

Sailing in the shadow of the HIMALAYAS

A voyage through Assam on the volatile waters of the Brahmaputra river proves to be just **Jeannine Williamson's** cup of tea. But did a tiger join her?

The Milky Way gleams in the clear night sky as my toes sink into the soft sand. I carefully carry the small piece of bamboo cane, topped with an oil-burning wick, down to the water's edge. Then I crouch down and silently make a wish before floating my candle out into the darkness.

It's a magical moment as I walk back to join the other passengers by the bonfire on the Brahmaputra sandbar and watch the snaking column of lights drifting along on the water. Slowly they change direction, their twinkling gradually growing dim before vanishing from view.

Inspired by the *aarti* ceremony that takes place at dusk on the banks of the Ganges, we are making an offering to an Indian deity; in this instance Brahma, the Hindu god of creation. 'You never know which way the lights are going to go,' explains our cruise director, Neena Morada. 'It is different every time.'

Her remark encapsulates the many moods of the Brahmaputra, the Asian subcontinent's wildest

river. Rising on the Tibetan plateau and coursing 1,800 miles through China and India before emptying into the Bay of Bengal in Bangladesh, it slices through Assam in India's far northeast, creating a fluvial backbone that dominates life in this lush, tea-growing state.

The Brahmaputra valley collects nearly half the annual meltwater of the Himalayas and an equal amount of rainfall during the monsoon, when it can rise to the height of a three-storey building and a width of 11 miles, sweeping away homes, harvests and animals (even elephants) in its path. Villagers living in makeshift homes on spindly bamboo stilts adopt the philosophical attitude that what the river takes away, it gives back. When the waters subside they know they will be rewarded by rich alluvial soil on which to replant their crops.

Outside the rainy season, this sinuous, ever-changing waterway is tranquil but it still demands respect - making it a tantalising off-the-beaten track destination for the more adventurous breed of

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The Brahmaputra at sunset (left); local wildlife includes the golden langur monkey (above)



Guests enjoy a ride on a classic bike (left), while a farmer pauses from his work in the fertile alluvial plain



river-cruiser. Sanjay Basu, a mountaineer and adventurer who once rafted along the Brahmaputra, pioneered cruising here in his role as managing director of Far Horizon Tours. Their 46-passenger MV Mahabaahu first set sail in 2011, navigating specially dredged channels and powered by three engines to deal with the upstream currents. Today it remains one of just a handful of vessels operating on this tricky river (during our week, sailing downstream from Jorhat to Guwahati, a pilot vessel sails ahead of us, the crew using poles to check the ever-shifting navigable passages).

GOLD, RED AND GREEN

Assam is the very essence of India – a land of golden temples, perfumed with the heady scent of marigolds and incense; of grand crumbling palaces, chaotic main streets filled with spluttering rickshaws and wandering sacred cows – but it still sees very few tourists. After leaving the teeming city of Kolkata and taking the two-hour flight to join the ship, we spot no other Western visitors during our entire time on the Brahmaputra.

The crew of the Mahabaahu also do their best to make us feel special, offering a warm welcome and being constantly on hand to dispense cold towels and refreshing juices when we return from excursions, zealously cleaning our dusty shoes and dispensing restorative G&Ts.

A utilitarian, rather plain-looking vessel on the outside, the Mahabaahu is charming within, decorated in pleasingly retro style with a cosy bar,

a dining room with panoramic windows, and a large sun deck that proves to be the best spot for admiring the passing scenery (all sailing is done during daylight hours) while keeping an eye out for freshwater dolphins, birds and wildlife on the banks.

The 23 cabins, all decorated with Assamese silks and all overlooking the river, have a relaxed, colonial-style vibe. Some offer balconies and all have air-conditioning (so effective that I often turned mine off). Tea and coffee-making facilities, robes and slippers are among the other welcoming touches.

Each day brings an intoxicating mix of different sights. Sometimes we stroll ashore for a guided walk; other times we get into cars – with a maximum of three passengers and a guide in each – which prove less spine-jolting than a minibus when roads give way to bumpy dirt tracks.

On the first day we travel to Sivasagar, the ancient capital of the Tibeto-Burman Ahom dynasty that ruled Assam for nearly 600 years from 1228. Their legacy includes Rhang Ghar, a once grand sports pavilion with high platforms where distinguished spectators could get on and off their elephants. We are intrigued to learn that the raw materials used in this elegant, orange-red building include mustard oil and 'snail ooze'.

Later we feel like royalty as we enjoy a private lunch with the gracious owner of one of the tea gardens, or estates, that make Assam the world's major tea-growing region. We sip a brew made from the 'second flush' of leaves and tips, and hear how the prized late harvest produces the finest tea. Afterwards we walk

through waist-high bushes where women in jewel-bright saris pick the precious leaves, carrying them in baskets hanging from their heads.

THE TIGERS THAT CAME TO TEA

A trip later in the week takes us to a tea factory, where we see how the jade-green leaves are dried, sorted and graded. Hearing that what goes into teabags is referred to as 'dust', I mentally vow to ditch my cheap supermarket brand as soon as I get home.

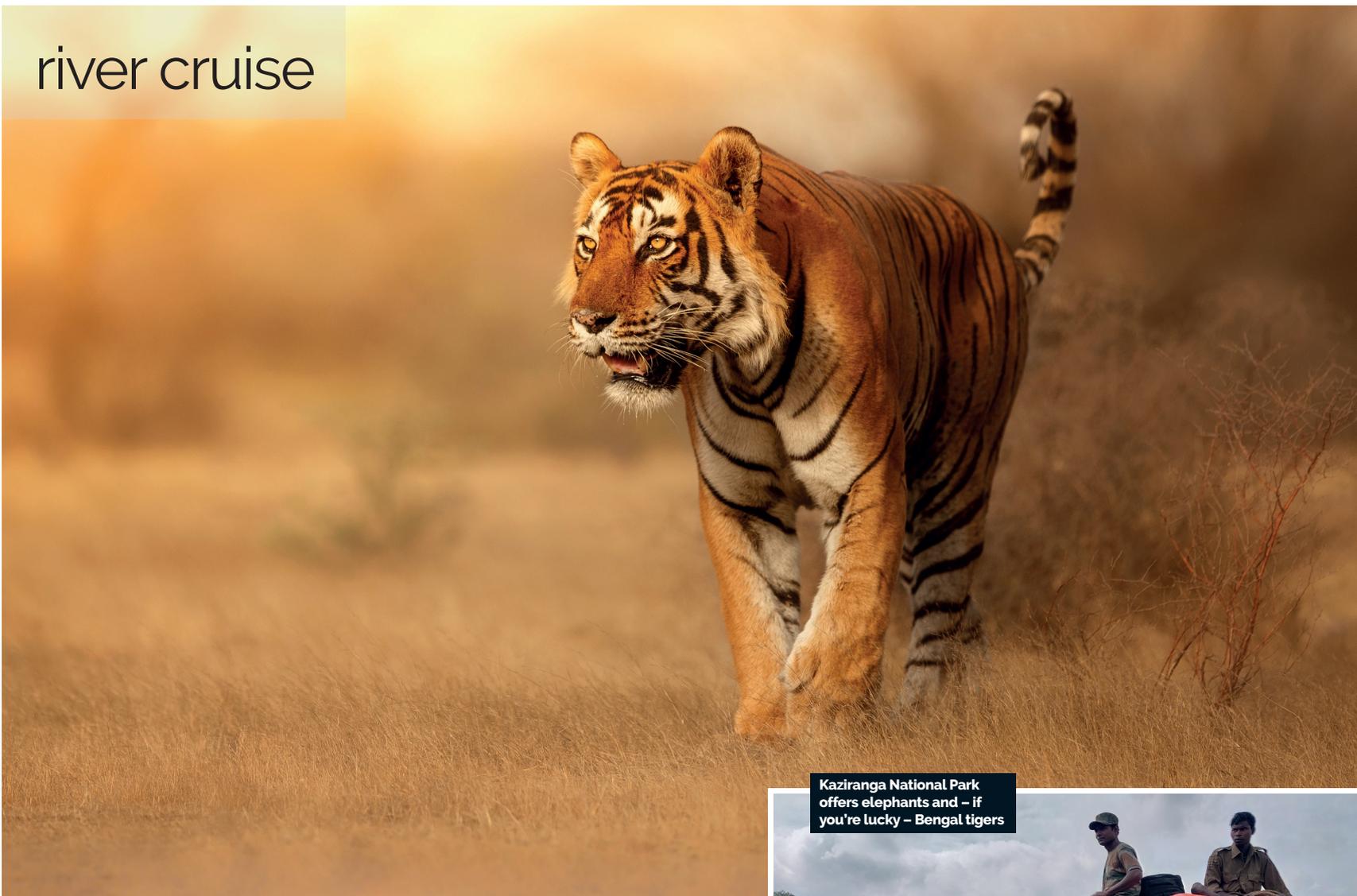
On other days we visit remote villages, where Mahabaahu's resourceful crew get us ashore by digging makeshift steps into the mud bank exposed by the receding water. Then they turn their attention to helping us by forming a human handrail – two of them positioned at each end of a bamboo pole. Our ungainly ascent is observed by wide-eyed children who gather to watch the unexpected live entertainment. Fishermen look up, pausing from the task of hauling in their nets.

Once on dry land, our unscripted walkabout offers memorable snapshots of daily life. Women usher us into one-room homes that house entire families; men rest from working in the fields to wave. The local headmaster roars up on a classic Royal Enfield motorbike and leads us to his school – with two Mahabaahu passengers riding pillion – where his delighted pupils sing songs and show us their neat exercise books.

We visit river islands, too. Majuli, meaning 'land between rivers', is the largest in the world, although the surging waters of the Brahmaputra have seen it



In the tea estates of Assam, late-harvested leaves make the best brew



Kaziranga National Park offers elephants and – if you're lucky – Bengal tigers

shrink from 340 to 136 square miles over the past 100 years. As well as being home to the Mishing people, one of the main ethnic tribes in Assam, Majuli has more than 20 Vaishnavite monasteries, representing a monotheistic variant of Hinduism. In one of these we sit cross-legged on a rug, watching spellbound as white-robed monks begin to chant, play cymbals and beat drums. They start to sway and then dance, leaping in perfect synchrony as the tempo gathers speed. Our guide tells us that this mesmerising performance is an integral part of their worship and we must not clap. Instead we bow our heads to receive a blessing.

We end our trip on another high note with a 4x4 safari through UNESCO-listed Kaziranga National Park – home to India's 'Big Five'. If you want to see the greater one-horned rhinoceros, Asian elephant, wild

water buffalo and Indian bison, this is the place to come. And – if you're very lucky – you might glimpse a royal Bengal tiger, about 100 of which roam the park.

We sit, holding our breath, and scan the tall, dense elephant grass, wondering if a golden pair of eyes is looking back at us. We see everything from tiny white egrets and graceful deer to a bull elephant, ambling along with its head at treetop height. Alas, the most revered resident eludes us, but a huge and very recent paw print produces a frisson of



excitement as we realise how close we are to sighting one of these magnificent beasts (the following week, our guide emails a breathtaking photo of one spotted on the same safari – it's a big-cat lottery).

Back on the ship we swap tales of the day over another delicious meal (the food on board is mostly Indian, always with meat and vegetarian options and a plethora of breads and condiments). The truly brave (or mad) can try *bhut jolokia*, grown in Assam and also known by the innocuous-sounding name of ghost chilli, though it is actually the subcontinent's hottest pepper. Discretion being the better part of valour, I pour myself a refill of the state's finest 'second flush', which is much more my cup of tea.

Even though a tiger didn't join me on this occasion, I could hardly have enjoyed a more thrilling river cruise along the mighty Brahmaputra through amazing Assam. ↓

GET ON BOARD

Fred Olsen River Cruises offers a 9-night fully escorted Brahmaputra cruise from £2,449, with a two-night B&B pre-cruise stay in Kolkata and seven nights on the MV Mahabaahu, visiting Guwahati and Kaziranga National Park. The price includes all meals on the ship, the services of onboard guides and naturalists, and transfers. For further details call 0808 278 0676 or visit fredrivercruises.co.uk