



Just my cup of tea

Jeannine Williamson enjoys a taste of Assam on an unforgettable journey along the Brahmaputra

An early morning mist shrouds the distant Himalayas as I step out on deck. It is already warm and villagers are up and about tending to cattle tethered beneath shady trees and washing clothes in the water beside the river bank.

Children wave excitedly when I appear and their parents glance up and smile before carrying on with their chores.

On the water a vast raft made of lashed together bamboo poles drifts slowly past in what is a model of sustainability. The woody stems multi-task as both the mode of transport, goods being carried and method of steering as two men on each side use long poles to propel it along. On top is a makeshift shelter for their wives and children and our guide, who comes out on deck to take a look, tells me it will take them days to reach their destination.

Later I realise the scene is one of many that encapsulates what to expect on a voyage along India's Brahmaputra - which is to expect the unexpected. There is, of course, an itinerary but no visit here can be entirely scripted and that is what makes it so enthralling. Rising on the Tibetan plateau and coursing 2,391 miles through China, India and Bangladesh it is the wildest river in the Asian sub-continent and the world's fastest river by volume shaping both the landscape and the lives of the people who live alongside it. Rather fittingly, given its might, it is also the only Indian river with a masculine name (Brahmaputra meaning the son of Brahma, the revered Hindu god).

Collecting nearly half of the annual Himalayan meltwater, it floods villages each spring but resigned locals know they will return to find rich alluvial soil on which to grow their crops.

The river is also swollen by the summer monsoon and on our downstream voyage we enjoyed early morning yoga sessions and magical lantern-lit sundowner parties on sandbanks that were submerged a few weeks before. Indeed, so changeable are the channels in the river that our ship, the 46-passenger Mahabaahu, only sails during the day and is accompanied by a pilot boat which goes out to test the water, quite literally, every time we set sail.

Due to its unpredictable nature, few cruise lines have ventured onto the Brahmaputra, but nobody knows its vagaries better than Far Horizon Tours. Since 1992, the independent Indian-based holiday specialist has been providing authentic land and water-based tours that have earned the company a national tourism award from the Indian government.

The Mahabaahu provides a comfortable way to explore the northeastern state of Assam, where the Brahmaputra is a liquid backbone running the entire length of the region. A world away from the crowded tourist magnet of the Golden Triangle, Assam still captures the very essence of India with temples filled with the heady scent of marigolds and incense, grand palaces, wandering sacred cows and teeming main streets filled with stalls selling all manner of goods from fruit to petrol syphoned into old plastic bottles. Outside big cities we saw no other western visitors during our stay.

Elsewhere there are tranquil areas, most notably the lush estates or tea gardens that are a trademark of the world's largest tea-growing region. Wild tea plants were first discovered in Assam in 1834 by Robert Bruce of the East India Company, which led to tea cultivation.

During the week we visited two plantations, learning about the history and production of tea, including the prized "second flush" harvest that

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produces a more full-bodied brew. Afterwards we walked among the plants, stopping to talk to pickers who were deftly plucking tips and carrying them in baskets on their heads. Another day we visited a tea factory, which was equally fascinating, along with a thundering jute mill.

These close-up and personal tours, far removed from mass tourism, provided a really genuine insight into Assamese life. Nowhere was off limits if we wanted to chat to locals and our knowledgeable guides acted as interpreters. The interaction worked both ways and at some mooring spots crowds of villagers would come down to greet us and shy, giggling youngsters followed in our wake, while braver teenagers armed with phones asked for "selfies".

Our voyage from Jorhat to Guwahati brought new experiences each day. Sometimes we would stroll ashore for a guided walk, other times get into cars - just three passengers in each with a guide - to visit historical sights. There were opportunities to buy swathes of silk in weaving villages, and within a day

they were transformed into tops, dresses and other items by Mahabaahu's very own on board tailor.

We went on bird and wildlife safaris, on foot or on the ship's skiff, with our eagle-eyed naturalist invariably spotting creatures well before we did. The natural highlight of the week was Kaziranga National Park, where we saw wild water buffalo, Asian elephants and members of India's largest population of greater one-horned rhinos. This is also the domain of the Royal Bengal Tiger and although the closest we got to seeing one was a fresh paw print it was still thrilling to know we were in such close proximity to these magnificent creatures.

The Brahmaputra is also famous for its river islands, in particular Majuli and Umananda, respectively the largest in the world and smallest inhabited isle. On Majuli, the centre of Assamese Krishna worship, we watched joyful monks take part in a religious song and dance, and afterwards we were invited to come forward to be blessed. It was another very special moment.

Factfile

Fred River Cruises offers the nine-night fully escorted Kolkata & the Mighty Brahmaputra River itinerary from £2,799. The fare includes a two-night pre-cruise B&B stay in Kolkata, all meals on the ship, the services of an on board guide and naturalist and transfers. For further details and departure dates call 0800 021 3189 or visit www.fredrivercruises.co.uk/far-horizons.

