

India - A Wildlife Cruise on the Brahmaputra River

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Exclusive Charter 2009 - 11

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Depart London
Day 2	Kolkata
Day 3/12	Fly Jorhat for 11-day Brahmaputra wildlife cruise
Day 13	End cruise; fly Kolkata
Day 14	Fly London



Sunderbans extension

Day 14/17	Sunderbans National Park
Day 18	Kolkata
Day 19	Depart Kolkata
Day 20	Arrive London



Images (from top): Brahmaputra River, RV Sukapha and Kaziranga National



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Dates and costs

2009

Tuesday 8th December — Monday 21st December 2009
Sunderbans extension: to Sunday 27th December 2009
£2,995 (London/London); £2,645 (Kolkata/Kolkata)

2010

Tuesday 2nd February — Monday 15th February 2010
Sunderbans extension: to Sunday 21st February 2010
£3,195 (London/London); £2,845 (Kolkata/Kolkata)

Tuesday 30th March — Monday 12th April 2010
Sunderbans extension: to Sunday 18th April 2010
£2,995 (London/London); £2,645 (Kolkata/Kolkata)

Thursday 16th December — Wednesday 29th December
Sunderbans extension: to Sunday 4th January 2011
£3,195 (London/London); £2,845 (Kolkata/Kolkata)

(Christmas departure)

2011

Thursday 10th February — Wednesday 23rd February 11
Sunderbans extension: to Tuesday 1st March 2011
£3,195 (London/London); £2,845 (Kolkata/Kolkata)

Thursday 10th March — Wednesday 23rd March 11
Sunderbans extension: to Tuesday 29th March 2011
£3,095 (London/London); £2,745 (Kolkata/Kolkata)

Thursday 7th April — Wednesday 20th April 11
Sunderbans extension: to Tuesday 26th April 2011
£2,995 (London/London); £2,645 (Kolkata/Kolkata)

Tuesday 13th December — Monday 26th December 11
Sunderbans extension: to Sunday 1st January 2012
£3,195 (London/London); £2,845 (Kolkata/Kolkata)

(Christmas departure)

Sunderbans extension: £795

N.B: Tuesday departures are on Sukapha

Thursday departures are on Charaidew

Single room supplement

February & December: £2,195 (extension: £215)

March & April: £1,995 (extension: £215)

Grade

Focus

Grade A

Birds, mammals and local culture

Introduction

A magical 14-day holiday to Assam in north-eastern India which includes a unique 11-day wildlife cruise down the Brahmaputra River aboard the RV Sukapha or RV Charaidew, visiting Kaziranga, Nameri and Orang National Parks, and taking in much of the local tribal culture.

Anyone who has travelled through India by train or road will be amazed to learn that there is actually a form of surface transport through the country that offers total serenity and comfort: for it is possible to cruise for some 1,750 miles along the rivers of India, passing great cities, wildlife sanctuaries and historical monuments, and journey into the very heart of rural India by boat. Indeed once, such rivers as the Ganges, Hugli and Brahmaputra were all vital arteries for the East India Company, as for other empires before them, and British-run passenger boats plied these rivers from the early 18th century until competition from the railways became just too great by the end of the 19th century. Passenger boats on the Brahmaputra, however, continued to operate until the early 1950s when the tensions that emerged between India and Pakistan after Partition in 1947 finally spelt the end for river traffic. Until that time, daily passenger boats from Kolkata plied the Brahmaputra through Assam, aboard them a complement of tea planters, forest officers, soldiers and district magistrates; indeed, during the Second World War, they also played a vital role in bringing in troops and evacuating casualties during the great battles of Imphal and Kohima in 1944. Today, however, in association with a pioneering Indo-British cruise company, Naturetrek offers you the opportunity to re-live the experience of those days of the Raj aboard a luxury 24-berth vessel exclusively chartered by us to provide a river cruise with a dedicated focus on the wildlife and national parks of Assam.

This 10-night cruise will include most of the highlights of Assam, with a particular focus on the wildlife, wilderness and tribal villages and cultures that represent the key points of interest along the mighty Brahmaputra, for often the riverbed is 20 to 30 kilometres across, an empty world of grass-covered and forested islands, sand spits and channels, favoured only by rural fishermen and a marvellous birdlife. We will also look out for mammals, especially when passing through Assam's national parks, although throughout our cruise we may expect to see the endangered and enigmatic Gangetic River Dolphin, a real highlight of this journey, and perhaps an Indian Smooth-coated or Small-clawed Otter.

We begin our cruise, after a night in the fascinating old colonial city of Kolkata and a domestic flight, near Jorhat in Assam. Our first point of call will be the Gibbon Sanctuary at Mariani, where we will walk in the forest in search of Hoolock Gibbons, India's only species of ape, and a wealth of birdlife. Next stop will be Majuli Island, reputedly the world's largest river island and short-listed for future UNESCO World Heritage status on account of its rich culture. Here we will visit some of the island's unique Hindu monasteries (famous for their dance drama performances), enjoy a typical Mising tribal lunch in a stilted bamboo hut, and enjoy the birds of Sakuli Jheel (lake). At other times we will spend time gently cruising down the Brahmaputra, relaxing and birdwatching from the sundeck, perhaps with a visit to a tribal village.

On our fourth day of the cruise Kaziranga National Park will appear on the left bank and we now have a chance of seeing wild Indian Elephants and wild Water Buffalo from the boat, perhaps even a Tiger! During the next three days we have the pleasure of India's finest national park alongside us, and in it will enjoy an elephant ride and jeep safaris. Kaziranga is a 430 square kilometre park, consisting of broad tracts of tall elephant grass interspersed with evergreen forests, shallow lakes and reedbeds. It is probably the best place on Earth to observe

the very rare Great Indian One-horned Rhinoceros and it is possible to encounter as many as forty of these prehistoric-looking beasts during a day in the field. Asian Elephants and wild Water Buffalo are also plentiful, as are Sambar, Hog and Swamp Deer, and Wild Boar, the prey of the Leopards and Tigers which roam the park, although amid so much cover they are always hard to see. We may even chance upon some of the more elusive residents such as Gaur, Leopard Cat and Sloth Bear, whilst the rare Capped Langur, Assamese Macaque and Hoolock Gibbon form a trio of primates that inhabit the woodlands. Despite the profusion of mammals, the birdlife is not eclipsed and a tremendously diverse bird list features many rare or local species such as Bengal Florican and Greater Adjutant Stork.

Leaving Kaziranga, we will next cruise to Nameri and then Orang National Park, which lie in the foothills of the Himalaya. Both may be explored by disembarking into smaller boats or rafts on which we are able to journey up the tributaries of the Brahmaputra to reach the heart of each park which we may explore on foot, elephant-back or by jeep.

Towards the end of our river cruise we will explore a range of jungle-covered hills and visit the idyllic and isolated village of Ganesh Pahar where we will take a birdwatching walk through rice paddies and unspoilt forest. These pretty hills, or the Golden Langurs of Peacock Island, are likely to be amongst our final memories of the stillness and beauty of the mighty Brahmaputra, before we must disembark at Guwahati and commence our journey homeward.

Itinerary

Day 1

Tuesday

In Flight

We depart London Heathrow today around midday on a scheduled Emirates' flight bound for Kolkata, via Dubai (where duty-free shopping at Dubai airport is amongst the best and cheapest in the world). We will be in flight overnight.

Day 2

Wednesday

Kolkata

Arriving in Kolkata this morning, we will transfer to a city hotel where the rest of the day will be spent at leisure. You will be free to sample some of the many delights of Kolkata, or to just relax and recover after your flight. Your leader will help you to arrange any sightseeing you may choose to do; perhaps a visit to one of the famous sights of Kolkata such as the Victoria Memorial or St Paul's Cathedral, or to one of the excellent museums. Alternatively, you might prefer to accompany your leader for a spot of birdwatching in the city's attractive Botanic gardens. Just 30 minutes from central Kolkata, this Botanic gardens hosts thousands of migratory birds from September to April. Protected by local citizens, the birds are remarkably tame and allow close approach. Lesser Whistling Ducks are by far the most abundant, but such other species as Pintail, Gadwall, Shoveler, Garganey, Comb Duck and Cotton Pygmy Goose are all common and easily seen alongside the many other waterbirds.

We will overnight in Kolkata prior to our flight to Jorhat tomorrow morning.

Day 3

Thursday

Fly Jorhat & Begin Brahmaputra Cruise

After a leisurely breakfast we will transfer to Kolkata airport for the 1055 flight to Jorhat, in the state of Assam, where we are scheduled to arrive at 1335 hours. This is a wonderful flight, for our flight-path runs parallel to the Great Himalaya and we can expect to enjoy fine views of the peaks of the eastern Himalaya... as long as the weather is clear!

On arrival at Jorhat Airport, we will meet our vehicle and driver and drive for 30 minutes to board our ship, the RV Sukapha or RV Charaidew, at Neamati Ghat on the Brahmaputra River.

Day 4

Friday

Brahmaputra Cruise: Mariani & Majuli Island

This morning we will leave our vessel and drive to the Gibbon Sanctuary at Mariani. Here we will walk through the forest in the company of a local forest guard in search of Hoolock Gibbons, India's only species of ape, as well as a wealth of birdlife. On our return to the ship we will set off down the river, cruising for about an hour or so across to Majuli Island, supposedly the world's largest river island. Here there are very few cars and little development and the island offers excellent birdwatching, especially at Sakuli Jheel which gives us a fine introduction to Assam's wetland birds.

Day 5

Saturday

Brahmaputra Cruise: Majuli Island

Today we will focus on the rich cultural heritage of Majuli Island, for it possesses unique Hindu monasteries famous for their dance-drama performances. Indeed the whole island has now been short-listed for future UNESCO World Heritage status. We will visit Auniati Monastery with its eclectic museum, enjoy a typical Mising tribal lunch in a stilted bamboo hut and, in the afternoon, we will attend a dance performance at Kamalabari Monastery.

For those lacking a 'cultural leaning', there will be further opportunities for birdwatching on the island, and from the ship, today.

Later we will return to the ship and spend a couple of hours cruising downstream as the sun sets and lines of waterbirds stream back to their night-time roosts.

Day 6

Sunday

Brahmaputra Cruise: Jamuguri Village

We will spend much of the day on the river today, watching waterbirds and for otters and Gangetic River Dolphins, not to mention the fascinating activities and techniques of the local fishermen. Our one riverside stop will be at the tribal village of Jamuguri, where we will make an interesting visit.

By the afternoon, Kaziranga National Park will be on our left, and wild Asian Elephants and other mammals such as Hog Deer and wild Water Buffalo may sometimes be seen from the boat. Even the magnificent Tiger has once, memorably, been seen in this way! The evening, as the sun sets on the river and when a beer is safely at hand, will be the ideal time to meticulously scan the river banks and islands for mammals and birds.

Day 7

Monday

Brahmaputra Cruise: Kaziranga National Park

In the early morning, we will take a jeep ride through the park's little-visited Eastern Range, where good woodland and grassland, and the wildlife they support, can be viewed from look-out towers.

Kaziranga protects an area of 430 square kilometres and is one of the world's most beautiful national parks. It lies on the south bank of the great Brahmaputra River and is one of the last haunts of the Great Indian One-horned Rhinoceros. The area was first given protection as a forest reserve in the early years of the twentieth century, but it was not opened to visitors until 1938, and it was not until 1954 that the Great Indian One-horned Rhinoceros was given complete statutory protection, allowing Kaziranga to become the most important – and one of the final – refuges for this endangered mammal. In 1974 the wildlife sanctuary was given national park status, and today there are over 1,100 rhinos in the park, a figure which represents over 70% of the world population. The extensive areas of tall elephant grass mean that sightings of Tigers are few, and less frequent than in Kanha and Bandhavgarh; however, in addition to the rhinos, we can expect to see Kaziranga's important population of wild Water Buffalo (one of the last remaining wild populations), wild Asian Elephants, Wild Boar, Hog Deer, Swamp Deer, Sambar, Barking Deer, Rhesus Macaques and a wide variety of other mammal species. We will also make every effort to locate the other more elusive inhabitants of the park such as Gaur, Leopard, Leopard Cat and Sloth Bear.

Kaziranga's birdlife is equally diverse and includes an exceptional range of waterbirds (amongst them many species of cormorants, herons, egrets, storks, geese, ducks, waders and terns), birds of prey, and such regional specialities as Swamp Partridge, Bengal Florican, Abbott's Babbler, Sultan Tit, Black-breasted Thrush, Bristled Grass Warbler, Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker and Little Spiderhunter. It really is a wonderful place to visit.

The reserve comprises a vast area of seasonally-inundated swamps, interspersed with broad tracts of tall elephant grass, open forests, watercourses (known as Jheels) and reedbeds. To the south the ground rises to 1,200 metres to form the Mikir Hills, an important refuge for the park's wildlife when the lowlands flood during the annual monsoon.

This afternoon we will continue our voyage down to a delightful mooring at Silghat, where butterflies abound in the surrounding jungle. Close by, where the Bharali River flows into the Brahmaputra, is a favourite feeding spot for the endangered Gangetic River Dolphins (although these can be seen anywhere on the river, and throughout the length of our river journey). At Silghat we will moor and next day enjoy our safari in central range of the Kaziranga National Park.

Day 8**Tuesday****Brahmaputra Cruise: Kaziranga National Park**

We will rise very early this morning and disembark before dawn in order to drive to Kaziranga's Central Range for an early morning elephant ride, the best way to get really close to the rhinos and all of Kaziranga's other mammals. Later in the morning, after our breakfast in a beautiful lodge, we will return to Kaziranga's Central Range for a morning jeep safari before returning to the boat.

In the afternoon, after our lunch, we will walk through terraced tea gardens and visit Durga Temple in a beautiful village before returning to the boat.

Day 9**Wednesday****Brahmaputra Cruise: Kaziranga National Park**

In the morning, we will take a jeep ride through the park's Western Range, where good woodland, as well as grassland and wetlands, and the wildlife they support, can be viewed from look-out towers.

Later we will return to the ship and start cruising downstream to Tezpur as the sun sets and lines of waterbirds stream back to their night-time roosts.

Day 10**Thursday****Brahmaputra Cruise: Nameri National Park**

Again we will disembark very early today, and drive north to Nameri National Park, which lies in the foothills of the eastern Himalaya an hour's drive north of Tezpur.

Nameri was given 'wildlife sanctuary' status in 1985, before becoming a national park in 1998. It spans 212 square kilometres and its north-eastern boundary adjoins Pakhui Wildlife Sanctuary in the neighbouring state of Arunachal Pradesh. Together they protect over 1,000 square kilometres of tropical evergreen, semi-evergreen, and moist deciduous forests with bamboo and cane brakes, and narrow strips of grassland along the Bharali River (which runs through the park) and its many tributaries. This is excellent elephant country, and the park may hold in excess of 200 Asian Elephants. However, it is Wild Boar, Sambar, Hog and Barking Deer, Rhesus and Assamese Macaques, Capped Langur and Malayan Giant Squirrel that are amongst the common mammals most likely to be seen. Such other mammals as Gaur, Sloth Bear and Himalayan Black Bear, Dhole, Leopard and Tiger require exceptional luck!

The park is a haven for birds, over 315 species having been recorded. A healthy population of the rarely seen Ibisbill is perhaps the highlight, along with a large population of three hornbill species – Great, Oriental Pied and Wreathed Hornbill. Blue-bearded Bee-eaters and a wide range of babbler species may also be along the Bharali River.

We will enjoy a walk around the eco camp to look for birds and mammals, then later board inflatable dinghies for around three hours float trip down the Bharali River through the park. In the afternoon, we must return by

road to Tezpur where our ship will be waiting and spend four hours cruising down river past Singri Hill to Orang National Park.

Day 11

Friday

Brahmaputra Cruise: Orang National Park

In the morning we will transfer onto a smaller vessel in order to cruise up a side stream into the heart of Orang National Park where we will disembark and take a jeep safari through the park.

Orang, like Nameri, was given 'wildlife sanctuary' status in 1985, before becoming a national park in 1999. It spans 78 square kilometres and lies along the north bank of the Brahmaputra River. Known as 'Mini Kaziranga', it is a low-lying reserve that protects similar habitats to Kaziranga, notably seasonally-inundated swamps and river islands interspersed with broad tracts of tall elephant grass, open forest, watercourses (known as Jheels) and reedbeds. The park holds a reasonable population of Greater Indian One-horned Rhinoceros, whilst other mammals include Asian Elephants, Sambar, Hog and Barking Deer, and small numbers of Tigers (seen very occasionally by our groups here) and Leopards. Recently the little-known and extremely elusive Pygmy Hog has been discovered here, though our chances of seeing one are perhaps a little slim!

The park is an exceptional haven for waterbirds, with winter visitors and migratory species prominent, especially at the time of our visits. Such specialities as Spot-billed Pelican, Black-necked Stork, Greater and Lesser Adjutant, and Pallas's Fishing Eagle may all be seen here and, with luck, we may also see the rare and elusive Bengal Florican of which the park holds 30-40.

In the afternoon we board our smaller vessel once again and cruise back to our ship, the RV Sukapha or the RV Charaidew and start cruising downstream to Ganesh Pahar.

Day 12

Saturday

Brahmaputra Cruise: Ganesh Pahar, Peacock Island & Guwahati

This morning we will take our country boat down towards a range of jungle-covered hills and stop at the idyllic, isolated and roadless, village of Ganesh Pahar, just at their edge. Here we will spend the day walking and birdwatching in the rice paddies and in the unspoilt forest of the hills. This afternoon's voyage is particularly pretty, with jungle-covered hills lining the south bank. We should reach Guwahati around in the afternoon, leaving us time to visit Peacock Island (with its population of Golden Langur monkeys) and then to land on the main river-front for a visit into town where, for the keen birders in the party, the rubbish dump has its attractions in the form of visiting Greater Adjutant Storks, one of the subcontinent's most endangered bird species. If time does not permit, then we will visit Peacock Island next day in the morning before visiting Kamakhya Temple.

We will return to our ship for our final night aboard.

Day 13

Sunday

End Brahmaputra Cruise; Fly Kolkata

This morning we will pay a visit to Nilachal Hill, high above Guwahati, where a good selection of birds may be found in the woodland surrounding the Kamakhya Temple. We must later disembark and transfer to Guwahati airport for our flight at 1525 hours to Kolkata, arriving at 1640 hours. On arrival we will be transferred to a city hotel, where we spend the night.

Day 14

Monday

Fly London

We depart our hotel early in the morning to catch our return flight to London (scheduled to depart at 0855 hours), via Dubai, with Emirates. We are scheduled to arrive in London at 1815 hours.

Please note that the itinerary outlined above is strictly subject to river conditions and daylight hours, which change continually. It offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse conditions or weather or other local considerations may necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the cruise. Any such changes will always be done to maximise the best use of time and weather conditions available.

Sunderbans Extension

The Sunderbans is a unique area; extending for over 1,000,000 hectares, it is the world's largest delta, formed by the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers, and spanning two countries – India and Bangladesh (the latter having the lion's share). Here, in the region's extensive mangrove forests, remains the world's largest concentration of Tigers – a population with an unenviable reputation for man-eating (though it will be our aim not to be on the menu during this tour!). Here the contours of the landscape remain in a constant state of flux, on account of annual monsoon flooding. Roughly one third of the delta is water, consisting of rivers, channels and tidal creeks that can be up to five kilometres wide. On the Indian side of the delta the Sunderbans National Park overlooks the Bay of Bengal and is the focus of this holiday extension.

Day 14

Monday

Sunderbans National Park

The Sunderbans is accessed from Kolkata by travelling south-east by road for 86 kilometres, through wetlands and agricultural land, to Sonakhali. From here we will take a two-and-a-half-hour boat ride from Sonakhali jetty to our lodge, which is well appointed but simple in style, albeit with en suite facilities.

Day 15 – 17

Tuesday – Thursday

Sunderbans National Park

The Sunderbans is steaming and untamed, a vast area covering 4,264 square kilometres in India alone, with a larger portion (60%) in Bangladesh. The 2,585 square kilometres of the Indian Sunderbans that are protected within the Sunderbans National Park and Tiger Reserve form the largest protected area in India. The region received UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 1997, it being the world's largest estuarine forest – a stretch of

impenetrable mangrove forest of great size and harbouring an incredible bio-diversity. Fishing, timber extraction and honey collection are the main human activities allowed within the Sunderbans.

To the naturalist, the best known inhabitant of the Sunderbans is the Tiger, of which the delta harbours the largest single population in the world (estimated at 250 individuals). The Tigers inhabiting this mangrove wilderness have become adept at living a semi-aquatic lifestyle and have also gained a reputation for aggression, attacking the honey-collectors and fisherman entering their domain. Despite their relatively large numbers, the Sunderban Tigers are not easy to see and are generally strictly nocturnal, resting up during the heat of the day. Mammals that are more easy to see include Wild Boar, Spotted Deer and Rhesus Macaque, whilst such interesting smaller mammals as Fishing Cat and Small-clawed Otter are occasionally seen. The mangroves also provide a home for many large reptiles such as the Indian Rock Python, King Cobra, Water Monitor, Estuarine Crocodile and the Olive Ridley Turtle, the latter the subject of a conservation programme in the Indian national park. Regrettably Leopard, Javan Rhinoceros, Swamp Deer and Water Buffalo have all become extinct in the delta in recent decades emphasizing the urgent need for the conservation of the area.

Birds will be amongst the highlights in this watery national park, especially a wide range of wetland birds, colourful kingfishers, and many mangrove specialities such as Masked Finfoot, Mangrove Pitta and Mangrove Whistler. We also have a slim chance of encountering dolphins, three species of which regularly occur – Gangetic River Dolphin, Irrawaddy Dolphin and Indo-Pacific Dolphin.

We will need good fortune to observe a Tiger during our excursions but this extension will allow participants to view a unique and severely threatened aquatic habitat, mostly by means of boat excursions.

Day 18

Friday

Kolkata

After a final excursion in the park, we will drive back to Kolkata and will be transferred to one of the comfortable city hotels.

Day 19

Saturday

Kolkata

Most of the morning is at leisure to relax or enjoy the historical city. We depart Kolkata in the evening at 2030 on Emirates' scheduled flight to London, via Dubai.

Day 20

Sunday

London

Arrive London at 0700.

Other extensions

If you don't fancy our scheduled Sunderbans extension, we should be delighted to tailor a holiday extension for you that is suited to your particular objectives and needs. You might wish to sample some of the cultural delights of India, for example, or even to visit another national park or tiger reserve. In India, anything is possible; just call our very own India consultant, Rajan Jolly, on 01962 73301, for expert advice.

Grading

The nature of this holiday – based aboard a 'cruise vessel' – is essentially relaxing! However, a fairly full programme of 'land excursions' is offered within the itinerary above and these include birdwatching and cultural walks, boat journeys, jeep safaris and elephant rides (subject to availability). Those wishing to participate in all the activities will need to be reasonably fit, mobile and healthy. It should be noted, however, that all activities are essentially optional, allowing you to pick and choose those that you wish to join.

Weather

Hot, dry and sunny weather is expected throughout this holiday, although it will be chilly in the early mornings and evenings, particularly during December's and February's morning game-drives in the national parks, when a jacket/fleece, hat, gloves and several layers may all be needed. The February and March departures takes place during the end of the Indian winter and dry season (though as Assam has the highest rainfall on Earth there is perhaps no season that can genuinely be considered a dry season!).

Daytime temperatures in February and March range from 20°C to about 25°C+, with cold nights (ca 5°C). By late March and April it will be hotter, with daytime temperatures in the region of 25-35°C or more, dropping to around 20°C at night. Rain is possible but welcome at this time of year. It will be very hot in the afternoons – sun hats, sun cream, cotton clothes and shorts all being needed.

Food & accommodation

The cost of all meals and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday, with the exception of lunches and dinners in Kolkata (as the range of restaurants here is exceptional, and well worth taking advantage of). Allow £40. Meals served 'on ship' are a mixture of Assamese (milder than most Indian cuisine) and continental.

Our cruise vessels, the 38-metre RV Sukapha and RV Charaidew, are a twin-engine steel-hulled passenger boats. RV Sukapha was constructed as recently as 2006 and RV Charaidew was converted in 2003. She offers en-suite accommodation in 12 roomy, air-conditioned cabins, each with en-suite shower and toilet, a spacious dining room, a comfortable saloon with French windows that open onto a balcony deck, and a large sundeck, all furnished with locally-made cane rattan chairs and sun-loungers. In Kolkata we overnight in a comfortable 3-star hotel in the heart of the old city. All rooms have private facilities.

Flights

We use the scheduled service of Emirates for all our tours to India because they offer an excellent all-round service (including departures from Manchester or Birmingham, though such departures from regional airports may be subject to an additional charge) and competitive fares.

The sole disadvantage is a 1½-hour transit time in Dubai on the outbound flight, and a 2-hour transit time on the return – inbound – flight.

If you would prefer a direct flight, you have a choice of Air India. We will gladly arrange a direct flight for you, but please give us plenty of warning, and expect to pay approximately between £150 and £200 extra for flights with Air India. If you decide to use Air India direct flight, please also note that we need to add an extra night in the beginning and two extra nights at the end to the length of your tour, due to the flight timings, at an extra cost of approximately £125 per night. These prices are only approximate and could vary according to availability and season. We will be pleased to approach the respective airline and offer you a quote on request.

If you would prefer to travel Business or First Class, please call us for competitive quotes.

If you would prefer to travel from Manchester or Birmingham, please let us know at the time of booking so that we can make the necessary arrangements and obtain a competitive fare.

Entry requirements

All UK passport holders and most other nationalities require a visa for India, which is obtainable in advance from your nearest High Commission or Embassy. No vaccinations are mandatory for entry, but as recommended in our brochure we think it is wise to be protected against TB, polio, typhoid, tetanus and hepatitis A and take malaria prophylactics. We recommend that you consult your GP or local Travel Health Clinic about your requirements as soon as possible before travelling.

Clothing

A full list of our suggested items to take is included in the Pre-departure Information which will be sent to you on receipt of your booking form. Take lightweight clothing for daytime wear; however, warm clothes will be needed for early mornings and evenings which can be very chilly. Khaki and other "bush" colours are recommended, as bright colours can often scare the animals. A wide-brimmed hat is essential protection from heat-stroke and sunburn. Please inspect the separate clothing list, sent to you on booking, thoroughly.

Focus

Birds, mammals and local culture.

Tour leaders

Nick Acheson, Sujan Chatterjee, Manoj Sharma or Tika Ram Giri, plus local guides.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to India. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to

assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.fco.gov.uk/travel or telephone 0870 6060290 regularly prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read our main Naturetrek brochure and complete and return the enclosed booking form, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus the full cost of the insurance premium, if required. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please give us a call on 01962 733051, and we will gladly post one to you. Alternatively, you are welcome to book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk or by calling on 01962 733051.

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Excerpt from our Naturetrek Newsletter (May 2009)

Written by Nick Acheson (Naturetrek Tour Leader on February 2009 cruise)

‘Oh, it’s just another rhino.’ That’s not the sort of thing you hear every day; but it’s exactly the sort of thing you hear if you’re leading Naturetrek’s fantastic new Brahmaputra Cruise. Ho hum, just another Greater One-horned Rhinoceros. Now, I’m a big fan of rhinos. It’s just that when you’re astride an elephant, rolling across the misty grasslands of the fabled Kaziranga National Park, and you’ve already seen thirty rhinos that morning (in addition to the twenty-five you saw the day before), and then a critically endangered Bengal Florican flashes its persil-white wings over a plain dotted with countless hundreds of Hog Deer, Wild Buffalo, Wild Boar and Barasingha, all to the sound of Bengal Bushlarks, it’s hard to lend your full attention to yet another rhino emerging from the grass.

But that’s just the way things are along the Brahmaputra. You hardly know where to look. Take our visit to Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary for example. On our first Brahmaputra Cruise, in February 2009, we rolled up at the sanctuary gate and were met by park rangers frantically pointing to the trees above their guard station, where a family of Hoolock Gibbons was perched – inky black males and youngsters and a dusky-brown female clutching a tiny newborn. While we watched the delightful play of the gibbons, there was more frantic pointing from the rangers – to the opposite side of the clearing where they’d found two magnificent Malayan Giant Squirrels. Later, during our breakfast there, a family of apricot-hued Capped Langurs appeared by the same clearing, causing cups of tea to go flying in the rush to see them.

The breakfast, I should add, despite our locale in the middle of nowhere, was delicious and was served with flawless attention to detail and with big smiles. It must be said that everything done by the staff and crew of our vessel, R.V. Sukapha, is done with impeccable grace, flawless attention and enormous smiles. Sukapha’s cabins are spacious, well-appointed and spotlessly clean, and the meals, always precisely on time, are delicious, especially

when served on a beach, under the stars, with crewmembers singing plaintive songs in Assamese against the murmur of the mighty Brahmaputra.

Sukapha herself is undoubtedly a highlight, on a tour which frankly is packed full of wildlife and cultural highlights. One day we're visiting Mising tribal villages where the local people graciously invite us into their homes to see their traditional crafts and share their rice wine. The next day we're entranced by monks drumming and dancing, as they have for centuries, in honour of Lord Vishnu.

And yet another day we're visiting Nameri National Park where, paddled expertly by local tribesmen, we're drifting on rubber rafts down a bright river, with Ibisbills and Common Mergansers patrolling the stony shallows, Great Thick-knees prowling the beaches, and the sharp calls of Small Pratincoles and River Terns overhead.

But to watch wonderful wildlife, you need hardly leave the refined comfort of Sukapha's top deck. In winter the banks of the vast Brahmaputra teem with waterfowl, cormorants, herons and gulls; and trained on them are the hungry eyes of Peregrine, Pallas' Fish-Eagle, White-tailed Eagle, Golden Eagle and Long-legged Buzzard. Kingfishers, martins, bee-eaters and swallows crowd the skies and a Grey-headed Fish-Eagle or a Great Pied Hornbill perches in riverside forest. Cheers go up from the group for each Gangetic Dolphin that leaps clear of the great river. And in February, as Sukapha passed Kaziranga to the south, we saw a glorious Asian Elephant tusk, a herd of Wild Buffalo, innumerable Hog Deer and, yes, a Greater One-horned Rhino. Just another rhino.

If you think you could bear to see so many rhinos, with an incomparable supporting cast of elephants, monkeys, gibbons, and birds, set against the great landscapes of Assam, and all the while be cared for by our gracious, beaming Assamese hosts – if you really think you could bear it – join us for our unrivalled Brahmaputra Cruise.

PYGMY HOG SIGHTING (On April 2009 cruise)

On our latest April Brahmaputra Cruise tour Sujan Chatterjee, a highly experienced local guide, sent us some very exciting news – a sighting of the world's rarest species of pig, the Pygmy Hog. Sujan, who is an authority on the wildlife of the region, saw two Pygmy Hogs. This may be just the second recorded sighting of the species in Orang National Park and could represent the discovery of a truly wild population in this reserve.

Sujan and four Naturetrek clients made the sighting of an adult and baby hog on 10th April as the animals crossed a jeep track in Orang National Park, right in front of the Naturetrek group. 'The Pygmy Hogs walked onto the road,' says Sujan, 'stopped for a few seconds and went off the other side. I was very excited and immediately contacted Dr Parag Dekka of the Nameri reintroduction scheme for the hogs.'

Naturetrek tour leader and operations manager Rajan Jolly was on the April tour. 'The Pygmy Hog sighting was definitely a very exciting moment,' says Rajan, 'but the whole cruise was full of wonderful sightings.'

'For me the Bengal Floricans were great – they're a very unusual bird – and a sighting's something akin to seeing 100 Tigers all in one go! In total we saw 259 different species of birds and 19 species of mammals. I lost count of the elephants – but one day we had two herds of about 70; and rhinos – about 20. It was a really superb trip!'