

MONKS, TRIBES & RHINOS

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TOUR DETAILS		Duration
		21 days
HIGHLIGHTS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit the stunning Tawang monastery • Overnight in bamboo huts on Majuli Island • Encounter unseen tribes • Assam's famous tea estates • Elephant-back safari in Kaziranga • Unicorn rhinos, tigers & wildlife 		
Off The Beaten Track Rating	● ● ● ● ●	Activity Rating ★ ★ ★

ITINERARY

DAY 1 Arrive midday into Guwahati, Assam (flying via Delhi or Kolkata). Your guide and driver will greet you at airport for onward drive to the Eco-Camp on the fringes of Nameri National Park. Go for a wander in the open fields, watch villagers gather their cattle as the sun sets. Feast on delicious Assamese cuisine in the open air banquet area and enjoy a drink by the bonfire. Stay in excellent bamboo tent/cottages, complete with comfortable bamboo beds and attached bathroom. Overnight in Nameri. Meal plan: D

*181 Kms from Guwahati, the largest city in Assam, and nestled at the foothills of Eastern Himalayas, **Nameri National Park** covers an area of 200 square kilometres. The park's endangered species include the sloth, bear, tiger, clouded leopard, as well as elephants. The national park is most famous however, for its **300 rare bird species** such as Hornbills, Bee Eaters, Mainas, Barbets and the endangered white-winged wood duck.*

DAY 2 Early morning chai, then set off for game walk. Cross the river by boat to Nameri National Park. Explore the forest by foot, looking out for langur monkeys, wild elephants, barking deer, rare birdlife and more. Return to eco-camp for breakfast. Soak in the tranquility of the surroundings. Head down to the River Bhorelli for a relaxing boat ride and stop off on the bank for a freshly cooked lunch. Rest of afternoon/evening free. Evening meal and overnight in Nameri Eco-camp. Meal plan: B,L,D

DAY 3 Early breakfast, then set forth on the *tribal circuit*, winding your way through lush tropical mountain scenery. Arrive in Ziro, home of the little-known *Apatani* tribe, whose older women bear distinctive nose-plugs and tattoos. Visit nearby Hong village, the largest tribal village in Asia, where you will get a rare and privileged insight into an almost medieval world. Overnight in hotel. Meal plan: B,L,D

*Ziro is in the state of **Arunachal Pradesh**, and being more mountainous than Assam, this valley is lined by hills and pines on either side. It is packed with **tribal villages, rice fields and bamboo groves** and the **Apatani** tribe homeland is limited to Ziro Valley. The **Apatani** women were historically considered the most beautiful in the region and were therefore frequently kidnapped by the **Nishi men** (of the surrounding territories). The women used **facial tattoos or nose plugs to deter them** up until the 1960s when Nishi men stopped kidnapping. This is why only women over 50 still bear these signs of facial graffiti. The **Apatani** farm sustainably and without machinery or animals.*

DAY 4 Full day to explore Ziro. Take a walk out to the paddy fields where you can learn about the ingenious system of 'pisciculture' where villagers breed fish and grow rice within the same plot of land. Visit the craftshop in Ziro, run by Future Generations Arunachal, a worthy NGO supported by Travel The Unknown. Overnight in Ziro. Meal plan: B,L,D

*The **Apatani** practice **pisciculture** – 'aquaculture' along with rice farming on their plots so that two crops of rice (Mipyra and Emoh) and one crop of fish (Ngihi) are raised together. This is a **unique practice** in Ziro. The **Apatani** add varieties of **domestic waste products** to their paddy field to enhance **crop productivity, soil fertility and feed the fish**.*

DAY 5 Free day to explore Ziro and nearby tribal villages. Hiking possibilities. Overnight in Ziro. Meal plan: B,L,D

Other than Hong, other less well-known tribal villages include Hijo, Hari, Bamin and Dutta.

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DAY 6 Early start for journey to Majuli, the world's largest river island, with its unique culture, increasingly threatened by climate change. Short ferry ride across the mighty Brahmaputra River to Majuli. After settling into your comfortable bamboo hut, stroll around and savour the atmosphere of this unique island. Overnight in Majuli. Meal plan: B,L,D

*One of the world's largest river islands, **Majuli Island** is located in the **Brahmaputra River** and runs for 80km from east to west and 15km north to south and a total area of 875km². It used to be much bigger than this but has decreased as a result of **erosion** from the river. The island has a population of 150,000 and there are 243 villages. With a natural and cultural heritage site with water bodies covering most of the areas, Majuli attracts a wide **range of birds**. Aside from the **rice field landscapes, fish traps and water meadows**, the **local Mising people and Satras** make the island a fascinating place.*

DAY 7 Explore Majuli – visit the island's ancient satras (rare Hindu Vaishnavite monasteries where Lord Vishnu is worshipped). Pop into the local mask shops and watch master craftsmen at work. Alternatively hop into a boat and take in the local surroundings. Overnight in Majuli. Meal plan: B,L,D

*There are just under 30 **Satras** in Majuli and each Satra acts as a cultural activity centre for its region in festivals and occasions. Formed by the Assamese philosopher, **Sankardev**, the religion is based on the **caste system** and **idol worship**. Dance and play-acting of scenes from the holy Hindu scripture (Bhagavad Gita) have an important role. Pottery in Majuli is also very famous because it is made from beaten clay that is burnt in ovens fired with driftwood.*

DAY 8 Free day. Bikes are available and a bike ride is a good way of exploring the island. Overnight in Majuli. Meal plan: B,L,D

DAY 9 After breakfast, cross by ferry to mainland Assam. Drive via Jorhat, passing perfectly manicured tea estates and paddy fields. Arrive around lunchtime at magnificent Kaziranga National Park. Check into your bamboo cottage. After lunch, leave for your afternoon jeep safari in Kaziranga. Look out for the park's abundant and rare wildlife. Return to the jungle lodge on the fringes of the park. Savour a fabulous Assamese meal and have a drink by the bonfire. Overnight in Kaziranga. Meal plan: B,L,D

***Kaziranga National Park** is home to two-thirds of the world's population of **Indian one-horned rhinoceros** at just under 2000. A few centuries ago, the Indian one-horned rhino ranged across the north Indian plains in the wetlands of the rivers Indus, Ganga, and Brahmaputra. Today it is found only in pockets of Assam and in Nepal. Kaziranga also boasts a range of other wildlife and harbours about 15 species of India's threatened mammals including the **densest population of Royal Bengal tigers**, Indian elephants, sloth bears, Gangetic dolphins and an extraordinary bird population. Kaziranga National Park is located partly in **Golaghat District** and partly in **Nagaon District** of Assam and covers an area of 430km². It lies in the flood plains of the Brahmaputra and annual flooding and burning has maintained the grasslands predominant in the west. It became an official national park in 1974, but was established as a reserved forest in 1908, a game sanctuary in 1916, a wildlife sanctuary in 1950 and as a World Heritage site in 1985.*

DAY 10 Early wake up with hot cup of chai and biscuits. Jeep will take you to the Central Sector for your elephant safari. As the sun rises, *ride on elephant-back* and wade through thick elephant grass on the look-out for the endangered unicorn rhino. Witness a host of other wildlife, including tigers, with Kaziranga being home to the largest concentration of tigers in a protected area. Return to the jungle lodge for breakfast. Morning to relax. After lunch, take an afternoon game drive. Evening free. Overnight in Kaziranga. Meal plan: B,L,D

DAY 11 Visit to Panbari Forest Reserve to look for the elusive hoolock gibbon and visit the nearby tea estate. After lunch, rest of day free. Optional visit to Mising tribal village. Overnight in Kaziranga. Meal plan: B,L,D

***Panbari Forest Reserve** is home to the rare **hoolock gibbon** – the only ape in India. Hoolock gibbons are the second largest of the gibbons. The males are black with **white brows** while the females are grey and brown with **white rings around their eyes and mouth** like a mask. Like other gibbons, the hoolock is an **arboreal and diurnal species**, and prefers the upper canopy of the forest, sleeping in emergent trees. The hoolock gibbon is an **endangered species** and the survival of the species is threatened due to **habitat loss, hunting and illegal trade**. In 2008, a captive reared female gibbon was released into the wild to provide a mate for a wild gibbon in Panbari Forest Reserve.*

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DAY 12 After breakfast, set off for Bhalukpong, a small town on the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border. Check into your cottage. Relax and rest of day free. Options include taking a walk along the riverbank and wander the local shops and restaurants. Overnight in Bhalukpong. Meal plan: B,L,D

*The contrast in landscape between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh is most apparent when approaching **Bhalukpong** as **the flat plains of Assam meet Arunachal Pradesh's imposing mountains**. Bhalukpong lies on the **Kameng River** and is known for its beauty. Perfect for wildlife lovers and adventurers, there is plenty of scope for **hiking, rafting and angling**. The cottage has fabulous views of the river and mountains.*

DAY 13 Cross the border into Arunachal Pradesh and drive through the Eastern Himalayas to Dirang. Arrive late afternoon. Rest of day free. Enjoy the picturesque surroundings of Dirang Valley. Overnight in Dirang. Meal plan: B,L,D

*This is **Monpa territory**, where people mainly follow **Buddhism**. Within the **Dirang Valley**, there is Old Dirang and New Dirang. **Old Dirang** is a picture perfect **Tibetan-Monpa stone village**. It is 1621 metres above sea level and has a stream running through it with a steep ridge topped with an old fort. **New Dirang**, 5.5km north, is more modern and has village shops and restaurants.*

DAY 14 Spend the day exploring Dirang. After breakfast, visit picture-postcard Old Dirang, its winding streams and Old Fort. Take a light trek through Sangti Valley and enjoy fantastic views of Dirang, encountering its people and wildlife on the way. Afternoon lunch, rest of day to relax or wander through Dirang. Dinner and overnight in hotel. Meal plan: B,L,D

DAY 15 After breakfast, we start our journey to Tawang, one of the Buddhist heartlands of India. Rise high above Himalayan clouds and through snow-capped peaks. Drive via Sela Pass, one of the world's highest motorable passes at 4400 metres, passing yaks on the way. Arrive late afternoon, put your feet up and relax. Munch on Tibetan-style food for dinner. Overnight in Tawang. Meal plan: B,L,D

*Driving north-west through the **4400 metre high Sela Pass** towards Tawang is an experience you won't forget. The Tawang Valley is encircled by **vast and dramatic mountains**, so the only way in from Assam is through the pass. Once through the Sela Pass, Tawang Valley is scattered with **Buddhist monasteries, prayer wheels and archetypal Tibetan-style villages**. The inhabitants of Tawang are mostly from **Monpa tribes** and they live off agriculture and animal husbandry.*

DAY 16 Early morning walk to Tawang Monastery, the largest Buddhist monastery outside Tibet. Perched majestically on a Himalayan cliff face looking into Bhutan, admire the huge statue of Lord Buddha and the sublime views. Proceed on to Urgelling Gompa, the birthplace of the 6th Dalai Lama, then on to charming Ani Gompa (nunnery), and watch the lowering of the Indian flag at the Indo-China War Memorial. Dinner and overnight in Tawang. Meal plan: B,L,D

*Tawang is believed to have derived its name from the dramatic **Tawang Monastery (Gompa)** perched on the edge of the ridge running along the western part of Tawang. '**Ta**' means Horse and '**Wang**' means chosen. Legend says **Merak Lama Lodre Gyasto**, searching for somewhere to establish a monastery, could not find an appropriate site so he prayed for guidance of a divine power. After praying, he realised his horse had disappeared. The place that he found him is where Merak Lama Lodre Gyasto founded his monastery 1681. The monastery is central to both social and religious life in Tawang and is the second largest Buddhist monastery complex in the world.*

*The **Dalai Lamas** are believed to be the reincarnation of spiritual leaders, reborn in order to enlighten others. They are the head of state, patron saints of Tibet and the spiritual leader of Tibet. **The 6th Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso was born in Urgelling Gompa in 1682. Ani Gompa** is one of the oldest **nunneries** in the Tawang district and is 12km from Tawang. This was commissioned by Karchen Yeshi Gelek in 1595 and houses about **45 nuns**. These nuns rely on **begging** for food to survive as they are so poor.*

*The **Tawang War Memorial** is a monument dedicated to the **martyrs of the 1962 war with China**, defending their borders. The **40-foot-high colourful war memorial** was designed by the Army and constructed at a cost of about Rs 15 lakh. It was dedicated to the nation and blessed by **Dalai Lama in 1997**. The names of **2420 dead soldiers** are etched in gold on 32 black granite plaques. The memorial is flanked by two memorial halls.*

DAY 17 Free day. Overnight in Tawang. Meal plan: B,L,D

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DAY 18 After early breakfast, start drive down to the small Buddhist town of Bomdila. Lunch en-route. On arrival, check-in to hotel and refresh. At dusk, visit the local monastery when the monks go to prayer. Evening free. Overnight in Bomdila. Meals: B,L,D

Bomdila offers views of stunning landscape and snow-clad mountains of the Himalayan Range. Its cool climate, apple orchards, snow-capped Himalayan peaks and Buddhist Gompas make it another fascinating place to visit.

DAY 19 After breakfast drive to Tezpur (6 hours) en-route visiting the Orchid Centre at Tipi. It houses over 7500 orchids. On display are some of the finest species of orchids in the world, with intriguing names like the Dainty Lady's Slipper! Lunch at Tipi. Continue drive to Tezpur, and check into hotel on arrival. Optional evening sightseeing tour of Tezpur, a city steeped in mythology and history. Overnight in Tezpur. Meals: B,L

*Tipi Orchid Centre is 65 km away from Tezpur in Assam. One of the main attractions of the centre is the **orchid glass house**, with a fibreglass roof, display gallery and a central pond with fountain. The house alone accommodates about 1000 exotic orchids displayed in pots and hanging baskets. **Tezpur** is one of Assam's most **beautiful** cities filled with **parks, lakes, stunning views and the Brahmaputra River** running through its centre. Sights include **Chitralekha Udyan** (a U-shaped pond set in lawns with sculptures) and **Ganeshgarh temple**. **Agrigarh Hill** is believed to be the site of Banasura's legendary fire fortress, used to protect his daughter from suitors.*

DAY 20 After breakfast leave for Guwahati (4 hours). Check into hotel on arrival. Rest of day free. Optional activities can be arranged, for example a visit to the Kamakhya Temple, where animal sacrifices are still a daily occurrence, or a visit to the quaint Umananda Temple located on a small island in the Brahmaputra. Overnight in Guwahati. Meals: B

*The **Kamakhya Temple** had been built in reverence to **Goddess Sati**. King Nara Narayana of Cooch Behar rebuilt the temple in 1665 after it had suffered destruction at the hands of foreign invaders and this is why images of the builder and related inscriptions can be seen there. The temple consists of **seven oval spires**, each topped by **three golden pitchers**, and the entrance spirals down to a curved path, linking the main road to the temple. Animal sacrifices are still practised daily here, so be warned!*

*On **Peacock Island**, the temple of **Umananda** was built in 1694 by the Bar Phukan Garhganya Handique by the order of His Majesty Swargadeo Gadadhar Singh one of the ablest and strongest rulers of the Tai Ahom dynasty. The **Shiva temple** is set at the top of a flight of steps. The original temple was however immensely damaged by a devastating earthquake of 1897. Later, it was reconstructed by a rich local merchant who chose to inscribe the interior part of a Siva temple with Vaisnavite slogans.*

DAY 21 After breakfast, transfer to airport for flight to Delhi or Kolkata. End of tour. Meal plan: B

PRICE INCLUDES

Internal flights from Delhi/Kolkata
 Airport pick-up & drop-off
 Ground transport
 Restricted area permits

Accommodation
 Most meals (refer to daily meal plans)
 Activity fees (rafting, safari)

Entrance fees to sites
 Drivers and guides
 Climate Care contribution