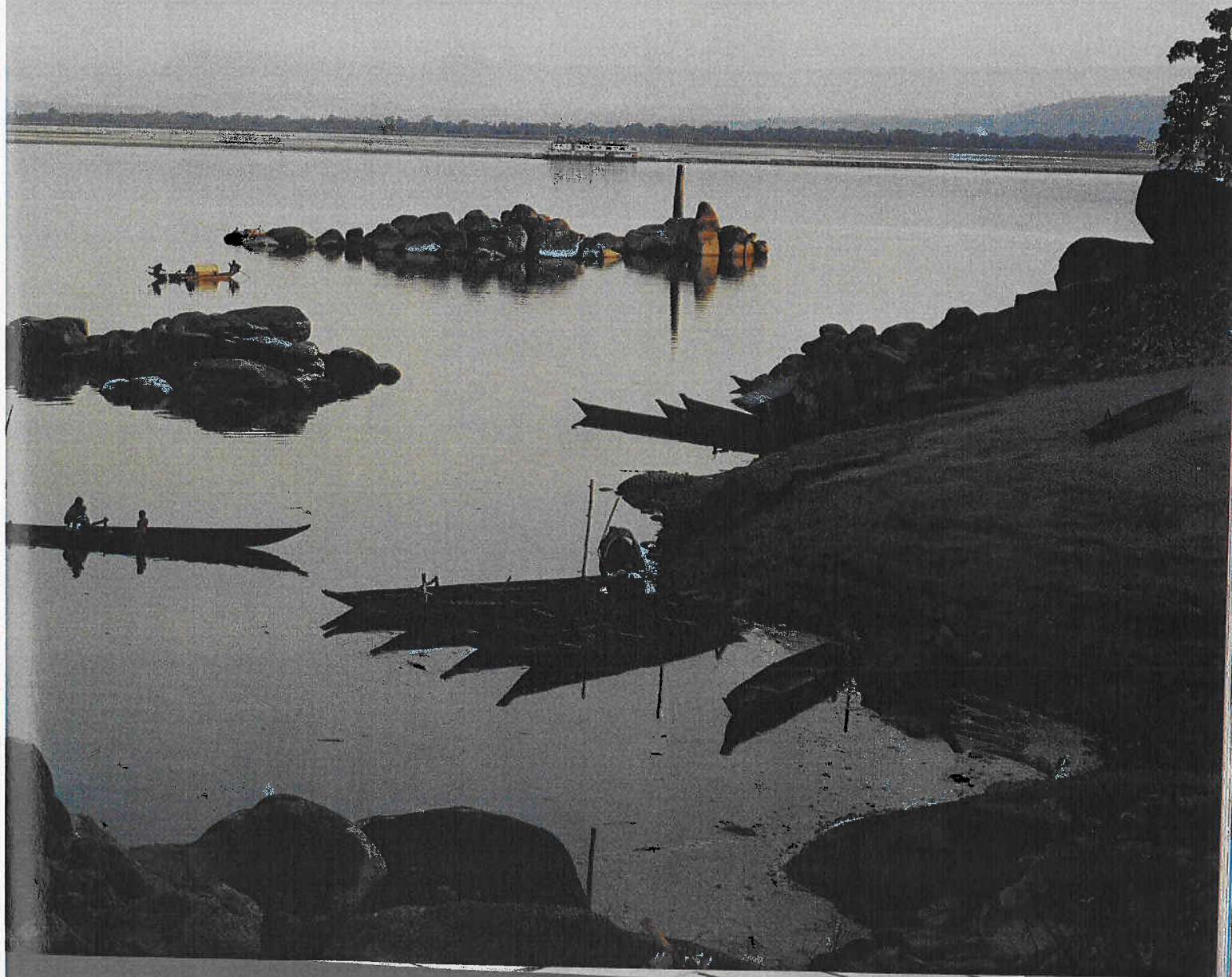
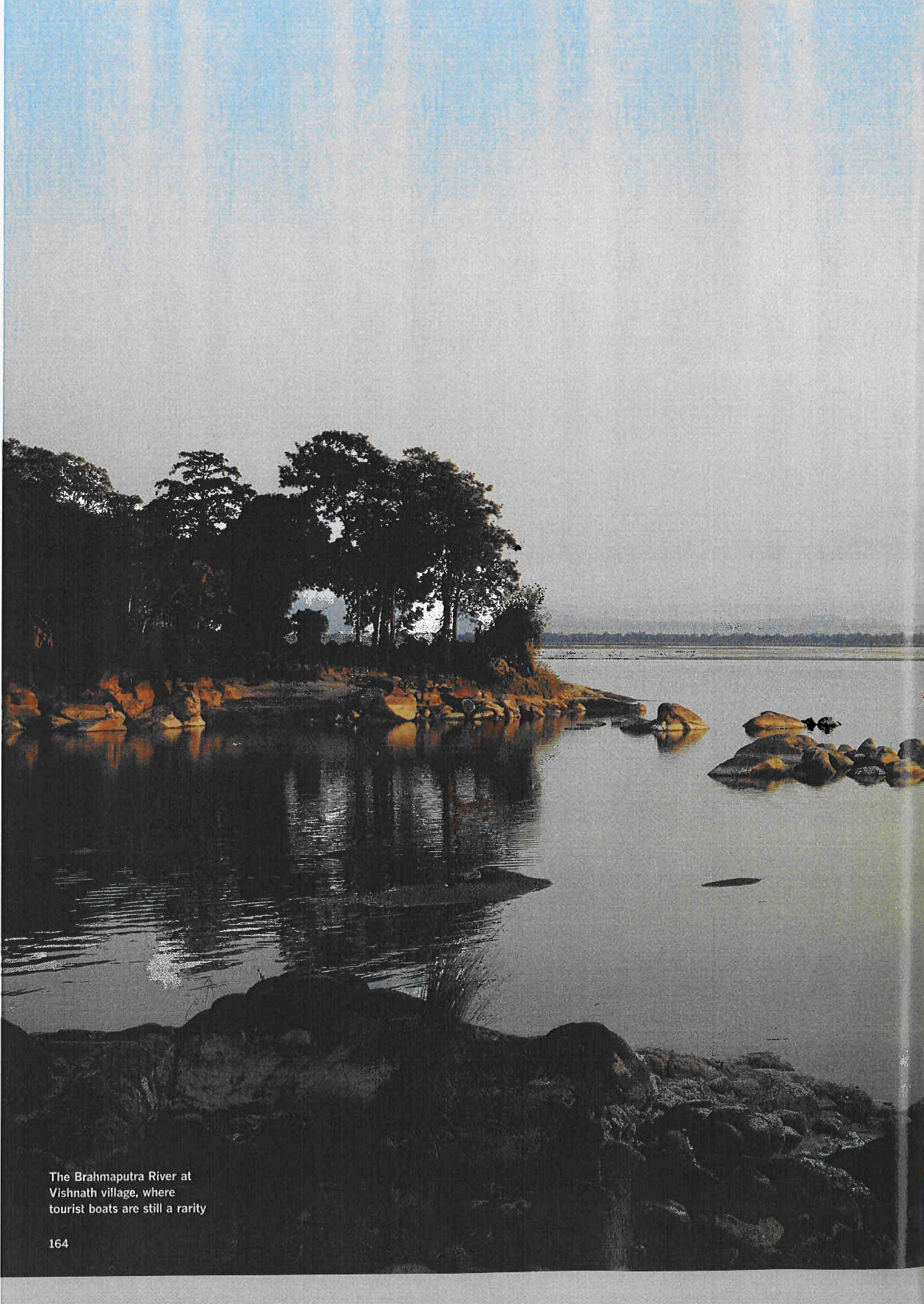


# A NEW LEAF

FAMOUS FOR ITS TEA PLANTATIONS, THE INDIAN STATE OF ASSAM HAS REMAINED UNTOUCHED BY TRAVELLERS UNTIL RECENTLY. NOW VISITORS CAN COMBINE A RIVER CRUISE WITH SAFARI EXCURSIONS FOR AN UNFORGETTABLE, SEPIA-TINTED EXPERIENCE, SAYS HARRIET O'BRIEN. PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTIN MORRELL





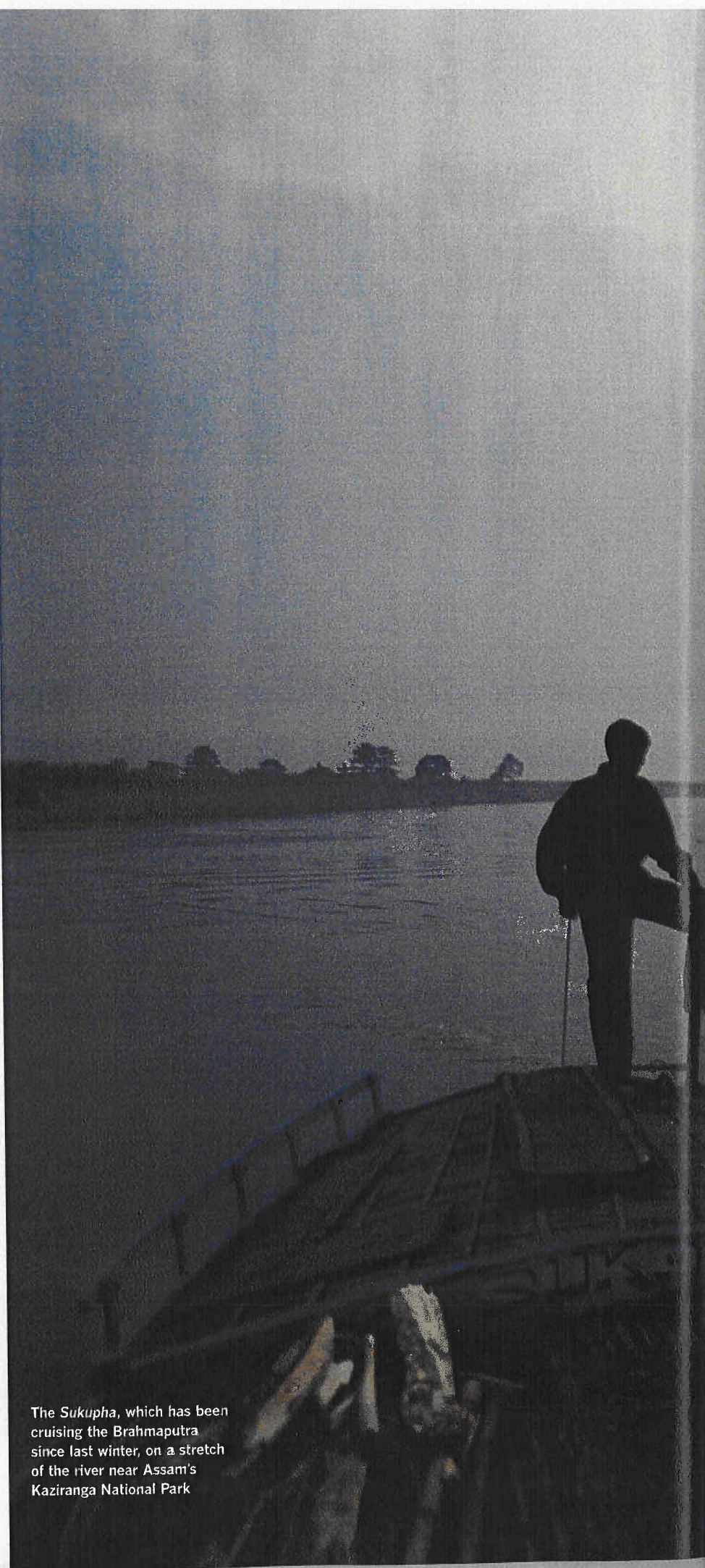
The Brahmaputra River at Vishnath village, where tourist boats are still a rarity

JUST OUTSIDE the village of Vishnath, in the glow of afternoon sunlight, I saw my first river dolphin. The creature's speed and agility were phenomenal.

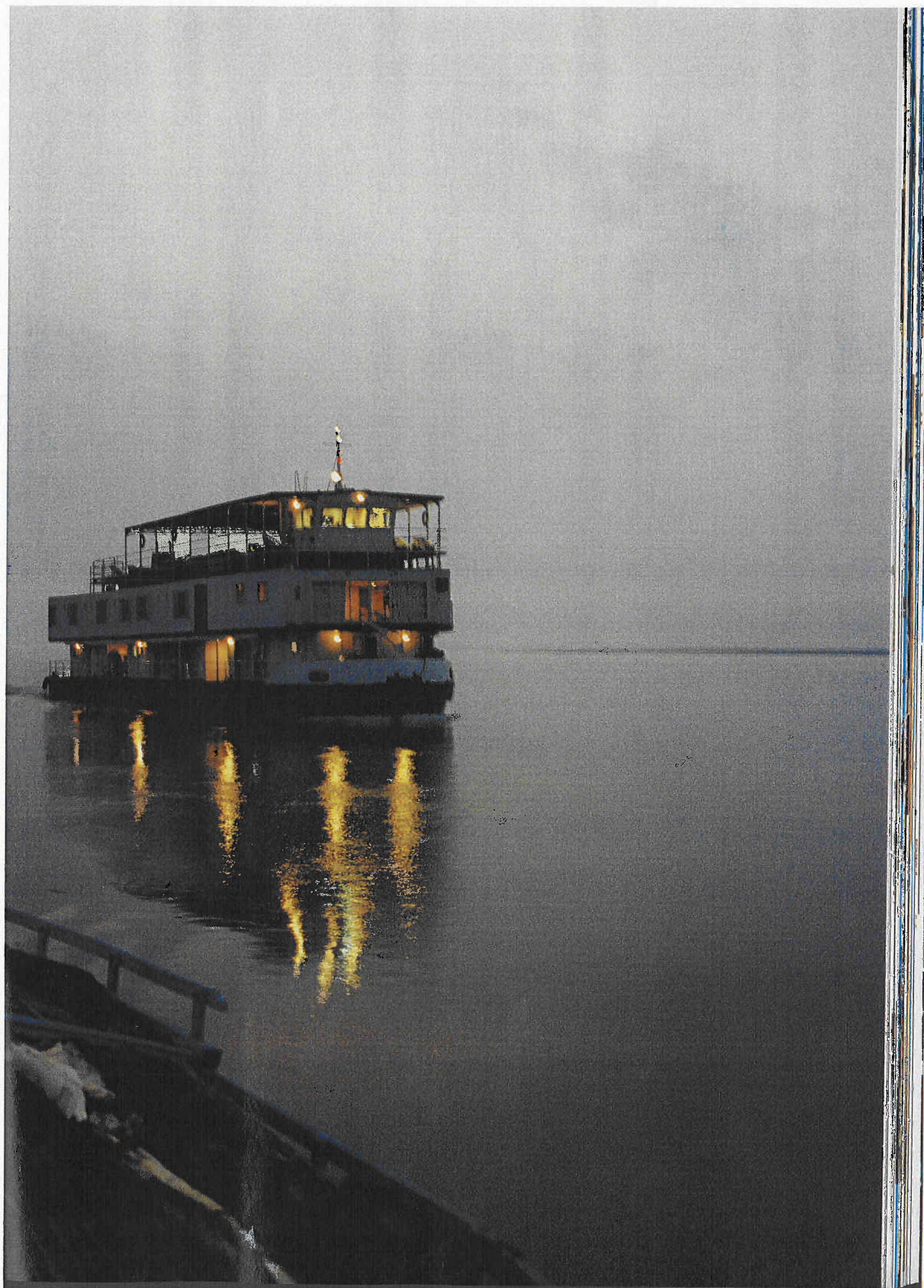
It arched high out of the water and disappeared back again in an instant, a tiny blur of a brown curve with a long snout – far longer than those of its seafaring cousins. The rapid movement barely disturbed the reflections of vibrant yellows, pinks and blues from the saris of the Vishnath villagers on the riverbank. The women seemed indifferent to the presence of the mercurial freshwater mammal. They had gathered to watch the arrival of our tourist river vessel, such visits being infrequent and therefore something of a local event.

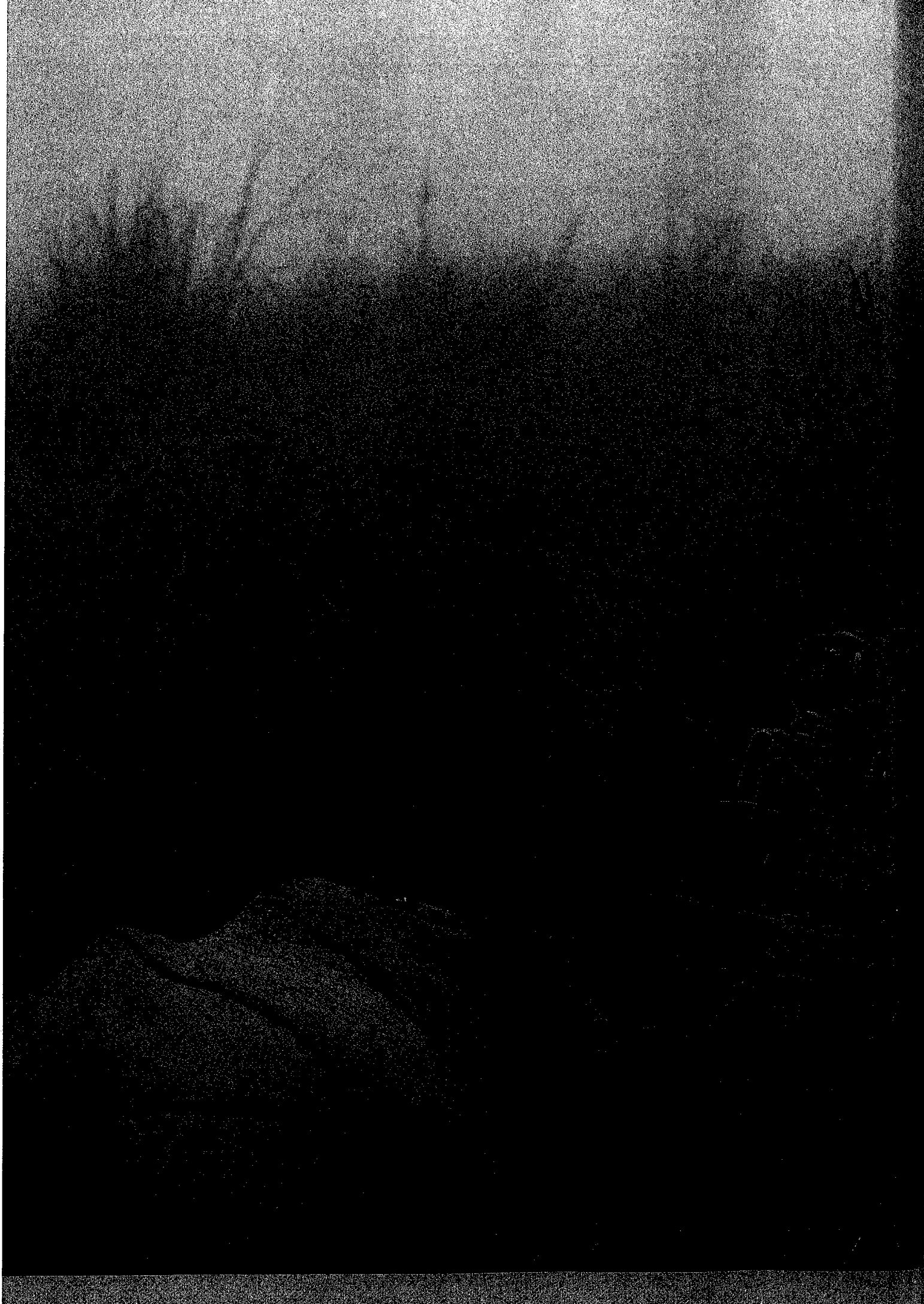
We were on a seven-day trip up the remarkable Brahmaputra River in India's northern state of Assam. Under colonial rule, Assam encompassed most of the country's north-east region. But after independence, pressure from different ethnic groups led to its division into seven states, with Assam now essentially comprising the Brahmaputra Valley. Intense political disputes meant that the area was out of bounds to foreign visitors for decades, and Assam has only recently fully reopened. As yet it remains little visited, so travellers here venture into pretty much untouched territory. Our journey took us through a rich and strange landscape, a watery world in which we called in on colourful villages, visited temples and tea plantations and met dancing monks. The wildlife along the way was spectacular. On a couple of excursions we had close views of rare one-horned rhino, wild buffalo, otters and eagles – quite apart from the evanescent river dolphins.

Stopping frequently, we covered a striking if minuscule section of the mighty river. From its source in Tibet to its confluence with the River Ganges in Bangladesh, the Brahmaputra is about 2,880km long (the Ganges, by comparison, measures a little more than 2,500km). Most of India's rivers are traditionally considered female, but this is a firmly male body of water: in Sanskrit, Brahmaputra means 'son of Lord Brahma', the creator god. No doubt its great width (the river swells to as much as 10km across in some parts of Assam) and the power of its flow during the monsoon season are contributing factors to its perceived gender. In the past it was a strongly mercantile waterway, too. This was especially so during the days of



The *Sukupha*, which has been cruising the Brahmaputra since last winter, on a stretch of the river near Assam's Kaziranga National Park





the Raj, when river steamers carried great cargoes of tea down to the Ganges Delta and Calcutta. The steamers returned as floating shops, laden with gin, cigars, tinned foods, medicines and other essentials for the resident European tea planters. Even after partition and independence, the Brahmaputra continued to see brisk business. But in 1950 a major earthquake altered Assam's topography, one of the most serious results being that the bed of the Brahmaputra was raised, so that in parts of the state the river became unnavigable to anything but small fishing boats. Or so it seemed.

About six years ago, however, shortly after Assam ceased to have 'Restricted Area' status for foreign tourists, a river route between Assam's commercial capital, Guwahati, and the town of Jorhat was painstakingly surveyed for a new enterprise, Assam Bengal Navigation. This private, British-Indian cruise company is a joint venture between Andrew Brock of UK tour operator Coromandel and Ashish Phookan of eco-adventure company Jungle Travels in Assam. In winter 2003 the company started the first of its river cruises, launching the *Charaidew*, a reconditioned diesel vessel built in the early 1970s but modelled on older river boats and capturing a nostalgic mood of the days of the steamer. With a library-saloon, dining room and plant-filled sun deck, the 12-cabin *Charaidew* was for three years the only long-distance river-cruise vessel in the whole of India, let alone Assam. Last winter, however, the same company introduced a second river boat on the Brahmaputra, the *Sukapha*, named after the first king of Assam's

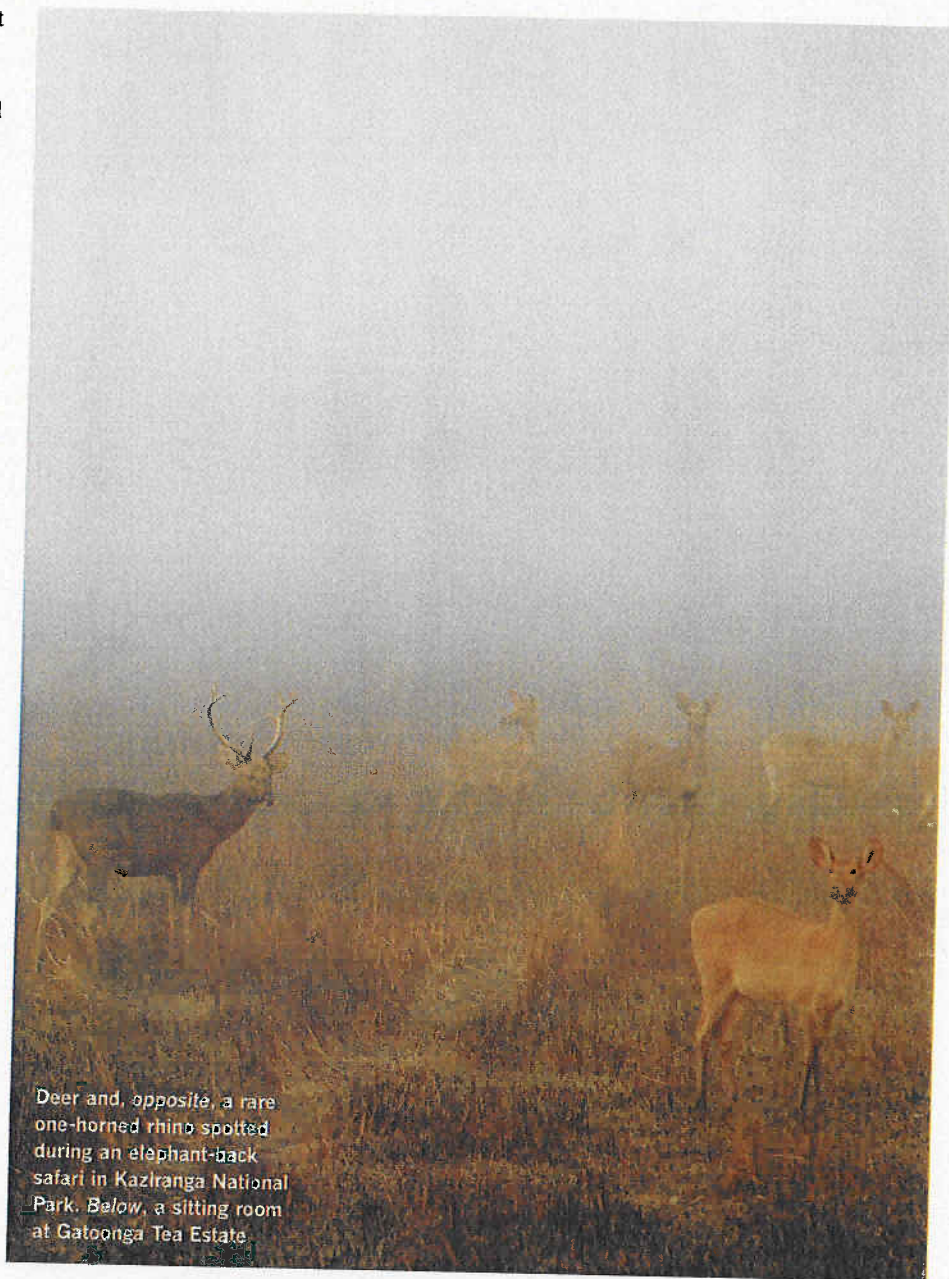
great Ahom dynasty which ruled the area from the 13th century until the British arrived in the 1820s.

We joined the *Sukapha* on her maiden voyage, reaching the boat when it was halfway from Guwahati to Jorhat. A brand-new vessel, the *Sukapha* has the same layout as the *Charaidew*, but everything – cabins, dining room, saloon, sun deck – is slightly bigger. In addition, a lower-deck front cabin that lay empty on our trip was due to be fitted out as a small Ayurvedic centre offering massage treatments. The 12 passenger cabins are comfortable rather than stylish, with furnishings of locally processed, eco-friendly bamboo and cotton. But sophisticated finish is hardly the point: this is principally an expedition boat – albeit one with an atmosphere and standards of service that

might make you feel as if you've sailed straight into the 1920s.

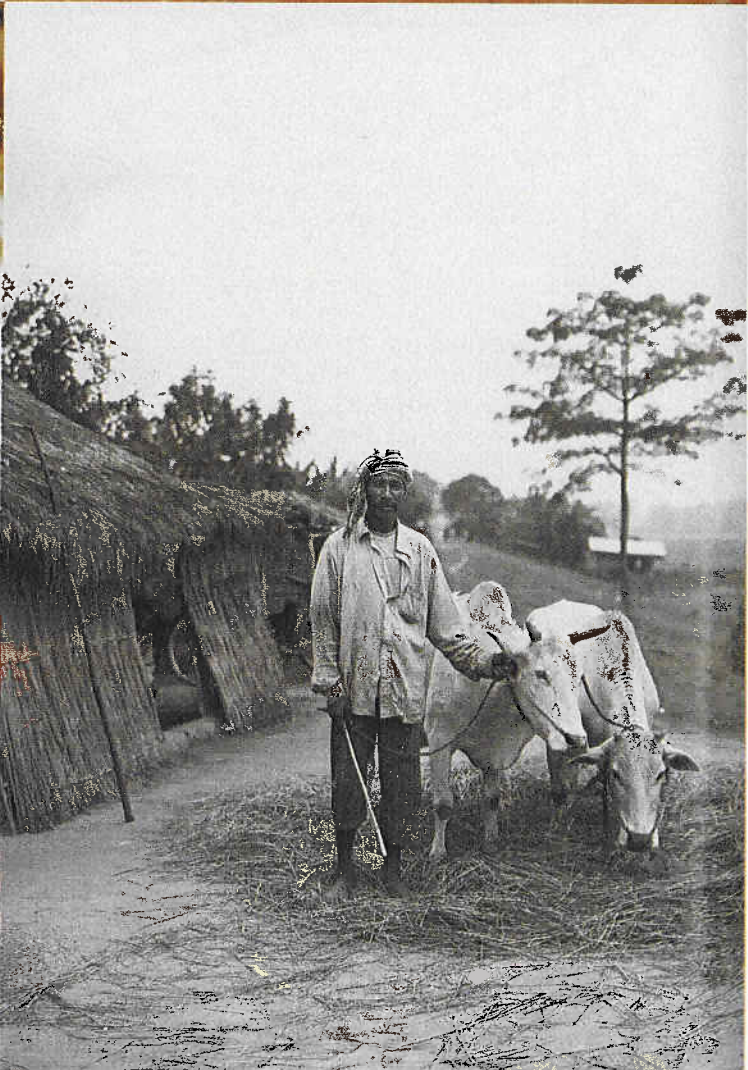
The 16 passengers on the *Sukapha*'s inaugural trip were a mixed group of Europeans, while the crew of 20 included three naturalist guides and a navigation team of eight, the course and currents of the river presenting them with a continual challenge. Silghat, about five hours' drive from Guwahati, was our boarding point. For tourists, the big draw of this jute-producing town is its location. It is about 45 minutes' drive from the western entrance to the Kaziranga National Park.

Covering some 430sq km, the park is a haven for wild buffalo, deer of many and varied types, wild elephant and greater one-horned (or Indian) rhino. In the early 1900s there were thought to be only about 100 of these prehistoric-looking

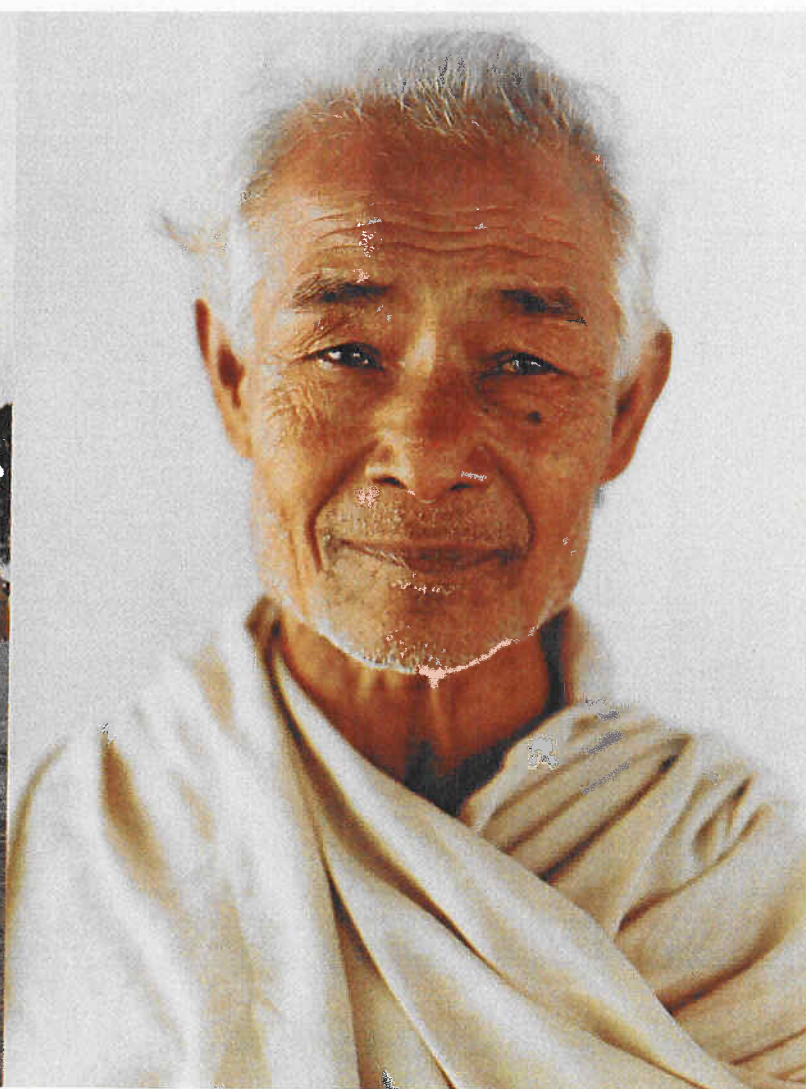


Deer and, opposite, a rare one-horned rhino spotted during an elephant-back safari in Kaziranga National Park. Below, a sitting room at Gatoonga Tea Estate.





Cricket on the riverbank at Vishnath. *Right*, a monk in one of the monasteries on Majuli island. *Opposite*, Assam is dotted with tea estates and remote cattle farms as well as candle-filled temples



creatures left, with extinction looming ever closer. But although the species is still endangered, the population has substantially increased. Kaziranga has been especially successful with its rhino numbers: there are now in the region of 1,600 here, and the park authorities have even started exporting some to other Indian wildlife reserves. This achievement is due partly to protection during the breeding season and partly to fierce conservation measures, with a rigorously enforced shoot-to-kill policy against poachers. With rhino horn fetching at least 300,000 rupees (about £3,600) per kilogram, poaching continues to be the most serious threat.

Our first day on the Brahmaputra began with an early-morning expedition to the park. The cruise itineraries are carefully coordinated so that Jeeps are ready and waiting at key points for land excursions. I was fortunate on that first venture to be with a sharp-eyed driver who, even before we reached the park entrance, spotted a couple of wild buffalo (thinner than the domestic variety and with fearsomely huge horns) and three rhino feeding in rice fields alarmingly close

to clusters of houses. Once in the park we set out on an elephant-back safari, each elephant carrying four passengers and a mahout, with one also bearing an armed guard. The views over the long grasses and across lakes filled with water hyacinths were spellbinding. But the real advantage of the animal transport was that it enabled us to watch the park's wild residents at close quarters. At one stage we were almost too close: a young rhino charged, causing some trumpeting and stamping of feet from our party before the aggressor retreated. Other rhino kept their distance but were still near enough for us clearly to see the folds of their thick, armour-like skin and to marvel at their bizarre horns. Our rhino count for the morning was 12.

We drove back to Silghat, where our small ship weighed anchor and set off at a stately pace. For the next three days we sailed beside the national park, the wide river bordered by broad, silver sandbanks with tangles of dark-green vegetation beyond. On the first afternoon we stopped at Vishnath, where women showed us their weaving techniques (each house, it seemed, had a loom) and laughing children accompanied us to three temples, practising

their English along the way (with no requests for money or pens as is often the case in other parts of India). It was a dignified place of quiet innocence.

On our third day we made an excursion to the eastern side of Kaziranga, walking through a village of the Mising tribe before reaching our attendant Jeeps. Thatched houses on stilts lined our path, with goats lazing in the shade beneath them. In a tapestry of fields beyond, yoked oxen pulled ploughs across a landscape dotted with lookout posts – vantage points for those in charge of protecting the crops from rhino and elephant. I was told that the lookout teams drive away the beasts by beating drums, lighting fires and even, David-and-Goliath-like, shooting catapults at the lumbering intruders. We set off in Jeeps accompanied by armed guards to look for some of these creatures in the outlying wilds. And we duly saw three wallowing rhino with a supporting cast of egrets, one swimming buffalo, a family of otters and an astonishing number of eagles, including a magnificent Pallas's fish eagle perched beside a huge nest.

Back on board, much of our time was spent under the awning of the sun deck,





An elephant-back safari,  
the best way to see  
Kaziranga National Park



Fishermen on the river near Vishnath. Opposite: drummers and dancers at a monastery on Majuli



from where we looked out on a watery desert of sand and silt that glistened in the sunlight. Occasionally we passed fishing boats or, in shallower reaches, huge nets strung up on bamboo poles. Domestic buffalo and herds of cattle could be seen from time to time in sparse grazing grounds on the far shores. With more than 40 per cent of the land in the Brahmaputra Valley susceptible to flood damage (this year's monsoon rainfall being particularly torrential), villages are built well away from the banks. A haunting sense of the boat's solitude in the midst of the huge river was punctuated by passing pelicans and the gymnastics of the little brown river dolphins.

To make the most of the views and the wildlife, we were frequently up at dawn, after which our days were regulated by set mealtimes. Breakfasts were bountiful, with a prodigious choice of porridge, cereals, fruit, eggs cooked to order, and

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## HOW TO GET TO ASSAM

**British Airways** (0870 850 9850; [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) flies from Heathrow to Calcutta, with connecting Indian Airlines flights to and from Assam's Guwahati airport, from £510 return in November. **Air India** (020 8560 9996; [www.airindia.com](http://www.airindia.com)) flies from Heathrow to Calcutta from £442 return in November. Airlines offering onward flights to Guwahati and Dibrugarh include: **Indian Airlines** (0871 222 9222; [www.indianairlines.uk.com](http://www.indianairlines.uk.com)); **Jet Airways** (020 8735 9650; [www.jetairways.com](http://www.jetairways.com)); and **Kingfisher Airlines** (0800 047 0810; [www.flykingfisher.com](http://www.flykingfisher.com)).

**Coromandel** (01572 821330; [www.coromandelabt.com](http://www.coromandelabt.com)) offers 11- and 14-day ➤

