



## Why Choose MV Mahabaahu?

- **Pro:** Comfortable, authentically Indian cruise experience; great for wildlife lovers
- **Con:** Spa is basic
- **Bottom Line:** A relaxed and enjoyable introduction to the glories of India

## MV Mahabaahu Overview Cruise Critic

By Maria Harding, Cruise Critic contributor

Editor Rating

4.0

MV Mahabaahu -- owned and operated by Far Horizon Tours -- is the largest and newest riverboat offering cruises along the Brahmaputra River, which winds its way through the verdant 'tea country' of Assam, in the northeast of India.

Bordered on the northeast by Bhutan and the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, on the south by Bangladesh and by West Bengal to the west, Assam is a spectacularly beautiful region, rich in wildlife -- particularly in the vast Kaziranga National Park, which National Geographic calls 'the Serengeti of India.'

So the Brahmaputra is the only river, apart from Africa's Zambezi, on which you can take boat, jeep and elephant-back safaris to view big game animals like tigers, elephants, wild buffalo and white rhino. Its sandy and ever-shifting banks are also home to large herds of deer and to a fabulous array of colorful birdlife, including great hornbills, greater adjutant storks and black-necked cranes.

Mahabaahuprovides an unshowy but very comfortable base from which to view all this action. Its large-windowed cabins -- several of which have balconies -- allow good views of the riverbanks (though for closer attention to the animals, guests board one of two well-cushioned, open-topped tender/expedition boats).

Though not a 'luxury boat' by today's Western standards, Mahabaahu is well presented with crisp linen cloths and napkins in the dining room, silk hangings and cushions on the beds, and comfortable seating in the main Soma Lounge, up on the sun deck, and around the pool.

The crew is friendly and attentive, and the itinerary fascinating and a good introduction to the subcontinent for those wary of the crowds and chaos along the banks of India's most famous river, the Ganges.

MV Mahabaahu runs seven-night sailings along the Brahmaputra, either upstream, from Guwahati to Jorhat, or downstream in the other direction.

Downstream itineraries depart from Neamati Ghat, near Jorhat (accessible by air from Kolkata).

International travelers tend to take the seven-night cruises, which can be packaged with 'Golden Triangle' tours of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur. But for local travelers, or those on a tighter time scale, two-, three- and four-night Brahmaputra cruise sectors are also available.

## MV Mahabaahu Fellow Passengers

You can expect a fair number of older, adventurous and well-heeled English speakers onboard Mahabaahu, as its cruises are represented in the U.K. by Saga Holidays and feature in the programs of several other operators, including Fred. Olsen, Pandaw, Noble Caledonia and Ultimate Travel Company. In the U.S., the cruises are offered by Road Scholar and International Expeditions, among others.

Far Horizon is also making inroads into European markets, and this is reflected in a more cosmopolitan mix of passengers. On my cruise, for example, we were joined by a lively group of Norwegians, as well as some wealthy Indians who came aboard for a shorter cruise sector.

## MV Mahabaahu Dress Code

Casual is the order of the day onboard; after a steamy day spent exploring ashore, passengers tend to shower and smarten up for evening drinks and dinner but the atmosphere is relaxed, and no formal dress is required.

A fun exception to this is a weekly Assamese evening, when a traditional menu is served and the cruise director helps everyone dress up in full local costume, often to stunning effect.

For those who'd like an outfit made from silks they've bought ashore, Mahabaahu even has an onboard tailor able to run up an outfit before the end of the cruise.

## Mahabaahu Inclusions

All excursions on Mahabaahu -- including an elephant-back safari -- are included in the fare, as are transfers between the ship and Jorhat or Guwahati airport.

Onboard, passengers pay for drinks and mini-bar items, but bottled water is freely and liberally provided. Two free drinks per person are offered at the welcome and farewell dinners. Drink prices are reasonable (c 300 rupees -- about £3.75 or \$4.50 -- per glass of wine or beer, 400 to 500 for cocktails). Spa treatments cost extra.

Guests are asked to pay 800 rupees (about £10 or \$12) per person per day for crew gratuities at the end of their cruise; this is paid in cash and ideally as rupees, but pounds or dollars would also be acceptable.

Spa tips -- a recommended 300 Rupees (£3.75 or \$4.50) per treatment session -- are also paid at the end of the cruise.

## MV Mahabaahu Cabins

## Editor Rating

### Cabins

4.0

Mahabaahu has three categories of cabin; its two 283-square-foot top grade suites have balconies, as do nine of its Superior cabins which, including balcony, measure between 206 and 230 square feet (the larger-sized cabins are numbers 109 and 110).

There are 12 unbalconied Superior cabins on the lower deck, each measuring 150 square feet.

Cabins come in a variety of shapes, but are largely roomy and wood-paneled, with floor-to-ceiling windows, plenty of storage space and striking Assamese decor, with headboards, bed cushions and drapes made from beautifully embroidered, locally woven Muga silk. All have effective (at times, too effective!) air conditioning.

Bed linen is crisp and well maintained; beds can be configured as doubles or twins, are very comfortable and are changed every three days (or more often, on request).

There are no bathtubs, but bathrooms are equipped with powerful showers, makeup/shaving mirrors and hair dryers, as well as spa-quality, wall-mounted shampoo, hair conditioner and body wash. Toothbrushes are also supplied.

All cabins also have (internal) telephones, safes and mini-bars (priced the same as the bars -- beers for 300 rupees, soft drinks around 100).

TVs, tea and coffee-making facilities and ample amounts of complimentary bottled water are also supplied. DVD players are available on request, as are a selection of DVDs, and there is a laundry service priced at 250 rupees for a shirt, 300 for a jacket.

The two suites have separate dining areas overlooking the prow, and occupants can have their meals served in the suite on request.

Bathrobes and slippers are supplied in every cabin and, on returning to the ship from the sandy banks of the Brahmaputra, you swap your shoes for slippers, so that they can be cleaned and later left outside your cabin.

## MV Mahabaahu Dining

Editor Rating

Dining

4.0

All meals are served in the 50-seat Mungri Mungram restaurant on the Main Deck, which also serves as a venue for onboard talks and slide shows.

There is a 24-hour tea and coffee station with cookies at the entrance to the restaurant, and a fresh egg/omelette station is available at breakfast (usually 7 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.), as is a toast machine and fresh butter and preserves.

Breakfast and lunch (generally offered between 12 and 2:30 p.m.) are served buffet-style, with waiter service at dinner. Breakfast dishes include hot bacon, and lunch buffets include tasty naan and other Indian breads alongside fish and chicken stews and mildly curried vegetable dishes.

The cuisine at dinner -- one seating, which usually starts between 7:15 and 7:30 p.m. -- generally alternates between traditional Indian/Asian and European, and some European dishes are available at every meal time, for guests who find Indian food too spicy.

While Indian and Asian dishes -- like gaur tenka (pork curry), kele ki phool (banana flowers) and thukpa (Tibetan noodle soup) -- are well made and largely delicious, European offerings like vegetable moussaka and spaghetti carbonara can be more erratic in quality, as the chefs seem to be more at ease with Eastern cuisine.

A solution might be to abandon attempts to offer complete European menus at some meals, and instead to concentrate on the Indian food at which the cooks are adept, while perfecting a few simple European favorites -- like chicken burgers, fried fish or grilled lamb chops -- which could be offered as an 'always available' alternative menu.

One thing worth noting is that fresh milk is served onboard -- a refreshing change from the revolting long-life stuff that predominates on most cruise vessels nowadays. So breakfast cereals and hot drinks are palatable and of a quality you would enjoy back home.

## MV Mahabaahu Entertainment

Editor Rating

Entertainment

3.5

### Shore Excursions

The main focus during a Brahmaputra River cruise is on the action ashore, and considerable time is spent on Mahabaahu's twin tender boats Rudra Singha and Gadadhar Singha, which ferry passengers ashore to meet local tribes and visit monasteries, markets, temples and historic monuments.

Passengers also take boat safaris to see the wildlife that inhabits Kaziranga National Park and the Brahmaputra's sandy banks.

All shore tours are escorted by a destination manager who is a naturalist and photography expert, and so able to point out birds and animals and also advise passengers on how to make best use of their cameras.

At the end of the cruise, photographic highlights chronicled by the naturalist are presented to each passenger on a memory stick.

The undoubted highlight of the trip is the elephant-back safari through Kaziranga Park, to view herds of wild deer and buffalo, white rhino and -- for the sharp-eyed and exceptionally lucky -- the occasional tiger.

This entails a very early start (at 3:45 a.m.) and a long drive, but you get snacks en route, breakfast afterward and an experience that -- like riding the elephants -- you will never forget.

Other shore tour highlights include a jeep safari (which follows the elephant ride); calls at the 13th-century town of Sivasagar and lunch on a tea estate, followed by a talk on Assam and Darjeeling tea.

You'll also get to see vivid dance and drama performances on the island of Majuli -- a center of Assamese culture -- and to visit the villages of the Mishing tribespeople, who live in stilted houses and make a living from silk weaving.

The inhabitants of Peacock Island -- which rounds off downstream cruises as *Mahabaahu* approaches Guwahati -- are equally interesting. A small family of golden langur monkeys live here, and seem happy to caper about and have their photographs taken, in exchange for tasty chunks of mango.

### Daytime and Evening Entertainment

Mornings on Mahabaahu generally begin with yoga sessions, either up on the Donyi Polo sun deck or ashore, amid the sand dunes.

While some passengers concentrate on balancing their chakras, others take an escorted walk along the river bank to get in a bit of bird-watching and witness the local villagers going about their daily round.

Evening options include cooking demonstrations on how to make samosas and other Indian delicacies; gathering up on Mahabaahu's roomy sun deck or ashore to chat over a few 'sundowners,' and taking in colorful displays of folk dancing by local troupes who perform shoreside, so that people can watch from the sandbanks or from their cabin windows and balconies.

Mahabaahu moors up every evening, so passengers are guaranteed an engine-free night's sleep. Before bedtime, they often make their own entertainment at evening parties held on the sun deck or ashore on the sandbanks, with joke telling and singing.

### Enrichment

There are regular talks and slide shows onboard, outlining aspects of local history and culture. Topics include 'Sivasagar, the seat of Ahom Civilization,' 'Majuli, the seat of Vaishnav Culture' and 'The River Brahmaputra and the life that exists alongside.'

## Mahabaahu Bars and Lounges

**Soma Lounge, Main Deck:** This cozy lounge is the boat's main indoor relaxation area, where people can read or play board games during the day and enjoy evening drinks.

## Mahabaahu Outside Recreation

Up on the sun deck (also known as Donyi Polodeck), there is outdoor seating, sunbeds and a canopied area; there is also an alfresco bar, making this a popular area for daytime sunbathing and socializing in the late afternoon and early evening

## Mahabaahu Services

Reception -- where you can book spa treatments or exchange money -- is at the main entrance to the boat, in an open space between the Soma Lounge and the Mungri Mungram restaurant.

There's also a pool table here, and the area is often used as an ersatz bazaar, with locally made silks, jewelry and craft ware for sale.

TV reception in the cabins can be erratic, but there are DVDs and players available for those who can't do without their daily fix. There are also games and a small library of books in the Soma Lounge.

For serious shoppers who'd like an outfit made out of local silks they've bought ashore, Mahabaahu has its own onboard tailor. Prices vary according to what's required, and can be discussed onboard.

## MV Mahabaahu Spa & Fitness

Editor Rating

Spa & Fitness

2.5

MV Mahabaahu has a small swimming pool and sunbathing area on First Deck (one up from the restaurant and lounge on the Main Deck). The pool is unheated but there are comfortable sunbeds, and two showers.

On Second (or Pashuram) Deck, there is a small open-air gym, which basically consists of a stationary bike and weights.

On the Lower (or Spa Ojas) Deck -- one down from reception -- there is a spa, equipped with an Ayurvedic treatment room, a whirlpool bath, a steam cubicle, a small sauna and a hairdressing area.

The spa area is basic and rather old fashioned, but it does offer a range of excellent Ayurvedic treatments at affordable prices. Foot, neck and shoulder massages, conducted alfresco on the sun deck, are priced at 1,000 rupees (about £12.50 or \$15). At the upper end of the scale, a traditional Ayurvedic Udhichil deep tissue massage with hot herbal oil costs 6,700 rupees (c £84 or \$100) for an hour.

A word of warning to Western visitors; Ayurvedic treatments are medically based and engage with the entire body, so the order of the day tends to be access to all areas, i.e., no underwear. If this would feel uncomfortable for you, have a word in advance and staff will be happy to work out something that suits.

## MV Mahabaahu for Families

Editor Rating

Families

1.0

MV Mahabaahu will accept children over the age of 6, but they are solely the responsibility of their parents or caregivers, and no special facilities are offered for them.