

KAZIRANGA



Kaziranga's great fields of tall grass are difficult to traverse—the visitors depicted are seated on an elephant that is pushing its way through the dense growth. There are also great vistas of open country where various species of deer can be seen among the rhinos, wild water buffalo and many colorful birds.

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DOESN'T EVERYONE have a desire to go on an elephant ride, at least once in his lifetime? A lucky few have ridden this sagacious beast at a county fair, zoo or circus; but unfortunately, such a ride in a park or on a city street does not give the same thrill as taking it through a forest, across a river, or over a mountain. Only on a cross-country jaunt can this animal display its vigor, potentialities and capabilities.

There is no better place to ride an elephant than in the wilderness of India, and some of the best riding in the world is offered at Kaziranga Sanctuary in Assam. There, one will find that just getting on an elephant is an adventure in itself. Perhaps the easiest method to mount is to climb onto a platform and walk onto a standing elephant. Sometimes, though, platforms are not available, and the riders must work their way up a long ladder which has been propped against the elephant. Then the animal usually moves

enough to make the rider wonder if he will make it to the top. Another way of mounting is to use a shorter ladder with the elephant kneeling on all fours. The last method probably is the most unnerving for the uninitiated, as the animal still must rise to a standing position. When the elephant is given the command to rise, it unfolds one pillarlike leg and the riders lurch diagonally backward. A second or so later, before the passengers have recovered from the first jolt, the next leg is in motion...two more shocks follow in rapid succession, and the elephant is up. By this time, the riders' heads are spinning. Then the mahout, mounted on the elephant's head, mumbles another command, whangs the elephant on the head with his bull hook, and prods it behind the ears with his great toes. Another lurch forward and the elephant taxi is in motion.

Six to eight persons can be accommodated in the well-padded, comfortable seats, all facing sideways. A plank along each side of the elephant serves as a foot rest. The manner in which

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Two versions of the four-
poster type of elephant
saddle— with the wooden
posts at each corner and
a foot rest on each side
of the animal.





The Great Indian species, *Rhinoceros unicornis*, is the largest of the Asiatic rhinoceroses, reaching a height of six feet four inches at the shoulder and a total length of fourteen feet. In record animals, the single horn measures two feet in length. Five hundred years ago, this armored beast roamed a large part of northern India and Nepal. Its present range consists of eight reserves, or sanctuaries, in India and the Rapti Valley of the Nepal Terai. In 1966, after a careful survey of these lands, an estimated total of 740 rhinos was determined. Hunting was doubtless an important reason for the decline of the species, but even more so was man's modification of the rhino's habitat. As the human population of India increased, so did the land area put under cultivation or grazing. Close contact with man's domestic animals has had detrimental effects, especially by the transmission of livestock diseases to the rhinos.

February is an ideal time to see the rhinos in Kaziranga. The weather is mild and the rhinos are pairing off. Their courtship is boisterous, with a good deal of fighting between the sexes at this time, and it is not uncommon to see great gashes on some specimens. The rhinos are most bold then and will even charge elephants. Their calls to each other are readily heard and traced. This pair was photographed after sundown from an automobile.

The Wild Water Buffalo of Assam, *Bubalus arnee fulvus*, which is a magnificent, streamlined and larger version of the domestic animal, attains a height of five feet four inches at the shoulder and a weight of over 2,000 pounds. The massive horns average over three feet in length. Occasionally cows have longer, but thinner, horns than the bulls. The Water Buffalo was domesticated in the rice culture of northern India between 3000 and 2500 B.C. Domestication altered the animal by decreasing the difference in size between



the sexes, shortening the skull, decreasing the length of the horn, thickening the horn and altering its shape and sweep. The litheness and alertness of the wild buffalo is seldom, if ever, seen in the domestic forms. The Wild Water Buffalo is well on the road to extinction. Its habitat has been mostly reclaimed for cultivation. Furthermore, many are killed in communal hunts for the protection of crops. Large herds of domestic animals exert considerable pressure on natural food resources. Domestic buffalos interbreed with the wild forms thus polluting the gene pool; and contagious diseases spread by domestic animals have been one of the main reasons for this wild animal's disappearance in many regions. The fate of the Wild Water Buffalo hangs by a thread. So far, there is no program for breeding the progenitors of one of the world's most common domestic animals in captivity. Perhaps their only hope of survival is a program of zoo breeding patterned after the successes of the Mongolian Wild Horse and the European Bison.



one holds on is determined by the style of the saddle. Some are built like a four-poster bed with a wooden post at each corner. A passenger lucky enough to be seated on one of the corners can wind one leg around the post to anchor himself in the seat. Then, if he feels secure, the hands are free for using a camera or field glasses. The passengers between the corners have to clutch the saddle itself. Other types of saddles have iron rails crossing the elephant's back, and the passenger secures himself by grasping a rail on each side.

The slow, swinging walk of an elephant is not impressive, but for the occasional rider, the swaying motion is all one can handle. The experience differs with the location of the seat—sitting on the corner directly above a leg gives a gyrating ride, whereas it is a smoother swaying motion when seated between the corner riders. Even so, it is wise to hang on tightly.

Elephant power is truly a revelation for anyone, but especially so for those who are experienced with heavy motorized equipment. It would seem that the mechanical giants of today cannot possibly have counterparts in nature, yet serious doubts arise when an elephant performs a myriad of tasks with nonchalant ease. An elephant can walk through swamps that would mire down jeeps, trucks and tanks. It can push through a forest or high cane just as well as a bulldozer. It can ford streams more quickly, climb steeper slopes, and work more efficiently than any single vehicle now operated by our armed services. And all these feats are done without roaring, fuming, coughing or clanking. They are done quietly, deliberately and with finesse.

The Kaziranga Sanctuary in Assam is an ideal place for elephant riding. There one can obtain the eerie feeling of taking part in one of Gulliver's travels. Giant grasses, ten to sixteen feet high, abound in the Sanctuary, and the only way one can pass through is on elephantback. As the mighty pachyderm swishes its way through the grass, the riders will see tunnels five to six feet high where rhinoceroses have trampled a passageway. Tigers and other forms of wildlife occasionally wander through these tunnels in a deadly game of hide-and-seek. As the stand of grass wanes, the tourist can see an abundance of wildlife, some of it most rare.

Kaziranga perhaps is the most famous of all wildlife sanctuaries in Asia. It is the main stronghold of two of the world's largest vanishing mammals, the Great Indian Rhinoceros and the wild Water Buffalo. A recent census of its 166 square miles reports 400 rhinos and 700 wild buffalo, approximately one-half of the total number alive in the world. Another species, the Swamp Deer, or Barasingha, is readily seen in the Sanctuary, and it too is found on the list of endangered and vanishing wildlife.

The Sanctuary, stretching over an area of flat, marshy fields on the south bank of the Brahmaputra River below the Mikir foothills of Assam, is easily reached from Calcutta by plane, although the last 60 miles must be traveled by motor coach or automobile. The Department of Tourism, Government of Assam, maintains two lodges for visitors. Both of the two-story structures are fully furnished with comfortable beds, clean linens, baths, electricity, and a lounge to relax with family and friends. The guests can choose between Indian or Western food. Within the Sanctuary, there are a few roads prepared each year which can be traveled by jeep from December to March. Visitors usually have to go on elephantback to see the many forms of wildlife. In addition to the rhinos, water buffalo and swamp deer, the visitor probably will see Black-necked Storks, Greater Adjutant Storks, Cattle Egrets, Red-vented Bulbuls, Moustached Parakeets, Sambar and Hog Deer. Possibly, there may be such surprises as otter, wild boar, wild elephant and jungle fowl; and if one is really lucky, one might catch a glimpse of a bear or even a tiger.

All of these animals (and many more species too numerous to mention here) await those who go to Kaziranga. A shikari to India is being organized for the coming months of January and February. The proposed tour will visit the magnificent Kaziranga Sanctuary, the Gir Forest with its fabled Indian Lions, and Tigertops Treehouse Hotel in Nepal for more game viewing. Ceylon, the island jewel, will provide unparalleled scenes of exotic wildlife in Ruhuna National Park on the shores of the Indian Ocean. The Taj Mahal and other great works of man will also be visited. To indicate your interest, write: Zoo Public Relations Department, Box 551, San Diego, California 92112.