



Assam: The Land of Fun & Laughter Brahmaputra River Cruise & Tribal Tour

One of the great rivers of Asia, the Brahmaputra commences its 3,000-km journey to the Bay of Bengal from the slopes of Mount Kailash in western Tibet. As Tibet's great river, the Tsangpo, transverses east across the high-altitude Tibetan plateau north of the Great Himalayan Range, carving out myriad channels and sandbanks on its way. As it tumbles from the Himalayan heights towards the plains of the subcontinent it twists back on itself, cutting a deep and still unnavigated gorge, until finally turning south it emerges in Arunachal Pradesh as the Dihong. Just beyond Pasighat, it meets the Dibang and Lohit in the north-east state of Assam (India) and finally becomes the Brahmaputra.

India's North East is one of the few regions in the world where communities live close to nature, nurtured by ancient tribal knowledge systems. More than 70 per cent of Assam's population depends on agriculture and forest resources for its livelihood. But the region's environment and an entire way of life are endangered by a long history of acute underdevelopment and violent conflict.

Most of Assam's population lives in the Brahmaputra River valley – a river so wide that its far bank cannot be seen in places. The river's tributaries feed production of the local crops, especially rice – the staple of the region. This is one of the rainiest places on earth. Each monsoon season, rains of up to 118 inches create floods on the Brahmaputra, washing away stretches of highway and causing wildlife to flee low-lying forest areas for higher ground.

It is over 50 years since the last daily passenger boat from Calcutta travelled through Assam along the Brahmaputra River with a mixed complement of tea planters, forest officers, soldiers and magistrates. This trip recreates the romance of that classic journey.

Majuli Island has been the cultural capital of Assam for the past five hundred years. It has also been the cradle of Assamese civilization. Although the exact origin of Majuli may be a point of contention, written records are found of the visit of Shankardeva, a social reformer, during the 16th century. He promulgated a form of Hinduism that was also called vaishnavism. He established monasteries or hermitages that were called *satras*. These *satras* became the hub of culture, art, religion and lifestyle. Even today these *satras* preserve antiques like

weapons, utensils, jewelry and other articles of cultural importance. The tribal folk culture of Majuli is also interesting. These include the Mishing tribes from the state of Arunachal who have migrated here many centuries ago. In addition, the inhabitants also include the Deori tribe. These people have an ethnic culture, music and dance forms untouched by modernism. The handloom work of these tribes is famous, and pottery is made in Majuli from beaten clay and burnt in driftwood-fired kilns just the way it was done in the Harrapan Civilizations.

Since the atmosphere is washed over so often by the rains and also perhaps because there are no industries or factories, Majuli is blessed with a totally pollution free atmosphere. A large number of migratory birds visit this island.

The Vaishnava Sattras (monastic orders)

In the 15th century, a saint by the name of Sankardeva took shelter in Majuli and spent a couple of months at Beloguri (in west Majuli) which was a place of glory for the historic and auspicious. He established the first *Satra* or monastic order on the island, and from it grew sixty-five "*Sattras*" which propagated ethics and socio-cultural ideals. But at present there are only twenty-two *Sattras* in Majuli. The others had to be shifted to other safer places due to devastation by floods and land erosion.

A Treasure House of Performing Arts

These Sattras are a treasure house religious and folk music and dance: "Borgeet", 'Matiakhara', 'Jumora', 'Chali', 'Notua', 'Nande Vringee', 'Sutradhar', 'Oza-Pali', 'Apsara', 'Satria Krishna', 'Dasavater' etc

The Majuli Sattras along with Kuruabai Sattras exercise tremendous influence on the life of the Assamese people. They are even to-day the glorious religious institutions of Assam, and are not only the seat of religion, learning and education, but the very centre of traditional cultural activities like dance, drama, music and religious recitals.

Itinerary

Day 1: London – Delhi

Day 2: Arrive Delhi (early AM): Clear immigration and customs. A High Points representative will be waiting for you outside the arrival hall. Transfer to hotel.

PM: Half day guided city tour of New Delhi. The buildings designed by Edward Lutyens -architect of modern Delhi - are truly majestic. The Presidential Palace, Parliament House and India Gate are all reminiscent of the British "Raj". We drive through Delhi's beautiful tree-lined avenues, and the Diplomatic Enclave enroute to the 12th century, 234 ft high fluted minaret of the Qutab Minar. Later, we shall stop at the Hauz Khas, to explore its art galleries, boutiques and exotic restaurants set amidst 1000 year old fortifications and a lively village.

Day 2: Delhi:

AM: Guided tour of Old Delhi: Today in Old Delhi, we will explore the magnificent Red Fort, built at the zenith of the Mughal empire in India. The centuries-old international market-place that sprawls at its feet is still one of Delhi's most important commercial hubs: Chandni Chowk, or "Moonlight Square". We shall ride on cycle-rickshaws through the bustling silver market and the wholesale spice market. The sounds, smells and colors of the

bazaar, and the throngs of people who animate it makes this an unforgettable spectacle. Our last stop in Old Delhi shall be the elegant Jumma Masjid, the largest mosque in Asia.

Day 3: Delhi – Guwahati

AM: Flight to Guwahati, capital of the state of Assam.

Met on arrival and transfer to hotel Brahmaputra Ashok.

PM: City tour. A bustling town set against a backdrop of green hills and the mighty Brahmaputra river, Guwahati presents all the impossible contrasts of gracious old world charm coming to terms with the age of IT.

Visit the 1000 year old Kamakhya Temple, where strange Tantric rites are practiced even today.

Day 4: Guwahati - Dibrugarh – Disangmukha (pronounced Dihingmuk)

Arrive Dibrugarh by air from Guwahati. Met on arrival and transfer to the Little Garden Restaurant for lunch, then proceed 2 km along a sandy stretch to the cruise boat at the embarkation point (ghat).

Begin cruise on the mighty Brahmaputra river. Proceed upstream for about 2 hr to Disangmukha. Overnight camp on a river Island or on board the boat, depending on group size. (These islands are recently formed sand bars usually not below 3-4 acres, without habitation and vegetation cover but full of drift wood and clear-water pools.) Tents are pitched for overnight halt. Huge bonfires from the driftwood are lit, hot water for bathing is arranged and toilets with partitions set up. Dinner is prepared on the boat.

Day 5: Disangmukha - Majuli

Depart after breakfast toward Majuli. This is a wilderness stretch of the Brahmaputra and the river is not as braided as it is upstream of Dibrugarh. We will pass traditional fishing boats along the river. After three hours of sailing we sight Majuli Island. This is the world's largest river island, with a land mass of 800 sq. km. stretching 80 km. The boat will anchor at Salmora ghat, where clay pots can be seen stacked high all along the banks. A visit to the Salmora potters village is an interesting interlude. There is no potter's wheel and women make the utensils. Men are employed in digging earth and in kiln activities. They also load these clay products on boats and start selling their wares in small villages along the river. Their boats fully laden with clay pots make interesting photo opportunities.

After visiting Salmora, lunch will be served on the boat while it cruises downstream towards Kamalabari ghat. This is the main ghat of Majuli Island. A vehicle will be available for the transfer (5 km) to Kamalabari. The night stay will be at the Uttar Kamalabari Guest House near the monastery. This is a guest house run by the monks. (Accommodation is basic but neat and clean)

Day 6: Majuli:

AM: Exploring the *Satras* (Hindu monasteries).

PM: Visit Dhapak village of the Mising tribe. Misings are a plains tribe who prefer to have their settlements next to the Brahmaputra River. They are of the Arunachal hill tribe origin especially of the Adi tribes of the Abor hills of Arunachal. Like some of the Arunachal tribes they worship the Donyi Polo (Sun and Moon God).

Return to the Guest house via the Auniati monastery (Satra) which is the largest on the island. A visit to their museum is of special interest, featuring some early manuscript from sasi bark, ivory work and some bell metal utensils. In the evening visit the Uttar Kamalabari monastery where the monastery dances will be performed.

Day 7: Majuli - Kaziranga

Cruise down river to Kaziranga Wildlife Reserve.

Overnight in the jungle lodge.

Day 8: Kaziranga:

AM & PM : Excursions in the jungle on elephants and by jeeps.

Explore the reserve by jeeps. Kaziranga lies on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, and is famous for its 1000+ population of the great One-Horned Rhinoceros. Tigers are also present in sizable numbers in this area. Other attractions of this national park include the wild buffalo, magnificent swamp deer, hog deer, wild boar, Hoolok gibbon, capped langur and ratel (badger). A wide variety of snakes including the rock python and the monitor lizard are also found here. Amongst the birds, the crested serpent eagle is common while palla's fishing eagle and gray headed fishing eagle are frequently seen. Others include the Great Adjutant Stork, crane, Bengal floribab, bar-headed goose, whistling teal, and pelican.

Day 9 : Kaziranga - Diphu:

AM: Half-day drive south to Diphu, the headquarters of the Karbi Anglong District. We now enter a region where few people remember ever seeing a western visitor, since it was closed for almost 40 years till the early nineties. Even now, few foreigners venture here as it offers none of the traditional tourist fare.

PM: Explore the remarkably well-stocked vegetable and fruit market at Diphu. The afternoon shall present rich photographic opportunities, as we mix with the colorful and extremely friendly Karbi people.

Day 10: Diphu:

AM & PM: Visits to several villages. We may find ourselves over-whelmed by the spontaneous, gracious and fun welcome accorded by our hosts .

Day 11: Diphu-Halflong :

AM: Halfday drive to Halflong through pretty forests. Wild elephants may err onto the road, and we may have to pay a ransom in bananas to persuade them to let us pass. Monkeys and Hoolock Gibbon apes chattering in the trees above may seem to be laughing at our predicament.

PM: Explore the busy Halflong market. The seven tribes of the North Cachar Hills can all be seen here, each distinct from the other in dress, language and traditions, letting the demands of gay commerce play down ancient tribal rivalries.

Day 12: Halflong:

Full day visits to the villages of several different tribes. We may also visit the village of Jatinga, where mystery surrounds the annual bird suicides, apparently caused by disorientation.

Day 13: Halflong-Silchar:

AM: Half - day drive to Silchar airport to board our flight to Calcutta.

PM: Silchar-Calcutta: Met on arrival in Calcutta and transfer to hotel.

Day 14: Calcutta - Onward destination:

AM: City Tour of the City of Joy. At first sight, this is a bewildering,overwhelming city of over seven million. A veritable dynamo, it is inhabited for the most part by Bengalis, an emotional and artistic people who have been called the Irish of India. Large sections of the city are still Victorian in appearance, and there are several reminders of the British Raj. Calcutta was the British capital of India till 1911. The Victoria Memorial is a mammoth pile of white marble in which European and Mughal influences have merged. The `Writer's Building' was built in 1780 by the East India Company to house its clerks, and is still used today for the same purpose by

EQUINOX TRAVEL LTD – +44 (0) 207 8314888 – www.equinoxtravel.co.uk - info@equinoxtravel.co.uk

the West Bengal government. The `Raj Bhavan'-originally `Government House'- is a replica of Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, and the High Court is an exact copy of the Town Hall of Ypres!

Some of the few real Indian landmarks in Calcutta are the early 19th century Kali Temple and the Parasnath Jain Temples, elaborately decorated and almost Burmese in design. Perhaps the most interesting part of our tour shall be the drives between each place of visit, as we inch along the seemingly total chaos and confusion of Calcutta's streets.

PM: Transfer to the airport for your onward flight.