

Cruising The Mighty Brahmaputra

Steve travels the world in style. This issue, he's in North India aboard Pandaw.

by Steve Leland





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STEPPING ABOARD THE RV *KINDAT* PANDAW

in Guwahati was the culmination of an 8,000-mile journey and the beginning of a highly anticipated river cruise in Northeast India. Showered by a cascade of marigold petals scattered by the captain from the deck above, greeted with a necklace of flowers and a welcome drink, we're not looking back. Well, actually we are!

Having previously experienced Pandaw's

unique style of river cruising in Laos and Vietnam, this arrival stoked fond memories of the company's small-ship hospitality. The infectious smiles of the crew and casual ambience are hallmarks of this line, where there is never a queue, never a rush, and always fellowship between adventuresome guests.

ENTERING NORTHERN INDIA

The Brahmaputra River begins in the northern Tibetan Himalayas, carving

its way through India and Bangladesh before spilling into a sprawling delta and the Bay of Bengal. With the rainy season complete, *Kindat* sails upstream and weaves through an itinerary of authentic 7-night adventures from mid autumn until early spring. It's a feast for the senses as the 36-passenger vessel explores tribal villages, the bounty of nature, stunning landscapes, and the wildlife that thrives deep in the hinterlands of India.

The expedition

begins with a stroll through a nameless community of Bangladesh refugees, revealing colorful dress, goats, chickens, and youngsters curiously peering at our band of camera-toting outsiders. Unrecognized by the government as Indian citizens, their survival is dependent on their own efforts to plant crops and fish the river for essential sustenance.

Back on board, our waiter Irfan strikes the gong signaling lunch time, followed by an afternoon of

engaging activity. As *Kindat* navigates the river, Chef Kunal provides an interesting explanation of Indian spices that leads into late-afternoon happy hour with canapés and cocktails against a spectacular backdrop of a blazing sunset. Evenings are highlighted by multicourse celebrations in the form of artistic dinner platings featuring regional flavors shown off in curries as well as seafood and vegetarian offerings.

THE WILDERNESS OF SOUTH ASIA

Pandaw's concept of river cruising is built on regional history, culture, and nature with the daily enrichment sessions provided by a naturalist guide preparing us for what we will encounter on complimentary excursions into untamed India.

The Kaziranga National Park is a breeding ground for elephants, water buffalo, scores of bird species including the great hornbill, and has recently been declared a tiger reserve. That is exciting enough, but we've come to witness the miraculous rebound of the iconic one-horned rhino. From only 12 in existence in 1905, today the park is home to over 2,400 of these magnificent creatures.

Donning our imaginary Indiana Jones personae, we hop into open-air rovers for a full day of tracking

wildlife inside this flourishing reserve. Within minutes, we brandish our cameras and phones to capture an up-close sighting of a mother rhino and her baby, the monumental animals seemingly oblivious to the excitement they have created.

Just as our heart rates are about to return to normal, a group of Asian elephants and rhinos appear on the horizon. Filling photo albums with the park's menagerie of water buffalo, swamp deer, wild boar, birds, and deep forest scenery makes for happy campers posting to Instagram until late in the night.

NATURE AND MAGIC AN EARLY MORNING

entry into the Nameri National Park provides an opportunity to commune with nature, floating gently downstream

on a raft with the peaks of the Himalayas looming over the distant horizon. Ever on the lookout for migratory birds and local wildlife along the river bank, the outing finishes as our van meets us downstream and transfers us to the bustling market town of Tezpur.

The ruins of a 9th-century panchayatana temple devoted to Lord Vishnu overlook the city high atop the Bamuni Hills. Once a prominent site of worship, intricately carved granite stones are scattered as massive boulders here due to frequent earthquakes.

As the waning hours of sunlight give way to another blazing sunset, *Kindat* slides alongside a sandy, 7-foot-tall bank and ties up to bamboo stakes driven into the ground. The crew starts up a

roaring bonfire on the massive mid-river sand stage and initiates a game of cricket with guests as the chef fires up a barbecue grill for snacks. It's an impromptu night of Bollywood music, fireworks, and cocktails that mix to make pure magic.

The magical spell continues the next morning with a visit to Mayang Village. Although black magic has been banned throughout India, the practice rebelliously continues in this village. A ride by tuk-tuk transports guests to a museum documenting the practice, and continues on with a visit to the home of a local shaman for magic demonstrations. The journey is not over till it's over, and the day before heading back to Guwahati, *Kindat* detours around the city for a visit to a silk farm.

SHE'S GOT THE LOOK

The outward profile of *Kindat Pandaw* is reminiscent of bygone colonial charm, with each room opening to a balcony-like promenade providing access to the open air. The polished wood floors of the upper deck's alfresco lounge remains true to the style: a full canopy gives shade and wicker chairs and chaise longues proffer unhindered views of the passing countryside.

Cocooned in comfort, void of a swanky aesthetic, yet far above basic, this river ship showcases cultural authenticity and makes itself an escape from the crush of overdeveloped tourism. If the allure of India starts shaping your travel plans, the great river of the Northeast is essential. The Brahmaputra can deliver every element of the ideal cruise adventure.●



Pandaw (6)





HERE'S THE DEAL WITH DELHI

In spite of New Delhi's traffic, the resulting smog, and the grittiness of a city of 26 million people, you'll discover a metropolitan area positioned among forest greenery, where boulevards are shaded by spectacular banyans and massive roundabouts encircling landscaped mini-parks.

Navigating the kinetic energy of this destination is not a DIY adventure, and we chose the experts at Sayang Holidays to curate every detail of a 3-day pre-cruise itinerary. The comfort of being personally greeted as we stepped out of the airport, of having a private guide for exploration of New Delhi, and a side journey to Agra with its iconic Taj Mahal, proved invaluable.

Monuments, mosques, and markets are everywhere, and strolling through narrow

alleyways packed with shops hawking everything imaginable is an eye opener. Tailors, jewelers, and fruit-and-vegetable vendors are interspersed with makeshift cafes, handicrafts, shoes, clothing, and wedding-apparel shops. Hindu and Sikh temples peacefully cohabitate next door to Muslim mosques.

A 100-acre spiritual oasis and intricately designed shrines surround the spectacular Akshardham Temple, widely heralded as one of the greatest monuments India has ever produced. Visits to the Gandhi memorial site, the sprawling Red Fort, and Memorial Gate conclude with a breathtaking exploration of Humayun's Tomb, a magnificent example of Mughal garden-tomb architecture constructed in the 16th century.

While every attraction of Old and New Delhi is impressive in its own right, nothing compares to the majestic, extravagant beauty of the Taj Mahal in Agra, a monument conceived by an emperor as a symbol of love to his wife. This white-marble masterpiece, overlooking the Yamuna River was constructed by 20,000 workers over a period of 22 years. The mausoleum is surrounded by elaborate gardens, a mosque, and palatial buildings. The nearby red-sandstone Agra Fort dominates the landscape and surrounds the palatial grounds once occupied by Emperor Shah Jahan.

Unfortunately, our travel schedule precluded us from participating in Sayang Holidays' popular and more in-depth Golden Triangle itinerary that includes Jaipur, but this pre-cruise journey of discovery has us planning a return to India's mystical allure.