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spaced out

The remote, untrammelled state of Assam is India in slow-mo. There are tea plantations, elephants and tigers, but also vast river plains, startling remnants of ancient kingdoms and a way of living seemingly unchanged in centuries

By Horatio Clare. Photographs by Alistair Taylor-Young





THE ENCHANTED KINGDOM OF ASSAM, known as the Land of Lahe Lahe (slowly slowly), is famous for tea plantations. Its peach-and-blue twilights, tiger forests, the bright flash of parakeets and the bustlings of mynah birds are little known beyond the borders of this remote Indian state. But having been there, this is what I picture when I think of Assam now, and the mists rising from the great Brahmaputra river into the soft, sweet air.

Many inhabitants of this finger of India, which lies east of Bangladesh and reaches up towards Burma, are descended from the 17th-century Tai Ahom dynasty; others have Burmese, Tibetan and Bhutanese forebears. The combination of races has given many Assamese an astonishing physical beauty, to which they have added a natural elegance and courtesy. Unrest, distance and obscurity have conspired to keep the world and Assam apart. It remains a rock pool of traditional ways. You see little or nothing of the poverty and desperation of other parts of India; instead, the largely agrarian population live and farm as the Assamese have for centuries. Some of those I met said – with a mixture of pride and haplessness – that Assam is like India was 25 years ago.

One account of its origin tells us the name Assam comes from a Sanskrit expression meaning ‘the place that is not flat’. This is initially puzzling, as most of the landscape – lying on the Brahmaputra’s flood plain between the Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal – certainly is. But invaders or travellers coming from the west, from India and Bangladesh, first encountered ranges of hills before the great, wide valley of the Brahmaputra opened before them, reclining in its jewel greens. Another possible explanation seems just as convincing: that the word comes from ‘Asama’, which is Thai for ‘peerless’.

I landed in Dibrugarh in the east and traversed the state to Guwahati in the west, travelling the two parallel threads which stretch the length of Assam: the river, and a simple two-lane road with a low speed limit, the Assam Trunk Road, part of which forms the oldest section of Asian Highway One. Somewhere far beyond the horizon, the highway connects Korea and Turkey and Iran, all of which seem semi-imaginary and implausibly far away from this ancient, sleepy place.

The vast, braided and silverish waterway of Brahmaputra, Assam’s heart and artery, is an antecedent river, older than the Himalayas themselves. Everywhere on its huge and quiet flood plain, scattered with great white egrets and water buffalo, there is a feeling that time has not so much stopped as aged. Near the city of Jorhat I boarded the *MV Charaidew*, a river cruiser built in colonial style: wide, flat-bottomed with cabins done out in bamboo and hardwoods. Watching the river banks go by, I felt like a successful tea planter from the 1940s. Plugs of water hyacinth slid down the great stream, as if the whole world were a tilted glass table. The air was apricot and the bird calls so profuse it seemed to me the mists were singing.

Before setting sail I visited temples and tombs around Jorhat and met two young women in bright clothes who were passing their Sunday afternoon visiting Rang Ghar, a historic pavilion of pleasure built of terracotta stone. Their dark and defined brows gave them a classical Assamese look which made me think of mynah birds. Falconry and sports were once practiced in the grounds of Rang Ghar. The two women – Rimizim Gogoi,

Left, on a plantation in Assam, India’s largest tea-growing region. Previous pages, elephants in the mist at Kaziranga National Park. Following pages, crossing a paddy field near Jorhat

a student, and Amropoli Kakoty, a librarian – are regular temple-goers who worship Shiva, as did the Tai-Ahom kings who built this place.

‘We feel proud when we come here,’ Rimzim said. ‘This is our culture.’

Despite their mobile phones and social-media profiles, the women appeared as a living continuation – in their beliefs, pleasures and pastimes – of that ancient dynasty. Kings may no longer watch falconry from the boat-like decks of Rang Ghar, but otherwise little has changed.

THE FIRST STOP ON MY RIVER CRUISE WAS AT MAJULI, the second-biggest river island in the world, a stronghold of priests living in relaxed orders. The monks may leave at any time. Should they choose to do so they are free to marry without

contradicting their vows. Their families and friends visit regularly. Here the boys and men study dance and music, so intensively and so successfully that many have travelled to international festivals in Europe. Drums, gongs, bells and athletic moves are their currency.

Babur Ram Saikia, now 21, was only five when his father put him in the care of a senior monk. Today he is a handsome, likeable young man, a cultural-studies graduate with perfect English who lives and trains in the marigold sun of Majuli and travels widely. The monastery gave him all this, and he remembers none of the homesickness or isolation many privileged Westerners experience when they are sent away to boarding school.

‘It is a happy place,’ he said. ‘There were many young children; I visited my parents and they visited me. For us, dancing and making music are ways of worshipping God.’

I WATCHED THE RIVER BANKS GO BY. THE AIR WAS APRICOT AND T



I disembarked from our little ship and stayed in a hut near a village called Garmur on the edge of broad water-meadows. Herdsmen called, water pumps squeaked and gushed, black goats and cream cows added their voices. Shuttles clacked across the looms and the shuffle-thump of women's staves, pounding rice, laid a slow beat beneath the day. We might have been in Burma or Laos, on some near-eternal jungle's fringe in the Orient.

The next day I left the river and took to the road, moving to Thengal Manor, a huge, high-ceilinged palace of a bungalow made famous locally in the 1930s by its owner, Dahnik Batori Batori, a well-known politician, newspaperman and littérateur. It stands near the border with Kaziranga, Assam's great national park, which is Thengal Manor's main attraction for visitors. All around, the tea plantations were budding with their First Flush, the fruit of the first rains and a prized

crop. The British are kindly remembered in Assam thanks to our help with tea cultivation, and also a series of military interventions which first drove out the Burmese, then halted the Japanese advance on India during World War II. The subject of tea is often raised around here and any visitor will soon become well versed on the various combinations of flavours and strengths depending on which flush or plant, and how the leaves are treated. The dark, nutty strains were by far my favourite, although like a heathen I continued to lash them with milk and sugar.

At my next home, Diphlu River Lodge in Kaziranga National Park, the conversation moved from tea to tigers. Thrilled guests discussed brief sightings. But, despite attempts to tempt the great beasts with murmured tiger twaddle ('Tigers in red weather; the tiger who came to tea; tyger tyger burning bright') while gazing

BIRD CALLS SO PROFUSE IT SEEMED THE MISTS WERE SINGING









Village life in rural Assam.
Previous pages, from left:
an elephant in Kaziranga
National Park; a holy man

across the park's tranquil lakes and grassland, a dream-like scape spotted with elephants and rhinos, I remained unlucky. Early in the morning my guide took me to a very quiet track near the river, away from the permitted trail, and I scoured the bush for beasts' eyes blazing, convinced I was being watched. Even if you see no tiger, nobody can say that one does not see you.

After the lackadaisical heat of the day, Assam comes back to life in the evening. The lodge is set around a paddy field on the banks of the Diphlu river. Every evening lanterns and candles are lit around its little huts on stilts and the delightful, tree-house-like bar, casting starry reflections in the water. Out in the great darkness of the park the tigers stirred, and their protectors, the forest guards, gathered around their cooking fires.

Elephants are still the preferred conveyance of the forest guards who mount anti-poaching patrols in the park. In a still grey dawn I went on an elephant-back safari, mounted on 35-year-old Hunmala, a most gentle and tolerant beast. On our slow, rocking tour of the swamps and savannahs of her environment we sidled up to rhinos and were subjected to the searching stare of a crested serpent eagle. The bluing morning air was busy with the flights of lapis lazuli-coloured rollers

people were chanting, bowed before them. An astrologer priest, Pulen Sharmar, named the nine. 'Moon. Mars. Dragonhead. Saturn. Dragontail. Jupiter. Mercury. Venus,' he said, moving round them clockwise from six. In the middle was the sun. The bas reliefs of the Hindu gods which glare through the gloom are sixth century AD; the domed temple enclosing them and their shrine was built in the late 1700s, but the worship of planets here dates back to the founding of Guwahati, to the sixth century, when the stone figures were carved.

Sharmar told me people have been travelling to this small sunny hill for centuries to consult men like him. For a full astrological reading he needs a week and the exact time of birth (if you are not Indian, and therefore subject to a different calendar). Did his study of the skies and the characteristic effects of stars have any limit, I asked through an interpreter, or, having done this for more than 20 years, did he now have a full astrological map of the heavens in his head?

'No, no, the universe is like a sea,' he said. 'You cannot finish it. To be able to excel at my job I have to think positively of everything living.'

I asked which was his favourite planet.

I WAS CONVINCED I WAS BEING WATCHED. EVEN IF YOU SEE NO TIGER, NOBODY CAN SAY THAT ONE DOES NOT SEE YOU

and rufous treepies. I was entirely happy; studying the world of an elephant from the back of an elephant is a deeply immersive experience which induces a kind of reverie.

BACK ON THE ROAD ON THE LAST LEG OF MY JOURNEY to the state capital of Dispur in Guwahati, I paused at a truck stop to examine the splendid, hand-painted liveries and slogans on the hulking vehicles, direct descendants, at least in transport terms, of the elephant. Blow Horn Bhullar Lovedeep. Mum It's My World (on the front). It's In Your Lap (on back). Don't Look At Me With Rude Eyes. One, a carnival of decoration, even sported elephant's ears in the form of silver aluminium brackets placed up behind the cab. The drivers washed their vehicles just like mahouts cleaning their charges, and rowed them up together, snouts facing the road. My favourite was owned by a Muslim who had converted to Christianity, and so was covered in homages to Christ the King.

'You arrive at 7am, have a whisky with the other drivers, bath, food, sleep, leave at 5pm. You drive around 450km in the night,' explained the driver, Madhusufhan Reddy, 28, who was transporting 15 tons of eggs. 'I was once kidnapped for 40 days in Nagaland.' (Some Nagas want independence from India and have resorted to kidnapping, ostensibly to make this point, but also as a source of income.) 'They ransomed me and my boss did a deal,' Reddy said. Moving at night allows the drivers to dodge some of the payments they are expected to make to avaricious police officers, though it exposes them to Reddy's main complaint: 'Cyclists with no lights coming towards me on my side of the road.' In fact, for such a busy highway the Assam Trunk Road is carefully navigated, for the most part, with helpful signs urging responsibility: Peep Peep Don't Sleep!

We continued our drive south through the hills to Guwahati, which stands on a wide and beautiful bend in the river, and is the site of the extraordinary Temple of the Nine Planets. In its inner chamber, the nine fires hung low in the darkness and

'Jupiter! When Jupiter is forward it brings happiness, in all senses of the word.'

When Sharmar casts a horoscope with negative aspects, his customers, or congregation, are moved to propitiate and address the influence of the stars through the worship of Krishna and contemplation. This last bit must come easily in Assam. I came across contemplative souls everywhere I went. One of my favourites was Mohar Ali, 52, who I met pedalling a rickshaw near Guwahati's fabulous riverside fish market. As heavenly choirs of bright fish of myriad shapes and colours were hacked, haggled and traded, Mr Ali smiled wryly at one of the challenges of his job: 'Women,' he said. 'They bargain so hard!' Thinking for a moment, he added, 'Foreigners are good people. They treat me well. I hope more will come here. I am old now, I cannot carry on with this forever; it is hard! So I hope they come soon. Thank you.'

I must say I hope not too many will come, and not too soon. Assam is rising slowly, slowly, and that seems just as it should be. 'Jupiter is with you!' the priest Pulen Sharmar cried, as we parted. Jupiter is also with Assam, and I am definitely coming back here, to the place that is not flat, to the limpid benediction of its air, to the scents of jasmine, spice, elephants and diesel, where the children are immaculately turned out and the college students wear their spotless uniforms like costumes, to the oriental sunlight and the jungle darkness where there are – there really are! – tigers, tigers burning bright, in the forests of the night. 🐅

GETTING HERE

Greaves India (+44 7487 9111; greavesindia.com) offers a 10-night trip to Assam from £3,750 per person. This includes return airfares from London to Kolkata with Emirates, internal flights, accommodation at Thengal Manor Hotel in Jorhat, ABN Charaidew Cruise, Prabhakar Homestay, Guwahati, and Diphul River Lodge, all full board, and at The Park Kolkata on a bed-and-breakfast basis, as well as Kaziranga game drives, all transfers, private sightseeing and excursions