

Discover India By Water

River journeys have a charm and lure as powerful as sea voyages. India's waterways—vast, exquisite, teeming with life—offer a languid and restorative way to travel. Here's a pick of five exhilarating experiences.

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The simple action of unplugging from the bright screen of your phone seems a mammoth task in the city. But think of a place where you're wedged in the exuberance of nature, culture, and gorgeous landscapes. Chances are that a 'ping', 'beep' or even the 'whirr' of your vibrating phone will not jolt you into picking up the device that you otherwise remain tethered to. If you've signed up for a manifesto of slow travel, it not only helps you to tune out from the swift pace of the city, but also to experience a destination with a fresh eye. And nothing serves that better than a cruising holiday.

India's vast network of rivers offers a unique perspective to destinations that they coil around. Not only do you get to see life along the river at close quarters, it is the best way to explore the dimensions of a destination that others are likely to miss. We've collated some of the best cruising options in the country for you.

SUNDARBANS & AROUND

Along The Ganges

Spanning the eastern edge of the country can be back-breaking on the road. Cruising on the Ganges, covering

Bihar, West Bengal and even Bangladesh across the border, is ideal. Expect first-row seats (rather, sun beds) to gorgeous countryside views, a tryst with the tigers of the Sunderbans and the flavour of local life. This sector offers a wealth of experiences both onboard and on land. This includes witnessing ancient folk tale performances to gliding close to the thick mangrove forests, with the anticipation of spotting a tiger. Birders are equally happy here, getting to see minivets, orioles, flamebacks, mangrove whistlers, striped tit-babblers, kingfishers and a host of other avian species. One can stop at Bhagabatpur Island, a hatchery and sanctuary for the biggest estuarine crocodiles in the world. The life of the fishermen is glimpsed as you go past Namkhana and its busy markets, where one has to jostle to buy fish, which is then cooked onboard at night. Eventually city lights draw close when the cruise reaches Kolkata, crossing Haldia, Diamond Harbour and Raichak.

NAVIGATOR

Highlights Sunderbans National Park, Bhagabatpur Island

Best time to visit September-February

Recommended cruise operator Vivanda Cruises (www.vivandacruises.com); approximately ₹14,750 plus taxes per double room, inclusive of all meals



ASSAM Natural Treasures

Assam offers one of the most exquisite backgrounds to practise the art of slow travel. Your deck becomes a classroom of culture, history, wildlife and diverse landscapes of Assam as you travel along the Brahmaputra river, looping different parts of the state. When the misty veil of morning lifts from the wide river, think of it as only a curtain raiser to more glamorous visuals during the day. It could be stopping to see the one-horned Indian rhino at the Kaziranga National Park or the tourist-free Vaishnava monasteries of Majuli. You can choose from a vast array of adventures over two to eight days, including visiting the ancient Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati, enjoying the company of river dolphins, and seeing Kaziranga National Park, tea estates, Majuli Islands (India's largest river island), Peacock Island, the homes of the Mishing tribe, and sampling folk culture, performances and other local experiences hinged on food. A week-long trip encapsulates the best of the state.

NAVIGATOR

Highlights Kaziranga National Park, river dolphins, Majuli Island, tribal life

Best time to visit September-February

Recommended cruise operator M.V. Mahabaahu (www.mahabaahucruiseindia.com); from ₹24,000 plus taxes per double room, inclusive of all meals

GOA Beyond The Beaches

Beer and beaches might never pale as the ideal way to relax in Goa but for those who are partial to trails not trodden, cruising on the Mandovi and Zuari rivers provides an alternative way of seeing Goa. You could spend all day in the comfortable lounge chairs on the deck, but the lush greenery all around will nudge you into standing by the rail, spotting kingfishers darting into the water along the island shorelines. Shorter trips are also available. It seems that the rivers have scant regard for the massive Arabian Sea close by. They wend around inconspicuous islands that are drenched in a thousand shades of green. The salubrious surroundings and the gliding down



A cruise on the majestic Brahmaputra in Assam redefines the art of slow travel while enlightening you on the landscape and culture of the state

(Clockwise) Cruising on the Mandovi and Zuari rivers provide an alternate way to see Goa; a cruise through the stunning blue ocean around Lakshadweep offer scuba diving and other activities; some of the houseboats on the Kerala backwaters come equipped with plunge pools and saunas as well



the river channels are excellent for rejuvenation, but you must keep in mind that all this calm and serenity could be swiftly decimated if you're on a large boat that amps up the evenings with DJs. It is recommended to get on a smaller yacht and stick to a low-key affair. Many of the cruises loop in the end to the Panjim riverfront via Miramar, a popular sunset junction.

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Highlights Birding from the deck, a glimpse of an alternative Goa
Best time to visit September-February
Recommended cruise operator Goa Tourism Development Corporation (www.goa-tourism.com); from ₹600 plus taxes per person

LAKSHADWEEP Up Close To The Arabian Sea

Bright white sand, soft as talcum powder, embraces the 36 palm-fringed islands of Lakshadweep. With a handful of humans in sight, and emerald water stretching as far as the eye can see, the ambience is extraordinary as it is. But island hopping on a cruise makes it all the more special when you are onboard a fully equipped vessel. Five-star liners offer round-trip cruises from Kochi to Lakshadweep, a journey of about five days. You can also choose shorter trips for 20 hours among the Lakshadweep islands. The loop from Kochi to the Lakshadweep islands is a popular choice for travellers as one gets to skirt the aqua waters around Minicoy, Kavaratti and Kalpeni Islands and alight to visit the on-ground sights. A lighthouse, cultural evenings with locals, a museum and plenty of water sports are part of the package. A cruise through the stunning blue ocean around Lakshadweep offers scuba diving, snorkelling and other activities.

Photography ALAMY and SHUTTERSTOCK

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Highlights Emerald water, ecological hotspot, scuba diving
Best time to visit September-February
Recommended cruise operator Lakshadweep Samudram by *M.V. Kavaratti* (www.mvkavaratti.com); approximately ₹25,000 plus taxes, inclusive of AC double room, all meals and activities

ALLEPPEY-KUMARAKOM Life In A Slow Lane

A backwater experience in a houseboat is a Kerala staple. The capillary-like network of canals in Alleppey are fringed with dense green foliage and colourful villages. Why not explore the region at the local pace and rhythm? While premium houseboats with bedrooms and a dining area feel much like home, they also offer a novel experience for the eyes. Some of the houseboats on the Kerala backwaters come equipped with plunge pools and saunas as well.

But the highlight remains gliding under the footbridges, watching local women wash clothes at the edge of the water and men walking in bright white *munds* (wraparounds), slippers slapping at the heels. The Alleppey canals open into the sprawling Vembanad lake, at the other end of which lies Kumarakom. Even though shorter cruises for a few hours are available, it is recommended to sign up for the 22-hour trip that includes local meals and an overnight halt. Expect to be anchored at the edge of the lake or a canal, bobbing gently. ♦

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Highlights Seeing local life at close quarters
Best time to visit September-February
Recommended cruise operator Spice Routes (www.spiceroutes.in); from ₹33,500 plus taxes for the entire boat, inclusive of all meals