

Sailing *with soul*



Room service, Pandaw-style
PICTURE: Pandaw/davidvandriessche.com

A new Hooghly River cruise offers a cultural, historical and spiritual journey through eastern India, writes [Jeannine Williamson](#)

It's just after sunrise and a sweet, intoxicating scent fills the air. I'm wandering through a maze of colour and movement at Kolkata's Mallick Ghat flower market, one of the largest in Asia, and the latest in a series of incredible only-in-India experiences.

Beneath the sweep of Howrah Bridge, one of the longest cantilever bridges in the world, traders balance huge baskets of marigolds, jasmine and roses on their heads. The blooms glow in the early-morning light. Amid the bustle, florists sit cross-legged in tiny workstations, fingers flying as they swiftly string together garlands that are destined for temples, festivals and weddings.

I emerge from within this living kaleidoscope and follow our guide onto the bridge, joining the never-ending tide of more than 100,000 vehicles and 150,000 pedestrians who cross it each day.

Before we get back on board the 24-passenger *Katha Pandaw* for breakfast, Kolkata reveals another of its morning rituals. We visit an *akhara*, a sacred wrestling ground where devotees practise the ancient discipline of *kushti*. After praying and stretching, they wrestle each other on consecrated earth mixed with turmeric, milk and mustard oil, then wade into the Hooghly River to bathe. Getting a glimpse of this daily routine feels like being privy to a part of life that's far removed from the usual tourist trail.

CULTURAL CAPITAL

These are the kinds of encounters that have shaped my nine-day journey with Asia small-ship specialist Pandaw. It's a new itinerary taking in the Hooghly and Ganges rivers, beginning with two culture-packed days in Kolkata, the one-time capital of British India.

Travelling in a small group, and with knowledgeable guide Deepak who stays with us for the duration, means I'm not just seeing West Bengal, I'm totally immersed in local life.

Once we sail upstream into rural areas, the few Western travellers we'd seen in Kolkata all but disappear and

we attract a warm, curious welcome wherever we land. Teenagers stop us in temples for selfies; market stallholders ask where we're from; and we're invited to join cricket matches that unfold on public lawns shared with sacred grazing cows. Each day we moor next to ghats – the stone stairways leading down to the water that are the social hub of towns and villages – and step straight into the heart of the community.

COURTING FAVOUR

One of our stops is Chandannagar, once a French trading post with a leafy promenade, where Deepak pauses to talk to a guard outside the local court building. It's totally unscheduled, but we're invited in to see clerks tapping away on vintage typewriters as black-gowned barristers skirt past on their way to the courtroom. These small, unexpected windows into daily life make the trip so special.

Our 350-mile journey takes in the Hooghly, a distributary (a channel that branches off a river) of the Ganges, as well as India's best-known waterway itself, worshipped by Hindus as the goddess Ganga.

Each day brings a wide array of experiences. The village of Matiar introduces us to the craft of brass smelting, little changed in over 100 years. Inside workshops, furnaces roar while artisans hammer the shining alloy into household and decorative objects.

In Murshidabad, we marvel at Hazarduari Palace where false doors were built to confuse potential →

SELLING TIPS

- A stress-free and relaxing way to visit India, particularly for first-timers who don't want to change hotels each night.
- Small ships dock close to hard-to-reach communities, offering rich opportunities for interaction in areas that get little tourist income.
- An alternative to well-trodden trails such as the Golden Triangle for travellers who are keen to understand more about rural life.
- Totally authentic and one-off experiences with a guide who can help put the area's history and cultural practices into context.

RIVER CRUISE



FROM LEFT: The Hare Krishna temple in Mayapur, West Bengal; the 24-passenger Katha Pandaw PICTURE: Iris Schuele

intruders and strategically placed mirrors in grand rooms were used to keep watch on untrustworthy visitors.

Temple visits range from the remarkable 108-shrine Shiva complex in Kalna to the colossal Hare Krishna temple rising above Mayapur's skyline. The latter is still under construction but, once again, travelling with Pandaw opens doors and we're granted behind-the-scenes access to the immense site, whose main wing is due to be completed by the end of this year.

TIME AND TIDE

Between excursions, the shaded top deck of Katha Pandaw becomes my front-row seat to the river life that unfurls in timeless scenes. Fishermen cast nets, women

rhythmically beat laundry on the ghats and families bathe and worship.

As the crew gather to wave us off at journey's end, we're told not to say goodbye but rather 'aaschi', a Bengali farewell that means 'I'll be back'. After seeing India through the unhurried and unscripted lens of this lesser-travelled river, I hope that proves to be true. ●

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BOOK IT: Fred Holidays offers Pandaw's 11-night *The Hooghly Ganges* cruise from £3,399, departing September 30 and including two nights in Kolkata plus the nine-night cruise, with flights, transfers, all onboard meals and drinks, excursions and Wi-Fi. fredholidays.co.uk

ask the expert



Andy Hawke, river cruise product and sales manager, Fred Holidays

"I'm really excited about Pandaw's new Hooghly River journey because it shows travellers a side of India many tours miss: everyday rural life along quiet riverbanks, dotted with small villages, temples and grand old palaces. Sailing on the Katha Pandaw and Kalaw Pandaw keeps everything relaxed and close to the landscape. The two nights in Kolkata are a real bonus – you get proper time to explore the city's museums and architecture without paying for a pricey hotel or constantly packing and unpacking. With flights, transfers, excursions, all meals and a drinks package included, it's fantastic value for such a high-quality, unique adventure."



Katha Pandaw

Katha Pandaw and its 36-passenger sister ship Kalaw Pandaw, which sails the same itinerary, were inspired by the 19th-century Burmese Irrawaddy Flotilla Company fleet. With wood-panelled cabins, shining decks and burnished brass fittings, the two vessels are as cosy as they are atmospheric.

A huge part of the experience is down to friendly, attentive crew members who are on hand for everything from leading shore excursions to mixing cocktails back on board. Meals are outstanding, showcasing authentic Indian cuisine that is imaginative and flavoursome – and spice levels can be turned up or down on request.

