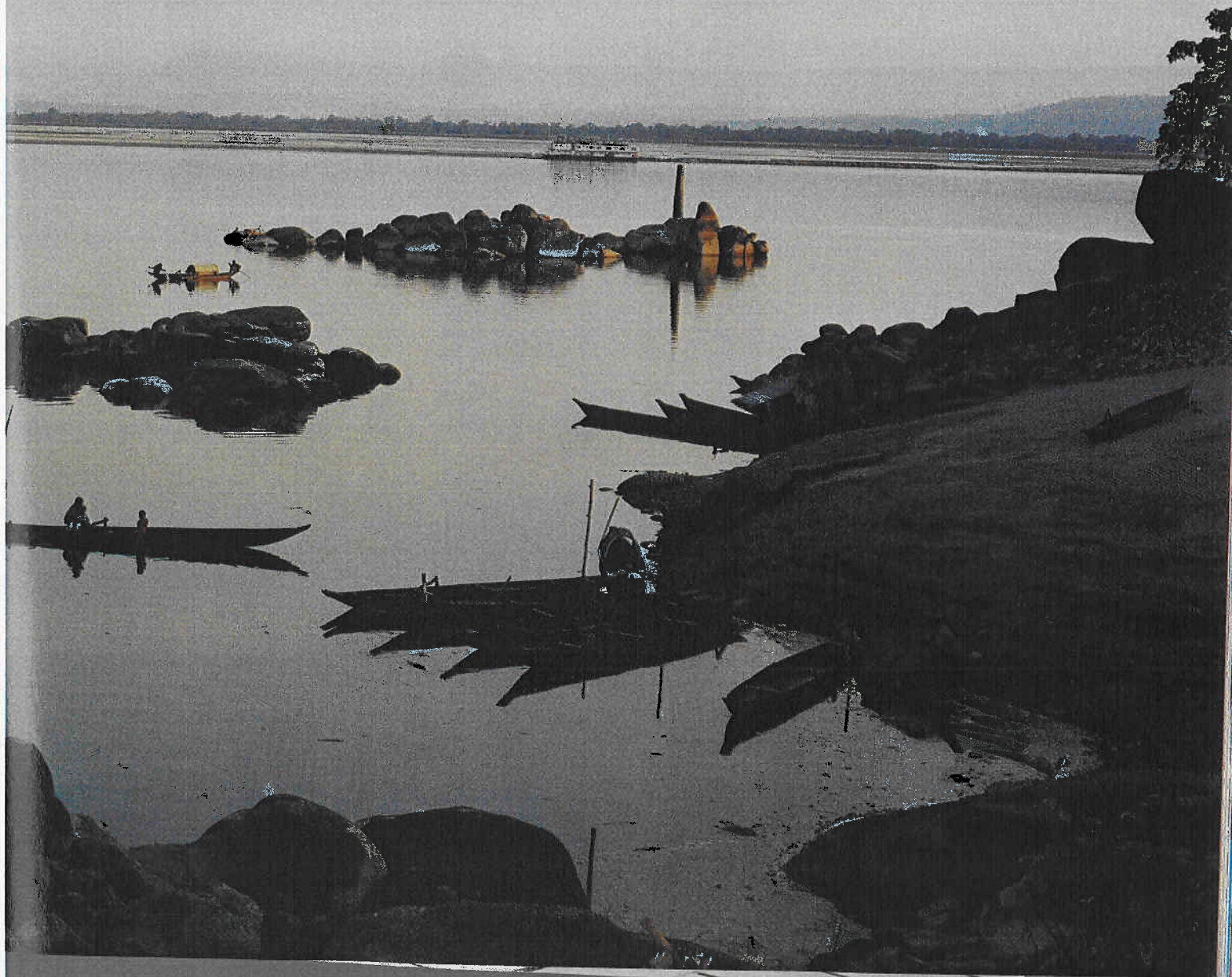
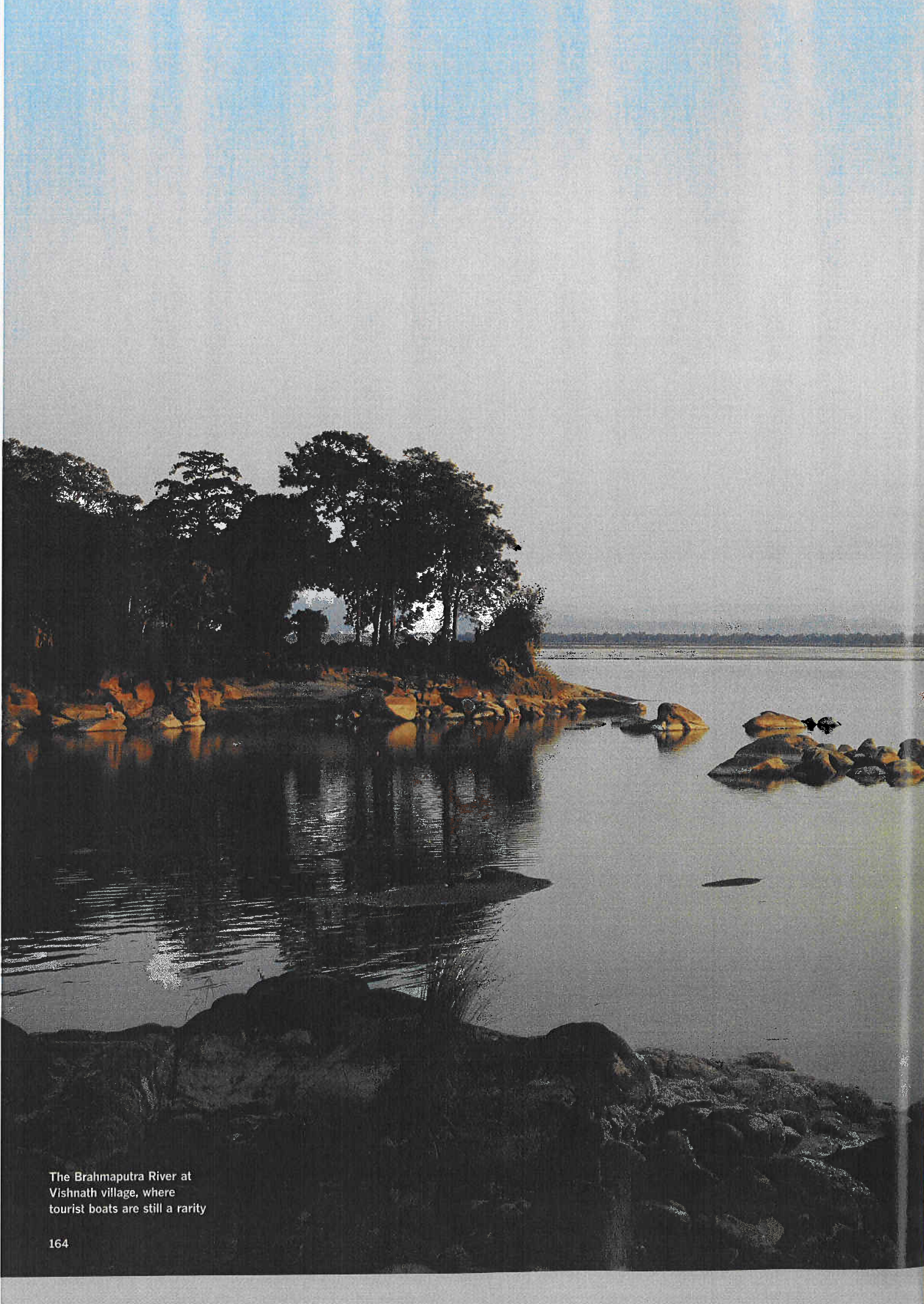


# A NEW LEAF

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





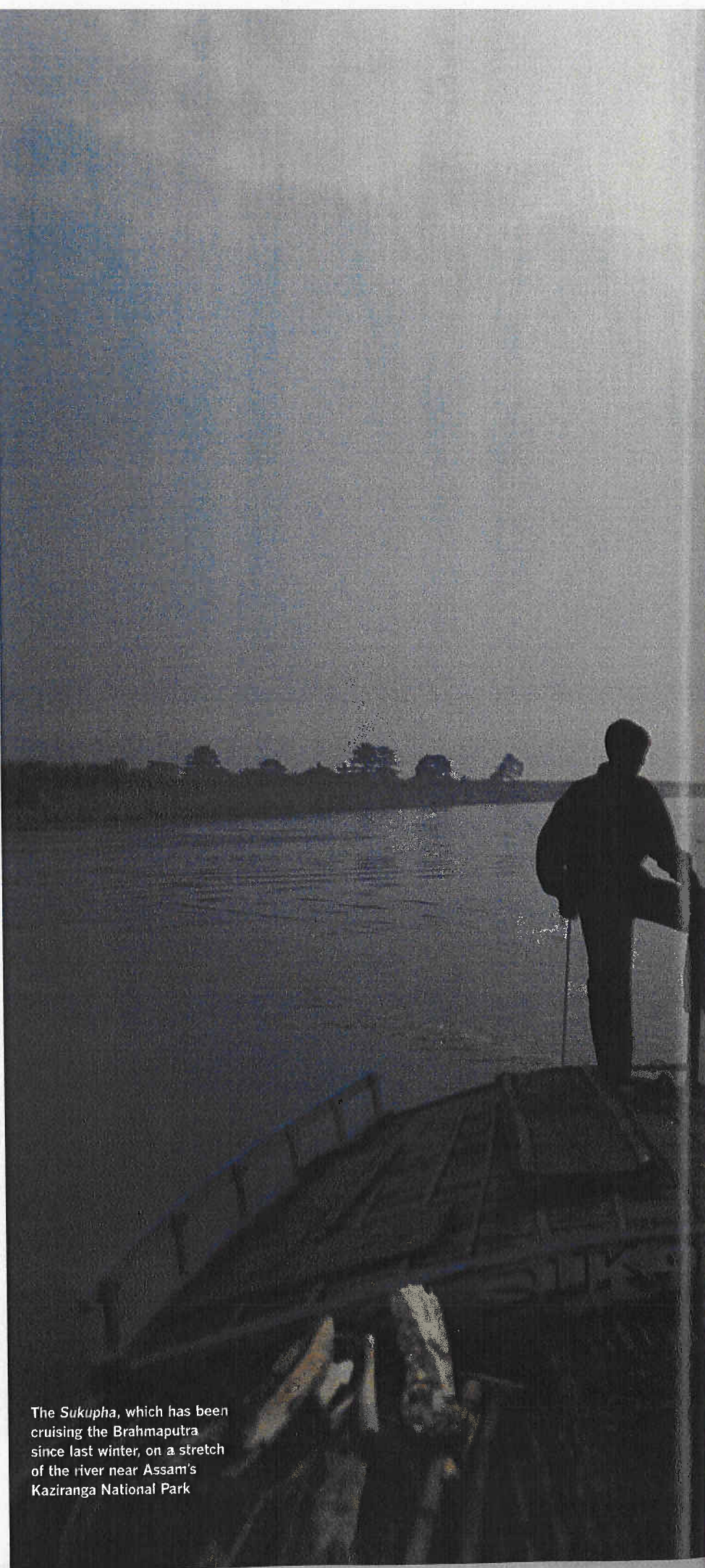
The Brahmaputra River at Vishnath village, where tourist boats are still a rarity

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

