



**The Crafts and Textiles of Assam  
with Kaziranga National Park  
16 Days/15 Nights  
Starting point – Delhi or Kolkata**

**Activities**

**Overnight**

- Day 1** Morning flight to Bagdogra in West Bengal. Upon arrival, you will drive to the Dooars Valley, a fertile region of alluvial floodplains that serves as a gateway to Bhutan. Dooars is known for its robust tea and timber industries, as well as its superb wildlife parks. This afternoon you are free to relax at your hotel.
- Day 2** Morning drive to Cooch Behar (a.k.a. Koch Bihar), the only planned city in northern West Bengal that still retains remnants of its royal past. The Cooch dynasty came to power in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, but was captured by the king of Bhutan in 1772. The following year, the Cooch rulers signed a defense treaty with the British East India Company, and thus became a princely kingdom under its protection. Cooch Bihar is the ancestral home of Maharani Gayatri Devi, the third Maharani consort of Jaipur and a member of Indian Parliament in the 1960s. This morning you will visit Cooch Behar Palace, built in 1887 by Maharaja Nripendra Narayan. It was designed in the Indo-Saracenic style, and features an Italian dome similar to that at St. Peters in Rome.

Dooars

Dhubri

After lunch, continue driving to Dhubri, crossing the border into Assam. The Seven Sisters of India - Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Manipur - are located in the remote, northeastern part of the country. This region shares borders with China, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar, and contains a wide variety of ethnic communities and remarkable flora and fauna. Unfolding along the Brahmaputra River, the state of Assam is the largest of the Seven Sisters, famous for its tea and oil plantations and its wild population of one-horned rhinoceros. The only river in India to have a male name, the Brahmaputra (Son of Brahma, Creator of the Universe) is an integral part of life in Assam.

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| <b>Day 3</b> | <p>Morning visit to the Gurudwara Sri Guru Tegbahadur Sahibji, an important Sikh pilgrimage sight located on the banks of the Brahmaputra River. This gurudwara was established in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century by the ninth Sikh Guru on a site visited in 1505 by Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion. Afternoon visit to the village of Asharikandi, where you will watch artisans create water pitchers, cooking utensils, religious icons and toys out of terracotta. This village is known all over India for its <i>Hatima Putul</i> (elephant mother doll), which depicts a mother with elephant-like ears holding a child on her lap. You will then spend time with village artisans who create colorful paper toys and decorative objects. Drive to Bongaigaon for overnight.</p>   | Bongaigaon |
| <b>Day 4</b> | <p>Morning departure for Sarthebari, where you will meet with local bell metal artisans. The art of bell metal in India dates to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and today over 40% of families in Sarthebari participate in this work. Plates, water vessels, eating utensils and offering bowls are made here for domestic and ceremonial use. Bell metal, an alloy of copper and tin, is believed to have medicinal properties and is thus often used for serving food. In fact, when a baby eats his or her first solid food, the tradition is to serve this auspicious meal using plates and utensils made from bell metal. Afternoon drive to Guwahati, the capital of Assam, arriving in the early evening.</p>   | Guwahati   |
| <b>Day 5</b> | <p>This morning you are free to relax at your hotel. Afternoon visit to the Kamakhya Temple, which dates to the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and is one of the oldest of the 51 ancient <i>Shakti Peethas</i> on the Indian subcontinent. These places of worship are dedicated to <i>shakti</i>, the divine feminine force that governs all cosmic creation, existence and change. They are located where parts of Sati Devi's corpse fell after Vishnu cut it into pieces with his sudarshana chakra. Kamakhya is purported to be where the <i>yoni</i> (genitals) of Sati fell, giving the temple a unique energy associated with creation. Kamakhya Devi is worshipped here as the young bride of Shiva, one who yields to all desires, and a giver of salvation. The temple attracts many practitioners of Tantra, and rituals such as the sacrifice of goats, pigeons, ducks and buffalo are made as offerings to the goddess.</p> <p>Pre-dinner visit to the Assam State Museum, the oldest museum in Northeast India, established in 1940 to display the arts and culture of Undivided Assam (which until 1963 included Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram). It contains rare collections of sculpture, folk art, weaponry and costumes, as well as exhibits on the region's natural history, anthropology and epigraphy.</p> | Guwahati   |
| <b>Day 6</b> | <p>Evidence suggests that silk weaving and sericulture were introduced to India through Assam by Tibeto-Burmese groups migrating out of China between 3,000 B.C. and 2,000 B.C. Assamese Muga silk, in particular, was prized by Ahom (Assam) royals for its yellow golden color and</p>   | Guwahati   |

sheen and its tremendous durability. This morning you will visit Sualkuchi, a famed center for silk weaving that now produces primarily jacquard silk. While you will see handspun, handwoven Muga later in the trip, Sualkuchi represents one of the few organized weaving centers in the northeast states. In contrast to other regions of India that have large commercial weaving centers, most weaving in Assam is done for personal use. In fact, most village houses have at least one loom for weaving *gamosa*, a multi-purpose cotton cloth featuring red and white designs, and *mekhla chadar*, Assam's traditional two-piece sari. You will next visit the village of Hajo, known for its brass metal crafts such as decorative storage vessels and gigantic oil lamps. Afternoon visit to the village of Bijohnagar to meet Naramohan Das, a highly-regarded dyer of silk yarn.

**Day 7**

Today you will explore the nuances of Assamese cuisine. This cooking style utilizes minimal spices and oils, relying instead on drying and fermentation for ingredient preservation and flavor. It thus more closely resembles the cuisines of China and southeast Asia than that of India. A huge variety of vegetables are consumed, such as bitter melon, bamboo shoots, pumpkin, eggplant, long beans, banana flower, peas, spinach and carrots. Fish and fowl feature prominently, and cured pork is found in many indigenous community dishes. You will first join a local chef for a walk through the meat and produce markets, and then enjoy a cooking demonstration followed by lunch. This afternoon you are free to relax at your hotel, or to visit several retailers of high-end Muga silk and indigenous community weaving.

Guwahati

**Day 8**

Morning drive to Kaziranga. En route, you will visit the village of Ranthali, known for its production of Assamese gold jewelry. Gold washing and jewelry production have been practiced in Assam for centuries due to the abundant gold deposits found in local rivers. During the rule of the Ahom kings, gold washing was done on a huge scale, generating substantial income for the state. A single tribe, the Sonowal Kachari, were engaged solely in gold washing. Today, roughly 90% of families in Ranthali still produce jewelry. Twenty-four karat gold is set typically with black, green and red gemstones or mina (enamel), and strung on colored thread interspersed with gold beads.

Kaziranga

You will next visit a local jute mill. India is the largest producer of jute in the world, and its use in Indus Valley textiles dates back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C. It is a *bast* fiber, made from the phloem or skin of the plant, similar to flax (linen) and industrial hemp, and is made primarily from plants in the genus *Corchorus*. It is extremely strong, affordable and biodegradable, and can be found in a variety of textiles including carpets, upholstery, rope and burlap (a.k.a. hessian or gunny cloth). Continue driving to Kaziranga, arriving in time for dinner.

- Day 9** Morning visit to the Kaziranga National Orchid Park, which contains an incredible collection of wild orchids from Assam, plus a good variety of hybrid orchids. The Orchid Park also contains a gallery of orchid photographs, a garden of medicinal plants, and a rice gallery with 255 dried species on display. After this, you will visit a traditional village of the Karbi community, a people who migrated to the hilly regions of northeast India from China via Central Asia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This afternoon, you will enjoy your first of two jeep safaris in Kaziranga National Park, best known as the home of the Indian one-horned rhinoceros. This endangered species was close to extinction at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but has made a miraculous comeback thanks to conservationists and the Indian government. The park is comprised of 166 square miles of grasslands, marshes, tropical moist broadleaf forest and tropical semi-evergreen forest. Besides rhinoceros, other animals found in the park include tigers, leopards, Asiatic wild buffalo, wild elephants, Hoolock gibbons, Golden langur, swamp deer, gaur, sambar, pangolins, flying squirrels and over 300 species of birds. Kaziranga
- Day 10** This morning you will enjoy another jeep safari in Kaziranga National Park. You will then proceed to Jorhat, a center for tea production. Assam is the largest tea growing region in the world by area, and second only to southern China by volume. Each year the tea estates of Assam, which straddle both banks of the Brahmaputra between Jorhat and Dibrugarh, produce 1.5 trillion tons of tea, representing 17% of the world's annual tea production and 50% of India's annual production. The type of tea plant grown here is *Camelia sinensis var. assamica*, a unique varietal found only in Assam and Yunnan, China. Your home for the next two nights is a colonial-era plantation bungalow. These wooden structures are elevated on stilts to protect from monsoon floods and to afford expansive views of the surrounding tea fields. Jorhat
- Day 11** Sunrise trek through the Hoollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary, home to the Western Hoolock Gibbon and the Bengal Slow Loris, the only apes found in India. After enjoying a packed breakfast, you will visit a Buddhist Tai Phake village. These Thai-speaking people migrated to Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in the 18<sup>th</sup> century from the Shan region of Myanmar. You will then proceed to a tea plantation for lunch, followed by a tea tasting. Assam teas are known for their bold, malty flavors and deep orange-red color when brewed. This is attributable to the fact that they are grown at or near sea level in a humid climate, versus in a cool, mountainous region like Darjeeling or the Nuwara Eliya region of Ceylon (Sri Lanka). They pair well with milk and sugar, and are often found in breakfast tea blends and in masala chai. Jorhat

- Day 12** Morning drive to Neematighat to board a ferry to Majuli Island. This island, which sits in the middle of the Brahmaputra, is one of the largest inhabited river islands in the world. It once covered an area of 350 square miles, but now is being eroded by strong river currents, its boundaries eternally shifting and its small communities migrating from one region of the island to another. It is home to a variety of craft and textile artisans, and is a delightful place to spend a few days. This afternoon you will meet Jamini Payeng, an award-winning handloom weaver from the Mising community who works in cotton, wool and Muga silk. You will explore her traditional Mising village, which is comprised of bamboo huts raised on stilts, under which livestock exist alongside weaving looms. Majuli
- Day 13** Majuli Island is best known for its Vaishnavite *satras*, or monasteries, which were initiated in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries by Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciple Madhavdeva. Srimanta Sankardeva was a scholar, a poet, a playwright, and a social reformer, essential to the religious and cultural history of Assam. He preached a *bhakti* (pure devotion), monotheistic form of Hinduism called Vaishnavism, which considers Vishnu as the Supreme Lord. He established 65 *satras* on Majuli Island, of which 22 are still active today. Besides being places of worship, these *satras* are dedicated to preserving traditional devotional music and dance forms. Today you will visit Samagiri Satra, which is known for its mask dances and mask making artisans. You will also visit Auniati Satra, which is famous for its *Paalnaam* and *Apsara* dances. This afternoon you will interact with a family that makes beautiful woodcarvings and bamboo crafts. You will also visit a pottery village that utilizes traditional hill-climbing kilns. Majuli
- Day 14** Morning departure for Dibrugarh, stopping en route to visit a village that produces handspun, handwoven Muga silk for high-end boutiques in Guwahati and beyond. Three types of silk are cultivated and woven in Assam – *Muga*, *Paat* and *Eri*. Assamese Muga silk was favored by royalty and is known for its lustrous golden color and high durability. It was granted a Geographical Indication by the Indian government in 2007<sup>1</sup>. *Paat*, or Mulberry silk, is very soft and white or off-white in color. *Eri* silk is darker in color and heavier than the other two silks, and is thus suitable for blending with cotton and wool. *Eri* is also known as *ahimsa* (peace) silk, as the silkworms are not killed during harvesting and processing. The villagers you will meet today cultivate their own Muga silkworms, which feed on aromatic *som* (*Machilus bombycina*) and *sualu* (*Litsea polyantha*) leaves. Continue driving to Dibrugarh, crossing over Bogibeel Bridge, India's longest and Asia's second longest rail/road bridge, which spans almost five kilometers over the Brahmaputra. Dibrugarh

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<sup>1</sup> A Geographical Indication identifies a good as originating in a specific locality where a given quality, reputation or characteristic of the good is essentially attributable to its geographic origin, e.g., Darjeeling tea.

**Day 15**

Morning visit to the Digboi Oil Centenary Museum. The region around Digboi has been producing oil since the 1880s. Lore has it that one day an elephant used for timber harvesting by the British walked out of the forest with black tar on his feet. The Burma Oil Company was formed in 1886, and had a monopoly in the region until Standard Oil entered in 1901. En route to Digboi you will pass Chabua Air Force Station, built by Allied Forces in 1939. Dinjan Airfield, seven miles away, was built in 1942. During the war, Chabua was a base from which to send supplies to Chiang Kai-shek's forces in and around Kunming, China. For a period of time, the Japanese occupation of Burma had cut off the only land route by which the Allies could deliver aid to the Chinese government. The only alternative was to fly over the mountains from India's Assam valley to Kunming. This air route - one of the most dangerous in the world - became known as the Himalayan Hump. Dinjan was home to a squadron of fighter planes whose mission was to protect these cargo aircraft.

Dibrugarh

Lunch and afternoon tea will be in a traditional Singpho village (Jingpho in China and Kachin in Myanmar). Legend has it that a Scottish explorer, Robert Bruce, discovered that the local Singpho people regularly drank a brew made from the leaves of a large shrub that resembled the Chinese tea plant. This turned out to be *Camelia sinensis var. assamica*, the variety now grown in the region. In contrast, the type of tea plant grown in Sri Lanka, the rest of India and most of China is *Camelia sinensis var. sinensis*, a varietal native to China. The British first tried growing this plant in Assam's tropical climate, but had little success, thus the discovery of the *assamica* varietal was a stroke of good luck. The Singpho still produce a pan-roasted tea with an earthy, smoky flavor. They store it in bamboo containers and leave it over the hearth to age, often for several years.

**Day 16**

Depart Dibrugarh for Delhi or Kolkata to catch your return flight to the U.S.

Flight to U.S.

