

Making history on India-Bangladesh sailing

By Nancy Trejos | Apr 25, 2019



The Bengal Ganga was the first passenger ship to sail from India to Bangladesh since Bangladesh became a country. Photo Credit: Sanjeev Hirudayaraj

As our small river cruise ship made its first sailing from India to Bangladesh this month, customs officials took turns boarding at their respective border ports, checking documents, snapping selfies and sharing snacks to celebrate the historic event.

"It is a very significant moment for both of the countries," said Raj Singh, managing director of luxury cruise and train tour operator Exotic Heritage Group, which invited me to join the first modern-day passenger cruise between the two countries. "The water route has been opened by two governments, so people can travel on either side. There is already an air service. There is already a rail service. And there is already transport service. But it is the first time that the river route has been opened [to a passenger vessel]."

Singh developed the idea for the 10-day, 440-mile sailing from Kolkata, India, to Bangladesh five years ago as river cruising was starting to become a more popular way for tourists to travel around India.

The Indian government supported the concept and began negotiations with officials in Bangladesh. In October 2018, the countries agreed on a standard operating procedure for how to deal with issues such as customs and immigration.

I joined a small group of dignitaries and tour operators hosted by the company for the sailing at the beginning of April aboard the 28-cabin Bengal Ganga, which was built in Myanmar in 2004 and normally sails Kolkata to Varanasi, India. When the company officially launches the route this fall, it will sail a smaller, more luxurious boat being developed in the same vein as the company's Ganges Voyager II, which is chartered by the Uniworld Boutique River Cruise Collection brand for its nearly 20 India sailings each year.

That boat, called the Ganga Vilas, will have 18 suites with decor inspired by the 1950s art scene that followed the 1947 Partition of India.



The dining room onboard the Bengal Ganga, where Indian and Bangladeshi meals were served three times a day. Photo Credit: Sanjeev Hirudayaraj

And while the Bengal Ganga has smaller, somewhat dark cabins with twin beds and little space between the door and the river to enjoy the outdoor seating, it has a dining room, saloon and a sun deck, where most passengers spent their time. Perhaps most importantly, it previewed the luxury service standards the company offers. The crew

brought us fresh flowers daily. We had turndown service with chocolates every evening, and breakfast, lunch and dinner were elaborately served with fresh products bought by the kitchen staff daily at local markets.

Sailing on several rivers, including the Ganges in India and the Meghna in Bangladesh, we traversed the Sunderbans mangrove forest and Bangladesh ports including Barisal, Chandpur and Narayanganj. Stops included the Mosque City Unesco World Heritage Site in Bagerhat and Sonargaon, the ancient capital of undivided Bengal.

Singh said that like the Ganges Voyager II, the Ganga Vilas will operate under the Heritage brand but will be available for charter by other brands, as the Voyager II is used by Uniworld. He said it has already been chartered by one European operator for some departures.

Itineraries and all-inclusive pricing for those departures will be developed in coming weeks, he said.

Officials who traveled with us said that besides opening a new route for the river cruise industry, the sailing underscores the government's commitment to river cruising in general, both as a tourism draw and as a way to alleviate congestion on the roads and rails. As a result, the government gives subsidies to companies that build river cruise vessels.



A bartender makes a drink in the ship's saloon, which was open for an hour or two in the evenings. Photo Credit: Sanjeev Hirudayaraj

There are no more than a dozen river cruise operators in India right now, but that is growing. Singh now has five river vessels but plans to have 25 in the next five years.

In 2018, there were 13,000 river cruise passengers in India, officials said. Though the number is low in a nation of 1.3 billion people, it is growing by about 40% a year, they said.

Right now, most long-distance cruises take place on the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. Other states such as Kerala and Goa have short-distance cruises, but officials have said longer cruises will begin operating in Kerala in October and in Goa next year.

India has 111 national waterways, and it is developing many of them to increase opportunities for river cruises as well as cargo movement.

"There is a lot of support for this," said Nutan Biswas, a former chairwoman of the Inland Waterways Authority of India who was a passenger on the inaugural cruise. "You need an alternate source of transport these days. What is happening is roads are getting congested, accidents happen on the roads, and the railway also is congested. People have to wait long to transport their goods, and time is money, so if your goods have to wait at a place, the cost increases."

Copyright © 2019 Northstar Travel Media, LLC. All Rights Reserved. 100 Lighting Way Secaucus, NJ 07094-3626 USA
Telephone: (201) 902-2000

<https://www.travelweekly.com/River-Cruising/Making-history-India-Bangladesh-sailing>