

KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK



Assam, India

Area: 694 sq km core area. 105 sq km restricted tourist area
Best Time to Visit: November to March

Altitude: 410 to 810 meters above sea level
Closed: Monsoon season



The Brahmaputra is one of the world's great rivers. For nearly 1,800 miles, it cuts a blue swathe round the eastern end of the Himalayas and like its namesake, 'Brahma' - 'the creator', it brings life to the alluvial flood plains and grasslands of northeast India. But, like another supreme Hindu God, Vishnu, the Brahmaputra is also indiscriminately destructive.

The Indian one-horned rhino – the species that looks like it's wearing plates of armour, is only found in Nepal and India. Assam's Kaziranga National Park is today its main stronghold, with a population of around 1,850 – at least 75% of the world's total population.

The park is bordered in the north by the mighty Brahmaputra River. The habitat is a mixture of grassland, forest, marsh and pools, flooded each summer during the monsoon when the river bursts its banks. There is a significant tiger population, but you'd be extremely lucky to spot one in the tall elephant grass. Other mammals include elephant, swamp deer and sloth bear, and there are at least 490 species of birds.

It might come as a surprise to find large areas of grassland rather than a forest at the park. This is due to controlled burnings taking place in the dry season (February and March). Silt from monsoon flooding also retards forest growth, while the increasing numbers of rhino also contribute to the environment.

“The rhino is really a landscape architect. It's a keystone herbivore. If you remove it then certain ecological procedures don't take place. This is a dynamic landscape – it changes all the time. But rhino are very hardy and adaptable. Man is their only problem.”

Just like the rhino, things generally move at a sleepy pace here. The drivers of the jeeps that carry you round the park are happy to stop to let you watch a bird or gaze at a stunning vista. Compared to the frenzy of Rajasthan's Ranthambhore National Park, at Kaziranga life is in the slow lane.

“One of the best ways of observing wildlife in the park is to take an elephant ride. There are 40 working elephants in the park, half of them used for visitors. A mist still sat on the ground, and the light was ethereal, the colours all muted greens and greys; as the sun grew stronger a palette of more vivid emeralds made an appearance. Ten rhino were scattered over an area that had recently been burned, relishing the



One horned Rhino



Sweet moment between mother and a calf



Tracking wildlife aloft an elephant

succulent new shoots that were coming up. They were unperturbed by the presence of the elephants and we could get within yards of them.”

Kaziranga National Park also harbours a variety of smaller animals and birds. Predators are the tigers, elephants and the hyena. The Indian Deer, Sambar, (spotted deer), Nilgai (blue bull), Chinkara and the Chowsingha (four-horned antelope) are also found here, along with the crocodile and the long tailed langur. Here some of the rarest wildlife in the world can be found.

There are a couple of lakes inside the Park. The lakes were full of birds- at least 5,000 demossile and common eastern cranes. Flamingoes were in abundance. One could notice both the Greater and the Lesser Flamingo in a single flock rummaging among the aquatic vegetation for food. A trumpeting call gave away the presence of sarus cranes at a field near the lake. This large bird, one of the tallest flying birds in Asia, is usually seen in pairs or families. It is known to mate for life and is a symbol of fidelity.

The forest inside the Kaziranga National Park is extremely thick. With luck one might spot a vast range of elephants near a small pond and a tiger. There is an extraordinary variety and range of birds here. A massive flight of common cranes, thousands of them in a single flock, flew overhead. One can observe dolphins surfacing for air, kingfishers, osprey and marsh harrier fishing for breakfast, cranes flying overhead, and cormorants, darters and herons sheltering in the thick forest inside the National Park. Large flocks of crab plover and other shore birds make the most of the beached cache of fish.

With luck, one might see a huge herd of blackbuck. The blackish brown and white bucks with their long spiraling horns, the juvenile bucks that are brown and white with shorter horns, and the does are fawn and white and have no horns. The blackbuck is capable of high speeds, achieved by bounding across flat plains which are its favoured habitat.



Elephants



Wild asiatic water buffaloes



Great Hornbill