

LEFT Dangamala nature camp, inside Bhitarkanika National Park

AMAZON *of* the EAST

On a river-based expedition in northeastern India, **Sarah Riches** encounters monkeys, monitor lizards – and the planet’s scariest predator

“No, no, no,” laughs my Indian guide, Nira Mohapatra, shaking his head.

“Are you sure?” I say, biting my lip.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Nira reassures me.

“So there are no leeches in Bhitarkanika National Park?” I ask again, having a flashback to a hike I’d done in southern India just three months before, when leeches the length of rice husks wriggled madly through my breathable trainers.

“Oh, you mean *leeches*?” Nira says, finally understanding me. “You could say this park is full of them.”

Nira seems to think this is funny, but I soon realise that leeches are the least of my concerns.

My wildlife adventure, which will see me board an Antara Cruises catamaran and traverse India’s ‘mini Amazon’, begins with a 170km

drive east from Bhubaneswar Airport to Gupti. With farmers tending rice paddies and grazing bulls visible through my window, it’s a wonderfully scenic four-and-a-half-hour journey to the gateway of Bhitarkanika National Park in the northeastern Indian state of Odisha.

Along the way, my friend Charan and I discover Lalitagiri, a site of significant Buddhist monastery ruins dating back to the first century CE. Set in grounds scented with jasmine bushes and mango trees, it makes for a picturesque pitstop in a region few international tourists explore.

It’s dark by the time we arrive in Gupti, where the crew of Antara’s *Mahanadi* greet us with garlands and ‘Welcome’ written in marigolds on the floor. The solar-powered vessel is one of four identical catamarans, all built with Bhitarkanika National Park



FROM LEFT A brown-winged kingfisher, one of eight species found in the park; ruins of an ancient Buddhist temple at Lalitagiri

Surrounded by crocodiles and with no other humans in sight, I find myself wondering how useful our lifejackets really are

in mind. *Mahanadi* and *Bhitarkanika* launched in 2024, with *Brahmani* and *Baitarani* following in 2025. Each has two luxurious ensuite bedrooms, a dining area and a sun deck with loungers (the line also provides yoga mats, board games and umbrellas).

After a dinner of drumstick soup, buttery fish and rice pudding, it's time to put my soft-looking bed to the test.

UNDER THE BOARDWALK

The best time to visit Bhitarkanika is during the cooler months, between October and February. I'm there in April, so the humidity is soaring, but even as the temperature hits a roasting 35C, eating guava and watermelon for breakfast on the top deck while having the park practically to ourselves is a real treat.

After Sundarbans National Park to the north of the Bay of Bengal, Bhitarkanika is India's second largest

mangrove ecosystem, fed by four rivers – Baitarani, Brahmani, Dhamra and Pathsala – each rich in wildlife. Designated a sanctuary in 1975, the 145sq km area became a national park in 1998 and was declared a wetland of international importance in 2002. It has since applied to become a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Stepping off the catamaran onto a boardwalk, I see red fiddler crabs scurrying for their holes and clusters of mangrove roots piercing the mud like stalactites. Chirps, calls and whistles emanate from the cashew forest as Nira guides us past a mangrove nursery and along a raised 700m walkway.

Here I glimpse a monitor lizard plodding through the undergrowth and a spotted deer darting between trees. Then I spot the orange beak of a brown-winged kingfisher. "This is the only place in the world where you can

see eight species of kingfisher," says Nira. "It's also India's largest heronry."

We're a sticky, sweaty mess by the time we reach a clearing, grateful for the coconuts on sale there. The monkeys around us are happy too, eagerly grabbing our leftovers.

Refreshed, we head for the cool of a nearby nature museum, where we learn that the park is home to mongooses and porcupines, civets and jungle cats, wild boar and hyenas. King cobras and red-tailed pit vipers are just two of its five venomous snake species – and then there are the crocodiles.

I marvel at the terrifying six-metre skeleton on display, though Nira is less impressed. "Every January the park conducts a crocodile census, which reveals a population of more than 10,000. This park has a Guinness World Record for the longest crocodile. At 7.3 metres it's longer than the width of your catamaran."



INTO THE WILD

Following a visit to the crocodile hatchery next door, we hop in a six-seater boat and venture further into the park. We soon see our first croc, a six-metre giant with its mouth agape and its eyes trained directly upon us. "That's a 50-year-old male," Nira tells us. Another crocodile sees us and slides down the sand bank, while yet more of them dip beneath the surface as we pass by. Surrounded by crocs and with no other humans in sight, I find

myself wondering how useful our life jackets really are.

Back on board, we dine on oily fish, dahl and mushrooms in a mustard sauce – a regional recipe – followed by baked cheese wrapped in banana leaf. At golden hour, we follow a one-hour trail through Shikar Kothi forest.

"This area used to be a royal hunting ground," explains Nira. "*Shikar* means hunting in Urdu, while *kothi* means lodge." We arrive at a lake in time to see flocks of pond herons, skimmers and red lapwings take flight at sunset.

The next day, we hike to Habalikathi Beach along a terracotta path that unfolds like a red carpet through the mangrove forest. Apart from a handful of dilapidated concrete chalets, there's no sign of life as far as the eye can see – so I'm shocked when a monkey scampers up my leg.

Back on the catamaran, we feast on smoky aubergine, jackfruit curry, chapatis and a cottage-cheese doughnut. After dinner we set sail at sunset, and as the burnt orange sun dips below the horizon, I feel both blessed for experiencing this enchanting corner of India, and relieved that at least I escaped the leeches. ■



MY VERDICT

Great for wildlife-spotting and tranquillity

Don't miss the walk to Habalikhati Beach

Best spot on board

The sun deck at sunset

Value for money The fare includes Wi-Fi and excursions.

Flights, transfers, alcoholic drinks and tips cost extra

Eco credentials The ships are solar powered (with a backup generator) to reduce emissions

Star rating 4/5

FROM TOP dining with the captain; Antara Cruises operates four two-suite luxury catamarans

Get on board

Sarah Riches travelled with **Antara Cruises** on a three-night Cruising in Bhitarkanika itinerary, round-trip from Gupti via Habalikathi Beach, priced from £4,875 including 10 hotel nights in Calcutta and Odisha, international and domestic flights and transfers. For similar cruise-and-stay packages, call 01993 838330 or see audleytravel.com/india

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