



Brand, the BBC and bullying: Why is cruelty cool, asks Terence Blacker

Horse-riding in India: Perfect blend

From the fabled tea gardens of Assam to the realm of the one-horned rhino, Amanda Hemingway rides the outer reaches of the old Empire

Saturday, 30 September 2006

The chicken neck of India doesn't sound like a particularly appealing destination for a horse-riding holiday - but this is where you'll find Assam. Just above Bangladesh, and bordered on the other three sides by Burma, Thailand and Tibet, it's an area that still feels virtually untouched by Western influences. Dibrugarh, in particular, where we were based for nine days, retains the ambience of old India. The shops are open-fronted booths and the streets are crowded with bicycles, rickshaws, motor-scooters, hand-painted trucks, cows, goats, stray dogs and women in saris bright as flowers. As we wandered around the labyrinthine market, fish sellers held up writhing eels to tempt us, while in the vegetable section we browsed mounds of lethal chillis, fire-red and venom-green, and stalls selling dozens of varieties of rice, fruit and exotic sweets.

Our accommodation was a two-storey "bungalow" with four palatial bedrooms, terraces upstairs and down, shaved lawns and shady trees. We were living the lifestyle of colonial times with silk sheets and "bed tea" in the morning. Michael Palin stayed here briefly on his Himalayan tour and visited the tea gardens; we, however, had the time to explore further.

Tea is the "green gold" of Assam, employing large numbers of people and bringing the region both its wealth and its fame. The gardens stretch for miles, with the bushes pruned to a height of about three feet, so cropped and tended that their topmost leaves spread in a level carpet broken only by the irrigation ditches and the long, straight paths where we rode. Trees are set at intervals to shade the precious plants, so the whole effect is of a well-spaced woodland growing out of a smooth green sea. There was no wind, only the warm, winter sunshine filtering through the canopy in an Impressionistic dapple of light.

It's a place of quiet beauty and perfect tranquillity. We visited the factory where the tea is processed, also an unexpectedly tranquil environment. Amazingly, it takes less than twenty-four hours from plant to pot, including drying, shredding, heating and more drying. We tasted unblended teas (as with wine-tasting, you spit them out, presumably in case they go to your head), drank brews of assorted strengths, even had nibbles of whole fresh leaves fried in light batter. In Assam, there are a hundred uses for tea. Most unusual of all was the story of a tea-picker on a remote plantation who was attacked by a tiger. The animal pounced from behind, and its claws sank harmlessly into the sack on her back - saved by a teabag.

Our host was Manoj Jalan, vice-president of the Equestrian Federation of Assam. The horses here are exceptional: pure thoroughbreds trained for endurance riding - the equine version of marathon running - they were rippling with muscle and gleaming. At our initial encounter with them, we stared with dropped jaws. I got the stallion - a first for me. I had always understood riding a stallion was a special experience, and had fantasised about the challenge and the mysterious bond we would form. However, it took me very little time to realise that this particular stallion was just a good-looking hunk of muscle with mares on his mind.

Over the first few days we rode through the tea gardens and down to the banks of the Brahmaputra. The valley forms a vast, flat alluvial plain with the Himalayas to the north, rising sudden and jagged against the skyline. The river spreads over much of it, at its widest broader than the Dover Straits, flowing with melt-water from the mountains, swift and very cold. When we were there it was sunken, exposing low islands and sandbanks, its shallower channels completely dry. Sometimes we rode across to one of the sandbanks with the object of going for a canter, and fanned

out into Magnificent Seven formation, side by side, racing blithely along the sand. Other days, we followed the endless paths on top of the dykes that criss-cross the countryside in an attempt to control flooding. We watched people fishing in the pools, or paddling their long, low boats in the river, or washing their clothes on the edge of the bank.

Children herd the water-buffaloes, sitting astride the necks of massive beasts which could easily gore or trample them - but they never do, it would be too much effort. In the town the traffic may be frantic, but beyond its borders the pace of life is slow, and each day seems to go on more or less forever. The people of Assam take their tempo from the landscape, whose huge stillness seems to mock human endeavour.

One lunchtime we picnicked in the tea gardens, in a bamboo rondavel built on stilts above the green lagoon of the tea plants. Another day we were met by a boat on the riverbank and taken to our own private island for a lazy meal under a canopy. And one morning we rode out early from the bungalow to a wonderful garden of medicinal herbs and plants where we stopped for breakfast and were given a guided tour, nibbling (cautiously) on leaves that tasted of sugar, sniffing flowers that smelt of fruit, learning that this plant cured fever, that one infection.

In the middle of the week we did a two-day trip to the Kaziranga National Park nature reserve. It was founded in 1905 by Lady Curzon to preserve the rare one-horned rhino, its numbers then down to 12. She was shown a hoof-print in the mud and took it as proof of the rhino's existence - she never actually saw one. But thanks to her faith, there are now 1,500. We went on elephant-back to see them, wading through eight-foot grasses as the sun sucked up the morning mist, while the rhino watched our approach with the incurious stare of long habit.

Later in the day, we explored by four-wheel drive, spotting sambhur and hog deer, water buffalo and wild elephant, auburn-haired macaques, fishing eagles, parakeets. The terrain consists of wide pools and marshland studded with water hyacinth, alternating with a dense jungle of giant ferns and creeper-hung trees. We saw the tracks of a tigress and her cub but no tiger, though the reserve has 82. But it wasn't so much a disappointment, just a reason to go back.

On our return to Dibrugarh, our last major ride was to a school in the rainforest sponsored by Manoj and In the Saddle. All visitors give a small amount to help - in Assam, a little goes a long way. We left feeling humbled, the way you do, and thinking predictable thoughts about children in Britain, who have so much and sometimes seem to value it so little, and their counterparts on the forest's edge, struggling to learn with barely more than paper and pencils and a roof over their heads.

Amanda Hemingway's new book, 'The Traitor's Sword' (Voyager, £12.99) is in bookshops now

TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

GETTING THERE

There are no direct flights between the UK and Dibrugarh. The most convenient hub is Delhi, served from Heathrow by British Airways (0870 850 9 850; www.ba.com), Virgin Atlantic (08705 747747; www.virgin-atlantic.com), Air India (020-8560 9996; www.airindia.com), Jet Airways (020-8970 1500; www.jetairways.com) and Air Sahara (00 91 11 2335 9801; www.airsahara.net). Qatar Airways (020-8896 3636; www.qatarairways.com) flies from Heathrow and Manchester via Doha. From Delhi, Dibrugarh is served by Air Sahara and Indian Airlines (020-7565 7979; www.indian-airlines.nic.in). To reduce the impact on the environment, you can buy an "offset" from Climate Care (01865 207 000; www.climatecare.org). The environmental cost of an economy class return flight from London to Delhi is £14.10, The money is used to fund sustainable energy and reforestation projects. In the Saddle (01299 272 997; www.inthesaddle.co.uk) offers 10-night horse riding trips in Assam from £2,140. This includes flights, transfers, accommodation, park entrance fees and all riding and activities. Dates available this year are 8 November and 13 December.

FURTHER INFORMATION & RED TAPE

UK passport-holders need a visa from India's High Commission (0906 844 4544, calls 60p/min; www.hcilondon.net).
India Tourism (020-7437 3677; www.incredibleindia.org).

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