with babies in tow in the Kaziranga National Park.

OPPOSITE PAGE – A beautiful dancer from Bishwanath Ghat.

suspect we might well be the first white people they've ever seen.

Reputedly the most silted river in the world, the fast-flowing Brahmaputra constantly changes course; hence we have our own pilot and dedicated dredge to ensure we don't go aground. An island that existed last time might have disappeared when the cruise comes through again. Likewise the riverbank may have changed so much that the bank is too high for us to access it.

Nobody minds a pre-dawn start when we revisit Kaziranga National Park for an elephant safari. The park is home to some 2290 great one-horned rhinoceros – the greatest concentration in the world – as well as 1300 Asiatic elephants, water buffalo, hog deer, otters, primates and some

100 royal Bengal tigers.

Kaziranga is one of the largest tracts of protected land in the sub-Himalayan belt and is classified as a biodiversity hot spot because of the abundance and variety of species.

It's also one of the country's biggest wildlife conservation success stories. When it became a park in 1905 and was closed to hunting, rhinos were almost extinct with only about 12 left. Even in 1975 there were only 600.

Later, on a jeep safari through the park, we sight seven rhinos in just minutes.

"The beauty of the Indian rhino is its armour," Sanjay suggests. "It is bullet and sword-proof. The army used to use it for shields in ancient battles." Sanjay is passionate about the

bountiful and diverse wildlife and is enthusiastic about each sighting: Himalayan squirrel "very rare – I've never seen one before"; the black-necked stork – "He's a carnivore. He uses his beak to spear other birds and then eats them"; and although we don't spot a tiger today, Sanjay waxes lyrical about their "sheer hypnotism, power and grace".

Back on board, we look for Gangetic dolphins and glimpses of the 6500-metre high Eastern Himalayas while destination manager Shagzil Khan and naturalist Payal Mehta impart their encyclopaedic knowledge on a wide range of things Indian – culture, religion, lifestyles and festivals.

Our cabin accommodation is comfortable: some have balconies, and all have ensuite bath-

rooms, mini-bar, safe, TV and generous wardrobe space. 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 and catch frisbees.

CNN has rated cruising on the Brahmaputra one of the top 10 natural history cruises of the world.

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

Upgrade music to your ears

DISCOVER the magic of Europe by land and by water and enjoy a free cabin upgrade when you book a 12-day or more Danube River cruise in March.

Gate 1 Travel is offering an exclusive charter of the intimate *MS Sound of Music* for a first-class cruising experience that includes sightseeing, most meals, unlimited wine and beer with dinners, daily entertainment and some of the best tour guides in Europe.

You'll have an outside cabin with panoramic windows and private bathroom. However, if you book a package of 12 days or longer you will receive a free upgrade to the top Cabin A with a French balcony.

Tours are available from \$3339 per person for a 14-day Danube River Cruise, which includes Budapest and Prague. This does not include airfares but discounted fares can be arranged through Gate 1 Travel.

Bookings for this special offer must be made by March 31. Quote promotion code STDRC620A to ensure your cabin upgrade.

■ 1300-653-618, www.gate1travel.com.au

Captain Cook
Cruises™

Discover Murray River

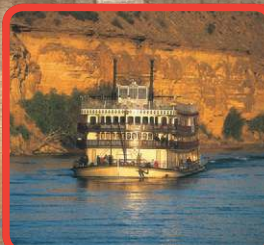
Cruise Includes • All meals – buffet & a la carte • Exciting range of shore-side tours • Guided nature walks & eco-excursions • Use of spa, sauna & gym • Captain's Dinner & Cocktail Party • Live entertainment • Transfers from Adelaide or car parking in Mannum

SAVE UP TO 25%
JAN-FEB, JUN-AUG SAVE UP TO 25%. YEAR ROUND SAVE UP TO 10%



South Australia

- 3 nights from \$695*1pp
- 4 nights from \$950*1pp
- 7 nights from \$1416*1pp



Three Locks Loxton Cruise

- 339km Mannum-Loxton
- Unique journey across SA
- 27 NOV & 4 DEC 2015
- 7 nights from \$1888*pp



Cruise & Kangaroo Island

- 5 to 9 night packages from \$1660*1pp
- Including Cruise, Kangaroo Island & Adelaide

See your travel agent or call **1300 729 938**

murrayprincess.com.au

Captain Cook
Cruises™

*All prices are AUD twin share & incl GST (as at Jan15) and may be subject to change. Limited Availability – once sold, prices revert to full fare. Valid on new bookings only. Excludes special events. Conditions apply. *Cruise-only prices & KI package prices valid for travel Jun-Aug15 & Jan-Feb16 CCC1121