

Five years ago, a Bollywood movie about a romance in the Mediterranean turned Indians into cruise fans.

Up until now, they have mostly done fly-cruises around Singapore and Europe, but India is now developing its very own cruise industry.

The world's second-most populous nation has enormous potential for both river and ocean journeys, and its reputation as an exotic, historic and spiritual destination is set to catapult India onto cruise itineraries.

As far as ocean journeys go, Costa already sails to and from India, and Royal Caribbean International is bringing two of its ships, *Spectrum of the Seas* and *Explorer of the Seas*, to India's shores in 2019. Example itineraries include five nights Dubai to Mumbai, nine nights Mumbai to Singapore and seven nights Maldives to Mumbai.

Seabourn also offers a choice of luxurious Indian cruises where passengers can immerse themselves in the local culture, interact with the locals, see homes and walk through rural communities around Mumbai, Kochi and Vaikom.

And this year, India will actually get its own cruise brand – sailing a ship very familiar to Australians. Zen Cruises bought *Pacific Jewel* from P&O Australia in 2018, and

intends to develop local itineraries, with its first sailing scheduled for May.

River cruising has also seen enormous growth, with some of the best-known global names sailing the Ganges.

With strong demand for river cruising, developing the infrastructure for it seems like a sure-fire way to build tourist numbers in the country.

Pandaw, which first offered river expeditions in India a decade ago, is moving more ships into the area, after success in remote areas like Myanmar. The line is expanding its fleet on the Ganges River, with *Katha* joining *Kalaw* earlier this year, and *Kindat* due later this year.

Pandaw will also add sailings on the mighty Brahmaputra River in Assam in 2020. Their itinerary will rival the existing one from local ship *Mahabaahu*, which currently offers a seven-night cruise on the Brahmaputra from Guwahati to Jorhat, including a safari on elephant back to spot the one-horned rhinoceros and Indian tiger in UNESCO-listed wildlife sanctuary Kaziranga National Park.

Avalon Waterways has also recently launched a new itinerary on the Ganges, a six-day round trip from Kolkata, visiting tiny towns in the north to explore how human life is connected to the holy river; visiting muslim

FACT FILE

India is a spectacular and spiritual cruise destination. On land, you'll be bombarded by colour, culture and chaos to stimulate all the senses, but you'll always have an onboard bolt-hole to escape the traffic, crowds and fumes.

/ Top places to cruise

Mainland India has about 5,000 kilometres of coastline and most ocean-going cruise ships will call at the mesmerising city of Mumbai; Mormugao, the main port of party-loving Goa; Kochi, the gateway to Kerala; and Chennai, the main port of the south.

For river cruises, you can choose to sail on the sacred Ganges River, the mighty Brahmaputra River or the backwaters of Kerala.

/ What to see

On an ocean cruise, immerse yourself in the bustling coastal cities, as well as the majestic interior cities of Jaipur, Jodhpur and Agra on excursions.

On the Ganges, you'll see India's most holy city, Varanasi, temples, goldsmiths, Mother Teresa's home, teeming city life and remote villages. On Brahmaputra cruises, you'll be amazed by India's wildlife – a highlight is a safari on elephant at Kaziranga National Park. In sleepy Kerala, you'll float past untamed jungle and tiny rural farms.

The sacred Ganges.



Traditional Kathakali dance on New Year carnival in Kochi.

“India's reputation as an exotic, historic and spiritual destination is set to catapult it onto cruise itineraries.”

weavers in Kalna, candy makers in Matiar and tea plantations at Azimгани and Jiagani. The 54-passenger ship is already 75 per cent sold, largely to holiday makers from the US, Canada, Australia and the UK.

A total of 139 cruise ships carrying 162,660 passengers visited India in 2017-18 at six major ports – Mumbai, Mormugao, New Mangaluru, Kochi, Chennai and Kolkata.

Historically, Mumbai has been the hub of cruise tourism in the country, and Costa Cruises homeported there three years ago. This year also expects to see calls from most major lines, including Azamara, Costa Cruises, Holland America Line, Crystal Cruises and Silversea Cruises.

Mormugao is the main cruise port of tourist-friendly Goa and lines such as Seven Seas Voyages, Royal Caribbean and MSC

visit regularly. Kochi, near the southern tip of India, is another popular port, with lines such as Princess Cruises, Costa, MSC, Norwegian Cruise Lines and Royal Caribbean calling there. Mangaluru, in the southwest, plays host to lines such as Celebrity, NCL and Aida.

India is loving the attention from cruisers, and they are pouring money and energy into developing their infrastructure.

“At Kochi, we have built an exclusive terminal for cruise tourists. At Mormugao, Goa, we have a three-storey cruise terminal and at Mangaluru, we are creating a cruise lounge and putting up facilities for customs and immigration and port health, and even a money exchange to cater to cruise traffic. We have 65 similar counters at Chennai,” said Asbhishek Chandra, deputy secretary, Ministry of Shipping.

Now there are plans to develop more ports such as Porbandar and Kandla on the west coast and Visakhapatnam and Paradip on the east coast. Drawing on the origin of Buddha in India, the government is also promoting the Buddhism circuit, a strong lure for Asian tourists, particularly the Japanese and Koreans.

But unlocking India's potential as a cruise destination for residents isn't as easy as promoting it to foreigners. More than 26 million Indians travelled overseas in 2017, but less than 150,000 of those went on a cruise, and most Indians who do cruise still prefer to fly to Singapore to board a cruise ship than embark at a port closer to home. The industry is now looking to grow numbers locally and develop this largely untapped but relatively small cruise source market.

Peter Lynch takes an Indian river cruise in search of the famed Bengal tiger.

There are many dilemmas facing today's traveller: Is my footprint light enough? Are local people benefitting from my visit? Am I respecting the culture?

So perhaps it isn't so surprising, as we drive towards Kaziranga National Park at 5am, that someone asks: "How will I know if my elephant is well cared for?"

We'd travelled hundreds of kilometres and endured a white-knuckled road trip to get this far before sunrise for an elephant safari through the long grass. But for today's traveller with a conscience, it's a fair question. Google "Should I ride an elephant?" and you'll find literally hundreds of posts arguing the toss.

We quiz our mahout relentlessly. We are encouraged by the fact that this is a World Heritage Site, and our female elephant only works two hours a day before the sun gets hot.

Welcome to adventure cruising in remote India, a journey that assails us with fresh conundrums every day.

We're sailing up the mighty Brahmaputra River like true explorers. Some 200 metres ahead, a wooden boat acts as our pilot. A man on the bows dips a long pole into the murky waters to ensure there is enough depth for *MV Mahabaahu* to proceed.

At one point we have to stop to empty the swimming pool so we can pass over a sand bar. We make it with millimetres to spare.

We're about as far from India's bustling, traffic-clogged and polluted cities as we can get.

We've flown from Kolkata, a metropolis bursting with humanity, to a place known as The Chicken's Neck. This narrow strip of land in the northeastern state of Assam is sandwiched between Bengal, Nepal and India.

The area is "politically sensitive" and patrolled by the Bengal Rifles Brigade.

It's home to one of India's best kept secrets – an astonishing array of wildlife. There are deer, hogs, leopard cats, otters, wild boar, jackals, eagles, buzzards and kites.

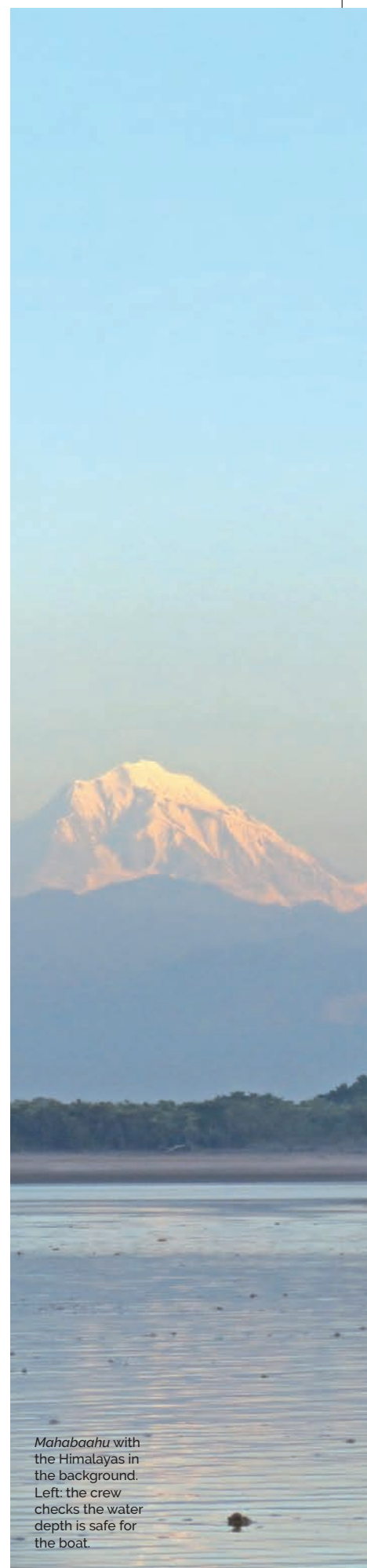
It's the last refuge of the one-horned rhino, a beast so heavily hunted by poachers eager to please mainland China's appetite for its horn that they risk being shot on sight.

It's also where you can find the Bengal tiger in the wild. Even the chance of a sighting brings thousands of tourists from across the globe to catch a glimpse of this mighty beast.

Mahabaahu is one of only two ships that make the trek from Guwahati to Kaziranga National Park, a 430-square-kilometre UNESCO World Heritage site. She is also the biggest. As we make our stately way up the Brahmaputra, scores of villagers run to the banks, yelling and waving at the unusual sight. Waving back, we feel a little like the Queen of England, or a Bollywood movie star. Later, we discover they are yelling "Goodbye!" Do they know something we don't?

Our ship is a hybrid. Built in 2011 by an Indian yard which only had plans for sea-going vessels, her peculiar features include watertight steel doors on its balcony cabins (they are on deck four, and if you're that far down the doors won't help at all).

She has a spa deck for Ayurvedic treatments, which are medically based and, in the words of one reviewer, feature "access all areas". It's serious business, though the staff are happy to tailor their treatments to your needs.



Mahabaahu with the Himalayas in the background. Left: the crew checks the water depth is safe for the boat.

Tiger tates

+ FACT FILE

CRUISE LINE: Adventure
Resorts and Cruises
VESSEL: *MV Mahabaahu*
STAR RATING: 3.5
PASSENGER CAPACITY: 46
TOTAL CREW: 30
PASSENGER DECKS: 5
CABINS: 23
TONNAGE: 47,800
FACILITIES: Spa, sun deck,
pool, bar, restaurant, two
expedition boats.
BOOKINGS: See
cruisetraveller.com.au



We raft up on a sandbank and make a fire. The crew have lighted candles on banana leaves that we place in the water with a wish and watch as they gently make their way along the river in the current. It's magical.

But all of this is but a prelude to the main game. We've come here for a safari, and after four days of jute mills, villages and traditional dancing in tea plantations, we're ready for the grand finale.

It's 3:30am and 10 degrees. But it doesn't matter. The excitement is palpable. We sip masala tea and check our cameras. Is this the day of the big cats? We're hopeful of a sighting, and apparently there was one yesterday (though we learn later there always is one 'yesterday').

Mayresh Hendre, a 21-year-old former Mumbai advertising executive who gave it up to focus on wildlife photography, assures us the elephant safari is approved and that the elephants are well cared for.

"Sometimes, if you drop something like your camera, the elephant will pick it up and return it to you," he says.

“ *If you drop something, the elephant will pick it up and return it to you.* **”**

It's a 90-minute drive to Kaziranga. And in those 90 minutes, every mad story you've ever heard about Indian roads is confirmed. We overtake on blind bends, and at the prow of a hill. We spend what seems like most of the trip on the wrong side of the road. We tighten our seat belts and try not to look.

Relieved, we arrive at a hotel and have more fortifying masala tea, before heading out just before dawn to the elephants.

The magnificent beasts wear copious saddles, and you mount them from a specially-constructed tower. Couples ride together with a mahout and a guard, who wields an enormous shotgun loaded with blank cartridges.

There is a small pool and – best of all – a large sun deck where you can while away your afternoons peering through binoculars at the ever-changing scenery on the banks, looking for wildlife, or waving at the incredibly excited villagers.

Our young, obliging chef is strongest at three dishes: river fish, chicken and goat. These ingredients are served with relentless regularity using different curried sauces each day. There is always at least one western choice.

There is a single dining room – the Mungri Mungram. Dinner is a five-course affair, and our cruise director mixes guests cunningly so everyone quickly finds like-minded companions to chat with over meals.

The passengers are a typically mixed bunch. Six Canadians, three Singaporeans, two Australians, two British couples, two Indian lawyers and the owner of a biomedicine business.

Mahabaahu is every inch an Indian river ship. If you like cultural immersion – an on-trend phrase that can mean anything from a visit to a local home to a performance by a dance troupe – this is for you. It's Little India on the waterways.

We visit charming but dirt-poor villages where children greet us with "Hello" and then shyly ask us to shake hands – no doubt the work of a local English teacher who trained in London. They really only want us to take their pictures on our smartphones, and they giggle and pose until we agree.

Above: traditional dancers in Assam. Below: a group of children in a village.





Above: an elephant safari in Kaziranga National Park.

Our elephant, a beautiful creature, brings along three calves. And as we gently stroll through the long grass, she stops occasionally to pull some choice stems and feed her brood.

Our mahout has been riding elephants since he was 12, and it is hard not to feel there is a bond between him and these mighty beasts.

Suddenly, there is our first sighting: a single-horned rhino having an early morning snack in the grass. At a huge 2,100 kilograms – you can only imagine how much grass he needs – the rhinoceros unicornis is a solitary animal. Hunted almost to extinction, they have been saved thanks to the Indian government and UNESCO financing parks like Kaziranga.

On our hour-long safari, we see many rhinos, along with deer, buffalo and birds. Though our mahout speaks little English, his excited pointing has us scurrying to our guide books to identify the next creature.

And the tigers? Well, with 12 mighty elephants and two dozen tourists ploughing through the park, perhaps they could be forgiven for remaining hidden.

Disembarking at the mounting towers, we all agreed we had just had the most exciting and memorable 60 minutes of our lives, and though we took a second safari in a jeep, it just didn't have the same magic.

Our seven nights aboard *Mahabaahu* were an extraordinary learning experience, and our pictures armed us for many dinner parties to come.

The Brahmaputra is a fascinating river. The people in this northern enclave, who move homes each spring when the Himalayas snow melts and the river floods, show enormous resilience.

During the devastating 2017 floods, 41 million people in the region were affected, with more than a thousand lives lost, and homes, schools and other infrastructure destroyed.

Why do they keep coming back for more? The annual floods bring a reward: here lies some of most fertile soil in India.

↑ THE VERDICT

HIGHS: Our safari was a truly memorable experience – even if we didn't spot the big cat! You'll feel like a true explorer, as there are still only a few international travellers who venture this far.

LOWS: Eccentric, peculiar and very Indian, *Mahabaahu* is advertised online as five star. But, as our tour director conceded, this is not correct. Its wood-lined cabins and food put it into the 3.5 star category. And while Captain's Choice uses her, she is proudly an adventure ship where the destination IS the destination.

BEST SUITED TO: Adventure loving couples and solo travellers with an independent streak.

