

# Songs of Brahmaputra

Beyond Assam's celebrated landmarks lies a more intimate journey that unfolds on foot, in river homes and over cups of hand-rolled tea.

Words Julie Kagti



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There is an unmatched thrill to an early-morning walk with Karbi tribesmen as guides. As first light dapples through the canopy, the forest awakens with the melodic calls of hoolock gibbons. Fellow walkers share generations-old ecological wisdom. Twigs of the *meswak* tree are used for cleaning teeth, sweet potatoes from the undergrowth are cooked and a paste of *awapuhi* (shampoo ginger plant) is used as shampoo. Mid-morning, we stop for *kimung*, a meal of foraged mushrooms and leafy vegetables cooked in bamboo over a pit fire, its smoky, earthy flavour is deeply satisfying.

A visit to Assam can't be complete without popular experiences such as the rhino safaris of Kaziranga National Park, exploring the river-wrapped expanse of Majuli and a trip to the state's storied tea gardens. But even in these destinations, there are many hidden nuances that only local residents can reveal.

#### The Kaziranga

Kaziranga National Park is often experienced through the thrill of jeep safaris. Yet, a quieter, more immersive connection to this UNESCO World Heritage Site reveals itself when you step out of the vehicle. Innam Kengam or 'Walking in the Forest' is an experience curated by Aaranyak, a leading conservation organisation from Northeast India. It offers a rare opportunity to encounter Kaziranga on

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foot. The approximately 7-km-long guided trek takes around 4 hours, involving moderate walking, along the scenic Kohora River. It begins and ends at Phumen Engti village, located roughly a 30-minute drive from Kohora market, Kaziranga's main hub.

#### River Stories

From the dense forests of Kaziranga, the journey flows to Majuli, the world's largest river island, often called the living poem of the Brahmaputra. On an island facing the constant threat of river erosion, the local Mishing community demonstrates a remarkably resilient lifestyle.

The weavers are warm and welcoming, often inviting you to climb into their homes,

ingeniously raised on bamboo stilts to withstand floods. You're offered rice and ash beer (*apong*), a local brew reminiscent of Japanese sake, and it's humbling to see how thoughtfully their homes are kept. Like proud parents everywhere, they display their children's artwork on the walls, while study tables with neatly stacked books anchor the rooms.

Beneath these elevated structures, Mishing women sit at their looms, weaving intricate, vibrantly coloured textiles. You can sit with the weavers, and over cups of *laal sa* (red tea), personalise a design that they will enthusiastically weave for you. The Mishing women have wonderful stories to tell and their warmth is heart-stirring.



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**MASKED TRADITIONS**

Masks, or *mukha*, in Assam trace their roots to the 16th century, emerging from the Neo-Vaishnavite Bhakti movement led by Srimanta Sankardeva. Integral to bhaona performances, they bring Assamese theatre alive through expressive dance, music, and storytelling. Crafted on bamboo frameworks and layered with cloth, clay and natural fibres, the masks are dried, refined and vividly painted to depict mythological characters.



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### Tea Tales

To round off the Assam experience, one must delve into its legendary tea traditions. While grand, colonial-era "Burra Bungalows" offer historical luxury, a more intimate narrative unfolds at small, independent tea gardens run by local tribal communities. One morning, I join a tea leaf-plucking session and marvel at the speed with which the women deftly gather the tender leaves, while I struggle to collect even a modest handful.

In quiet courtyards, you can sit with local growers and watch as freshly plucked green leaves are expertly hand-rolled or pounded over small wood fires. As you sip your smoky tea, you experience it not as a mass-produced commodity but as a meticulous craft rooted in heritage and everyday life. Hosted by mindful operators like Curtain Call Adventures, these visits reveal the soul of Assamese culture.



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