



India & Indian Ocean TTG Features

Waters of wonder

A cruise along the Ganges, Hooghly and Brahmaputra rivers is a leisurely way to explore the heart of India. *Amar Grover* immerses himself in the nation's sacred waterways

As the Rajmahal casts off from the riverbank and heads downstream, I make for the sundeck to scan the hazy horizon. A handful of brick kiln chimneys on the outskirts of Patna give way to seemingly endless fields; cattle cluster around shady trees; buffaloes amble along in a neat line. In no time, it seems, we've reached the heart of rural India bisected by a seemingly endless stretch of grey-green water.

Rajmahal is the newest boat of Assam Bengal Navigation (ABN), an Anglo-Indian firm specialising in cruises on the Ganges, Hooghly and Brahmaputra rivers of north India. The Ganges is the country's best-known and most sacred river. On its journey from the Himalayas it passes a handful of cities and navigates a vast chunk of tranquil countryside before reaching the Bay of Bengal.



Preparing to cross the Ganges

For ABN's generally well-heeled and middle-aged clientele, these vessels offer a great way of exploring parts of India that are largely hidden from more conventional tours. A typical day's cruising is punctuated

with guided excursions to an array of historical and archaeological sites. There's usually plenty of "down time", too, for onboard relaxation (including a spa), while sumptuous three-course meals in the dining

room underpin the daily regime. The compact cabins are spotless and comfortable, and the Rajmahal boasts French windows with sliding doors so passengers can enjoy river views in privacy. It is an upmarket product.

Over the following days, I realise it's one likely to appeal not so much to first-time visitors to India but those seeking something different. Apart from Varanasi and Kolkata (Calcutta), most of the cruises' various itineraries involve seldom visited or obscure destinations. Yet this is part of their unique appeal - an experience of the "real" India coupled with the simple pleasure of sailing a vast river in comfort.

So after the near-comical chaos of Patna city, where we visit a Sikh temple and a bizarre 18th-century granary resembling a giant haystack, I eagerly anticipate five days of more leisurely calm. At Pawapuri we stroll across a causeway to a charming Jain temple built in the midst of a lake. In Nalanda, probably the world's first international university, we walk in the ancient footsteps of Buddhist monks who once came in their thousands to study and preach.

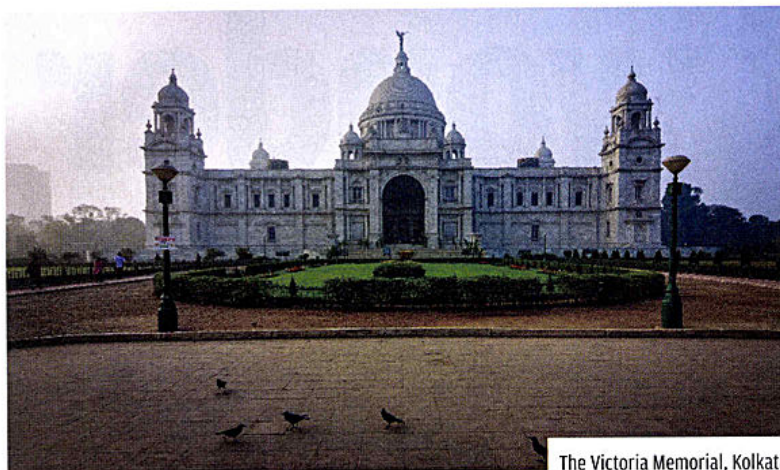
At times the Rajmahal sails close to the riverbank and I can see the astonished faces of villagers who stop and stare. For such a vital river there is surprisingly little traffic. At other times we sail midstream and it is here usually that we pause for the night, in the moonlit, inky darkness. For some excursions we catch a skiff hitched to the main boat to access land, and this added charm underlines the remoteness of some of the places we visit.

One afternoon I see that the ghats, or riverside steps, to which we're heading offer a brilliant splash of colour - a gathering of some 200 women and girls in gleaming saris, carrying clay jars. It's a small local ceremony. Soon they move off in a procession down a dusty

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Life along the river in Kashmir



The Victoria Memorial, Kolkata



Amar Grover

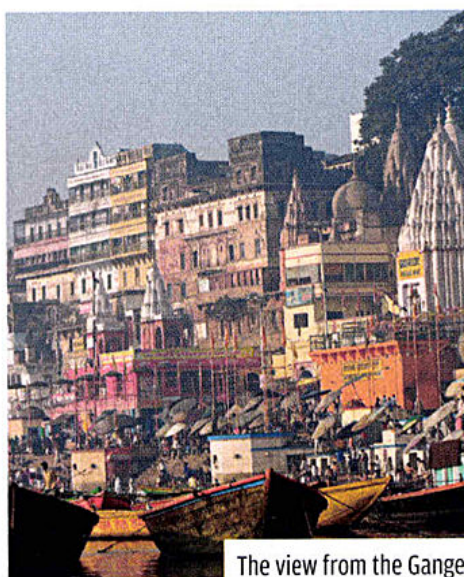
An array of colours along the "ghats" (riverside steps)



track - an unexpectedly magical Indian moment.

On our final afternoon near Farakka's great barrage, we alight to visit an ordinary Bengali village. Undeniably, it's poor and life revolves, as it has for centuries, around agriculture. Yet the locals seem thrilled by our appearance. One of them joins our guide and some of the crew to escort us around its little lanes and cane fields edged with picturesque ponds. We hear blaring music and exuberant dancing; the grinning, slightly tipsy youths of a wedding party pass by. Hands are shaken, eternal friendship is pledged, and everyone's content.

Book it: Assam Bengal Navigation (ABN) operates six seven-day itineraries on the linked Ganges and Hooghly Rivers: Varanasi to/from Patna, Patna to/from Farakka and



The view from the Ganges

Farakka to/from Kolkata (Calcutta). Greaves Travel offers an 11-day package with six nights on ABN's Rajmahal and visits to Murshidabad and Kolkata from £2,750pp in November, including breakfast (full board during the cruise), transfers and all flights.

■ greavesindia.co.uk