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INDIA

## PLEASURE CRUISING ON THE GANGES RIVER

By Maria Visconti

PLEASURE CRUISING ON THE GANGES is something that has not been attempted since the extraordinary river parties of the 19th century, when Calcutta was the Imperial capital of British India and European diplomats entertained their guests by hiring gondolas on the Hooghly (a distributary of the Ganges). The Governor-General's summer village, located in Barrackpore, was a popular point of pleasure-raft embarkation for the British. The French used Chandernagore, both upriver from Calcutta. In his Travels in India, Including Sinde and the Punjab, published in 1845, Captain Leopold Von Orlich describes such an event commenting: "Beyond Barrackpore we crossed the Hooghly, then passed Tranquebar which belongs to the Danes and soon afterwards Chandernagore, where the French nation was vividly brought before us; not only by the 100 sepoys in their French uniforms but also by the countenances of many of the natives". And so it is that I arrive in Calcutta on Christmas Eve to be one of the first passengers to attempt a trip upriver, from Calcutta to Varanasi, aided by modern technology but not immune to river-rage.

Calcutta (now known as Kolkata) has a buzz to it at all times, but during Christmas, the voltage goes up. Bengalis embrace festivals with an intensity that marks them apart. The city, which for two centuries was the administration and business centre of the Empire, creates at this time of the year a festive setting of fairy





lights and grinning Santa Clauses all along Park Street, in the business centre. It is cold here on Christmas Eve. Six degrees Celsius brought in by icy Himalayan winds.

Once onboard the Bengal Pandaw, life is slow and contemplative for the passengers but intense for the crew. We need a pilot at all times to navigate the sandbanks shifting underneath the currents like clouds in the sky. Rudyard Kipling wrote about these elite of men in his short story: An Unqualified Pilot: "ALMOST any pilot will tell you that his work is much more difficult than you imagine; but the Pilots of the Hooghly know that they have one hundred miles of the most dangerous river on earth running through their hands. Their service is picked and sifted as carefully as the bench of the Supreme Court, for a judge can only hang the wrong



*Life by the river is very public: people bathe in it and do laundry. Buffaloes toil, goats bleat, and funeral pyres burn while cows watch procedures with their unique bovine equanimity.*

man, or pass a bad law; but a careless pilot can lose a ten-thousand-ton ship with crew and cargo in less time than it takes to reverse her engines."

Along the Hooghly, the towns and villages described by Captain Leopold Von Orlich remind us of a colonial past. The French, the Portuguese, the British and the Dutch came and went leaving behind not only buildings, but also their own bodily remains. Rundown European cemeteries poignantly stand where rival nations agreed to share a plot of land –only in death. In these towns, the tonga, a horse-pulled, two-wheeled cart with bamboo shafts harnessed to a tiny horse, is still the preferred choice of communal transport. There is no better way to explore the ancient Bengali temples –decorated with fascinating terracotta friezes– than by this means of transport.

When we enter the mighty Ganges, at the Farakka Barrage, it is clear that this temperamental river will have its way. To our rescue comes a dignified looking Sikh pilot referred to by our crew as 'irascible Singh'



*Life by the river is very public: people bathe in it and do laundry. Buffaloes toil, goats bleat, and funeral pyres burn while cows watch procedures with their unique bovine equanimity.*

while life's panorama unfolds before our eyes: fields of yellow flowers, the odd dead tree full of crows, a concentration of egrets, river dolphins and the ever-present human throng of water gatherers. Paradoxically, the mixture of funeral smoke and dust –caused by deforestation of the area– create those uniquely Indian sunsets: a huge disk of fire with a smoky grey layer smudged on top. When one of the cultural talks is scheduled for 5:30pm the passengers request it be changed to another time. Why? Because that's when the sunset takes place and nobody wants to miss it.

Bihar, one of the four states the riverboat goes through, is one of the poorest in India but the richest in Buddhist sites. Buddha was enlightened at Bodhigaya and gave his first public address at Sarnath. The oldest (Buddhist) university in the world, Nalanda, offers its ruined ramparts and meditating cells to throngs of international monks in saffron and maroon robes.

Thousands of pilgrims progress clockwise around the Bodhigaya stupa where they

gather to pay respects to the sacred Bodhi tree under which Lord Buddha sat before enlightenment. Here the colourful national dresses of Bhutan, Ladakh, Tibet, Burma, China, Korea, Japan, Nepal and others, add a psychedelic vibe to the place. There are holy men in dreadlocks and demure nuns with shaven heads; lay elders with prayer wheels sidestep Tibetan women prostrating themselves. The hum of prayers rises in the air together with swirls of fragrant incense. Outside the compound, there are vendors, snake charmers, contortionists and a cacophony of tongas, trishaws and mini-buses.

The cruise ends in the holy city of Varanasi, where we silently board paddleboats at night to see the cremation ghats enveloped now in a Dantesque glow. Later, we are paddled to a farewell dinner at a 14th-century palace –not far from the funeral pyres. Here, in stunning contrast, thousands of tiny oil lamps illuminate the steps from the river to the rose-coloured palace festooned in marigolds. After dinner, we walk the narrow lanes of old Varanasi where pretty cows roam. They timidly approach us with soft, quivering muzzles. With elongated lips, they gently (but expertly) tug at the festive flower wreaths hanging from our necks... and eat them. Then, in an instant, it fully dawns: this is uniquely, incredible, India. ☼

For more information see: [www.thegangescruise.com](http://www.thegangescruise.com)



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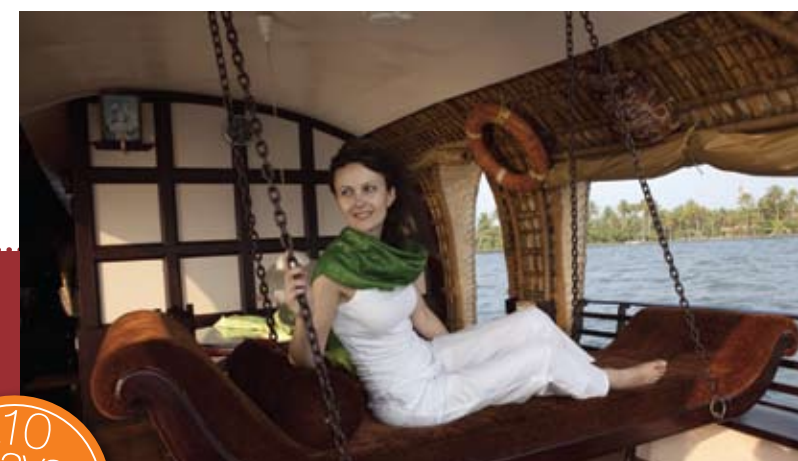
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- Service of English speaking tourist guide at Cochin only
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\*Terms and conditions apply.



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Package Includes:  
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• 1 Return transfer by scheduled shuttle from hotel to race circuit on the Sunday, 10 April 2011  
• Goodie bag upon arrival  
• 24 hours customer service helpline  
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OPTIONAL: Additional Shuttle Service on Saturday, 09 April 2011 R400.00 nett per person • KUL City Hotel - Sepang International Circuit - KUL City Hotel R416.00 nett per person

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