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STAY AT

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SPOTTED BY SITA

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# Art of Travel





Me:Po Okum

# Stay At

Me:Po Okum (no website) means 'Happy Home' in the indigenous Mishing language. "And the vibe is definitely happy over here if you believe in slowing down. Stay here to immerse yourself in the splendid isolation of Majuli, Asia's largest freshwater island (more in our Destination Insider section) accessible only by a 2 -hr long ferry ride," says Kuntal Baruwa from our Destination Knowledge Centre who stayed there recently. Located in the Chitadarchuk village near Garamur, it has 2 independent cottages and 1 two-bedroom cottage with separate entrances (ideal for 2 couples traveling together) all modeled like a Chang Ghar (ethnic hut of the Mishing tribe on stilts), with a balcony and a western loo. Me:Po Okum is run by Haren Narah, a Majuli local who stays with his wife and 3 year old daughter Daksharin in the same compound. "It is, however, not for everyone. The facilities are basic. Yet there is a silent generator for power back-up and they provide you with a water bucket immersion rod in the room for hot water. The bed is comfortable, actually better than some of the heritage properties of Rajasthan ensuring a good night sleep and the linen clean," says Kuntal. Me:Po Okum will perfectly work for those of your adventurous clients who have done their bit of traveling in the mainstream and are willing to forgo some of their creature comforts to experience an India that is fast vanishing elsewhere.

The location of Me:Po Okum is its first plus. It is right inside the village, with the River Luhit; one of the tributaries of the Brahmaputra flowing right next door and 5-minute walk. "Cycle around, got for a leisurely stroll, take a sunset boat ride, go fishing, spend time with the in-house weavers, have a chat with the locals who are lovely people and aren't used to the hordes of tourists as yet, enquire about the next exotic dish they would cook for you, watch the villagers go by their daily lives sipping tea from your balcony or simply do nothing (more in our 6 Things we Liked About section). Me:Po Okum doesn't make any tall claims of being authentic, sustainable, traditional etc. Just Happy and they let you be. Be sure to carry a flash-light, mosquito repellent body spray/lotion (they provide mosquito nets and liquid vapourisers in the room), your own towels and toiletries (they don't provide towels and have only basic toiletries to offer) and definitely ask Dev to make Sunga Murgi (more in our Top Chef Recommends section) for you while there. Let him know about the spices if you need to," says Kuntal.



*Stay here to immerse yourself in the splendid isolation of Majuli, Asia's largest freshwater island accessible only by a 2 -hr long ferry ride*





## Apprentice Mask-Maker

“When we entered the Natun Samaguri Xatra (Monastery) in Majuli, Krishna Borah ushered us in with a smile and asked us to be seated. The small sunlight room had all kinds of masks in different shapes, sizes and colours. Most of the masks were of characters from Hindu epics which I remember from the night-long Bhaonas (traditional Assamese folk theatre) my father took me to see as a kid. The visual treat was so special that we kept on standing. I was transported back in time, somewhat lost in deep admiration of what I saw. “Bohok soon” (please take a seat); the soft spoken Krishna repeated after sometime, bringing us back to reality. I apologised; somewhat embarrassed for having ignored him, we took a seat on the bamboo mat on the floor,” says Kuntil Barua from our Destination Knowledge Centre who was at the Natun Samaguri Xatra recently.

Xatras in Majuli are centres of religion, spirituality, education, theater dance, music and art and craft where monks stay and devote their entire life, whilst leading a life of celibacy. The first such Xatra was established in Majuli by the Vaishnavite seer Srimanta Shankardev in the 15th century. Known for his path-breaking contribution to the field of indigenous theatre, dance, music and visual art, Shankardev is considered the Father of the Assamese Culture. But the Natun Samaguri Xatra which is world famous in Majuli for its Masks and Mask Making; thanks to the efforts of its Xatradhikar (Head Monk) and expert Mask Maker Sri Hem Chandra Goswami is different. Here the Monks are allowed to marry. “It is not necessary to lead a celibate life to be spiritual. One can be spiritual too, while maintaining a household,” said Krishna who has been an apprentice under Sri Hem Chandra for the past 6 years. “He is no apprentice. He is an expert Mask Maker himself. Don’t believe him. He is being modest,” joked our driver Naba, a Majuli local. “No I am not. I am still learning. And It would take more than a life time to acquire the skills of my Guru,” said a smiling Krishna as he picked up a Mask from the floor, eager to talk about this craft unique to Majuli. The Masks of Natun Samaguri Xatra are made of a particular clay, found only in Majuli, cow dung, bamboo, jute and cloth. They are then moulded to represent different emotions of the character and coloured. “Traditionally it was indigenous dyes, but now we use poster colour. It takes about a week to make a Mask,” said Krishna.

Krishna told us the work begins with a bamboo

# A Day in The Life of Krishna Borah



*Natun Samaguri Xatra is world famous in Majuli for its Masks and Mask Making*

framework which is coated with cow dung and left to dry. It is then bandaged with papier-mâché or cloth and then dried in the sun. Then it is coated with a paste of very fine grey mud from the river bank and again, left to dry in the sun. Cow dung is used to create the contours and once it's dry; it's ready to be painted. Krishna's day, as an apprentice with Sri Hem Chandra Goswami starts early [Click here to read more](#)





## The Women Potters of Salmara

Every day the women potters of Salmara in southern Majuli and their families, make a careful pact with the River Brahmaputra flowing next-door; their song of woe, both their life-giver and destroyer, the grim reaper whose scythe year after year rips through their very existence during the monsoon. Here at Salmara, the women potters have been engaged and have preserved something unique since time immemorial. They make their pottery without using the potter's wheel. From beating the clay to shaping the pots to finally polishing them, they use ancient wooden tools true to a technique which can be traced back to the Bronze-Age Harappan civilization. Archaeologists say, Salmara could well be the "missing link" between Mohenjodaro and Harappan civilisations, during which pottery flourished. While it is the women of Salmara who make the pots, the men folk dig the clay from the river bank and collect driftwood from the Brahmaputra to fire the kilns. The finished products are then ferried up and downstream on country boats by the husbands, where they sell for cash and also barter for essential household goods like rice and lentils and return home after two months. More than 300 families are engaged in the pottery industry here.

But this ancient art and way of life may soon be on its way out. Rampant erosion by the Brahmaputra has reduced Majuli to less than 50 per cent of its habitable land in the past few decades. Salmara is one of Majuli's worst hit areas. The riverbank where the husbands dig their clay is so undermined that the local administration is now contemplating a ban on it. They have even offered to train them to shift to terra cotta, something which the women potters and the families have refused so far. Fleeing the Brahmaputra and the erosion which inundates their homes every year, many families of Salmara have already moved out of Majuli in search of a new home. "But where do we go and what we do. We have lived all our lives here and this is what we do. Aamar kaarone xukh manei dukh aaru dukh manei xukh (for us happiness is sadness and sadness is happiness)," says Lakshmi, a potter of Salmara.

"Combine your trip to Salmara with a visit to the Natun Samaguri Xatra (Vaishnavite Monastery) known for its incredible masks (more in our Day in a Life of section). Have lunch at Dutta's restaurant in Garamur. Post lunch, ladies don't forget to browse through the collection of River People opposite the restaurant. They have some interesting objects with indigenous Mishing



*Every day the women potters of Salmara make a careful pact with the River Brahmaputra; their song of woe, their life-giver and destroyer*

motifs (more in our Spotted By section). If you have the energy, head out for a sunset cruise on the River Luhit (more in our 6 Things We Liked About section) to end your day. Start early. Pack water and something to snack on the way. Be aware the roads are bumpy," adds Kuntal Baruwa from our Destination Knowledge Centre who was at Salmara recently.



## Mini Loom

In the indigenous Mishing tribe of Majuli no women can be in the good books of her in-laws unless she knows how to weave her own Yakan Age-Gasar (a traditional black two piece draped around the body), the Mibu Galuk (traditional shirt for the men folk) for her husband and the pere rubong (a sleeveless mantle of striped or plain cloth, its upper part tucked tightly over the breast) for her mother-in-law.

Sita spotted these Mishing girls at play in Majuli with their mini loom, post their school hours. In fact, a Mishing girl in Majuli has to know weaving before she can be married. Her skill in weaving determines, to a great extent her popularity amongst eligible bachelors. Weaving here is done mainly by women who weave for the entire family.

“For those of your clients interested in collecting traditional weaves like me I would recommend Reshma Mili of Sonapura village near Garamur for some amazingly beautiful Mishing weaves. This is no shop and she stocks up in her house. They are mostly woven by herself or by her relatives. The prices are reasonable and Reshma will give you a good discount too if you are nice to her. Call her husband Diganta at +91-9707691969 should you want to visit their home and have a look,” says Kuntil Baruwa from our Destination Knowledge Centre.

# Spotted By Sita







“  
Sunga Murgi

Dev Payeng of Me:Po Okum; janitor, waiter and cook, all rolled into one recommends the Sunga Murgi (chicken cooked in a hollow bamboo) as a must try during your stay here. Shredded chicken marinated with ginger, garlic, coriander leaves, pepper, green chili, bamboo shoot and salt is wrapped in a banana leaf and stuffed in a hollow bamboo and put in fire till cooked. “It’s a hit with our guests,” says a shy Dev, who politely declined to be photographed and likes to listen to Assamese songs from his cell phone while cooking. “It is a simple dish, cooked in an even simpler way and is as simple as the people of Majuli. But with excellent flavours. Do remember to tell Dev about Sunga Murgi in advance as everything is procured fresh here,” says Kuntil Baruwa from our Destination Knowledge Centre who stayed at Me:Po Okum recently.

Recipe available on request - [click here](#)

# Top Chef Recommends



*It is a simple dish, cooked in an even simpler way and is as simple as the people of Majuli*



## Gone Fishing

Dear Friends,

The night before I left Majuli I saw these two young foreigners leaving Me: Po Okum (more in our Stay at and 6 Things We Liked About section) close to midnight. It was a full moon and Majuli bathed in its silvery light, was already fast asleep. We were just back after having dinner in a local's house; the invitation was extended to us, after we kept on bumping into him during our many walks in and around Chitadarchuk village. He would pass by our cottage with his cows every day. My driver Naba chatted with the girls briefly in Assamese; yes they spoke the local language too and said bye to them as they got ready to bicycle to their guest house, which was 2 kms away. "Is it safe for these girls to cycle now? We didn't see a soul on our way back?" I asked Naba. "Safe? Of course. That's Gili from Israel and her friend who has initiated a community based project with the weavers and farmers here. She keeps on returning every year. They are like family now and friends of Majuli. We will kill anybody who dares to even look at them in a wrong way," Naba said. And there was Lily, a Chinese national who barely managed English and was traveling solo. "I like it the best here as people would not bother me and leave me alone with my bicycle," she said when I met her by the River Luhit after the Sunset Boat Ride (more in our 6 Things We Liked About section). Lily reached Majuli after visiting the Golden Triangle (Delhi-Agra-Jaipur), Varanasi, Khajuraho, Orchha, Kolkata and the Kaziranga National Park.

Off and on, there are talks about building a bridge to Majuli from Jorhat, the nearest town which also has an airport where your Majuli bound clients can fly in from Delhi or Kolkata. It is said that the bridge once built will cut down travel time from close to 2 hours in a public ferry from Jorhat to only 20 minutes by surface. Life here in Majuli is difficult with the River Brahmaputra every monsoon ripping through the very crops that its waters would have nourished just months before, turning seed to waste, an annual baptism that is the essence of life of these simple folks who have made its banks their home. Maybe once the bridge is built they don't have to take the water ambulance (a converted mechanised boat with basic medical facilities) at their own risk anymore when someone during monsoon has to be shifted for better care in a hospital in Jorhat. Maybe there will be more tourists visiting Majuli. Me and my driver Naba; we were

# Destination Insider



having a chat while on our way back from Salmara after meeting the women potters there (more in our Lifestyle section). "Nobody seems to be asking the locals if we need that bridge or not," Naba said. "No we don't need that bridge. I make enough by driving around tourists and I don't need any more money. With that bridge; along with the good will come all sorts of evil over which we will have no control. It will spoil Majuli and its people," he adds. Next morning I broached the same subject with Horen Noroh, the owner of Me:Po Okum over breakfast. "Majuli is not ready for it. The deluge of what will come in along with the bridge will be worse than the annual floods. In fact many foreign tourists who have visited Majuli and loved it, still call me and tell me that we need to oppose the bridge," he said.

As we boarded our mechanised country boat, which we had hired exclusively for us and said goodbye to Horen, Naba, Diganta and all our new found friends, I wondered if Majuli really need that bridge. After having traveled to more than 70 destinations in India; some of whom I have dismissed; saying it can't be promoted because of the lack of "infrastructure", I am saying NO to the bridge to Majuli. Let Majuli be. For I want to see more foreigners like Gili cycling close to midnight in Majuli, under the full moon safely. Won't you want that too? And yes here is another insider tip - if you can, do coincide your clients' visit Majuli with a full moon night. It's beautiful and I hope Majuli stays this way.

Cheers

Kuntil Baruwa





Me:Po Okum

1. **Location and Ambience:** Except for the occasional honking of motor bikes on its way to the Sonapur village close by, the River Luhit to cross over to the other side in country boats, the tractor of a farmer on his way to the fields or the tinkling of a bicycle bell of the villager with his sack of mustard seeds, we loved the peace and calm of Me:Po Okum which played perfect foil to the splendid isolation of Majuli, Asia's largest freshwater island accessible only by a 2 hour long ferry ride. "From the balcony of our cottage modeled like a Chang Ghar (ethnic hut of the indigenous Mishing tribe on stilts), we watched people go by their daily chores and children waving at us on their way to school. Occasionally we fed the piglets, the chicks with the mother hen, the cows, and the goats of Horen Narah, the owner who passed our cottage on their way back home in the evening," says Kuntil Baruwa from our Destination Knowledge Centre who stayed here recently.

2. **Food:** We loved the food cooked and served in bell metal utensils by Dev Payeng of Me:Po Okum; janitor, waiter, and cook, all rolled into one. "Roasted fish, Sunga Murgi (more in our Top Chef Recommends section) and all that we ate during our stay at Me:Po Okum was once a staple in every Assamese home but now long forgotten," says Kuntil. However, there is no random landing up in their dining hall with "I am hungry so I need food" kind of thing here. Everything is freshly procured from the village. They would take your meal orders in advance as everything is cooked as per the occupancy of the day so that nothing is wasted. Tea is not a problem though. Order it anytime.

3. **Evening Sunset strolls to Sonapur Village:** We loved our evening strolls to the Sonapur village to watch the Sunset. "Sonapur village is the best place in Majuli to watch the sunset," says Kuntil. "Continue further west from Me:Po Okum, the Luhit River will be on your right, ask anyone for directions to Sonapur village which will be on your left. When you reach Sonapur continue further on your left. You will come to a huge open field from where you can watch the most stunning sunset whilst the villagers return home with their livestock. Ask Dev to pack you a flask of tea and some biscuits," he adds.

4. **Cycling and Walking Around:** We loved walking and cycling in and around Me:Po Okum immersing ourselves in the simple lifestyle of the people here.

# 6 Things We Liked About



*Go for a leisurely evening stroll to Sonapur Village for the sunset*

"Life of the people here is really uncomplicated. You need fish? Just head to the river. Every house would offer us tea and we even got invited to a local's house for dinner," says Kuntil. The women of the villages here also stock up some really beautiful traditional weaves (more in our Spotted By section) which they are happy to sell. Do remember though that you need to tell Horen Narah in advance if you need bicycles and he is happy to keep them ready for you. Mind you, he is likely to borrow from his friends so they will be ones which are used by the villagers. Not the fancy ones.

5. **Sunset Boatride on the River Luhit:** We loved the sunset boat ride on the River Luhit which filled our hearts with infinite peace. A perfect way to end your day in Majuli. "This is not something organised which they do for tourists. It was recommended by our driver Naba. Start from the banks of the Luhit and end it near Me:Po Okum. There are no proper disembarkation points. But the boatman who is a friend of Naba and runs a tea stall by the Luhit is more than happy to find you the most convenient one and help you disembark safely and also negotiate the steep climb up," says Kuntil.

6. **The Weavers of Me:Po Okum:** Horen Noroh, the owner of Me: Po Okum has given space to a few weavers who run a self-group and stay here. Feel free to land up in their workspace to see them at work. They come from all over Assam and from various indigenous tribes known for their weaving. "There are no fixed timings but you can hear the sound of their looms. They speak only Assamese but are eager to communicate about what they are doing. You can even try your hands at weaving," says Kuntil. They also have some lovely stoles for sell which you don't come to know about till you go and chat with the girls.





# Festivals



## Raas, Majuli November, 2013

“It is the best time to visit Majuli,” says Kuntal Baruwa from our Destination Knowledge Centre who has experienced the Raas Festival in Majuli many times. “People of Majuli are some of the nicest I have ever met. Honest in their hearts and great hosts. And during the Raas Festival they are even nicer. I remember staying in the homes of random strangers recommended by friends during Raas and they were more than happy to host me. For the past 200 years Majuli has been playing host to the Raas Festival during the month of Kartik (November) in the local calendar where various stages of this River Island celebrates the life and times of the Hindu God Krishna in all- night live performances that lasts for 3 days. The rehearsals of the various plays brought alive by a unique mix of indigenous dances, puppets, masks, songs and musical instruments lasts for almost a month. “And the celebrations during the Raas Festival are not only limited to the people of Majuli, flocks of Geese dance in abandon during the night in the shimmering water bodies lit by the full moon,” Kuntal adds. Legend has it that they hear and dance to the music of the flute of Lord Krishna; the master flautist.

After the havoc of recurring floods, Raas is the time when people of Majuli forget the pain of loss and celebrate. In that sense the Raas Festival is also Majuli's way of healing itself. “What I like most about the Raas Festival is how every community of the island would participate and involve themselves,” says Kuntal. While children are cast as young Krishnas, the handsome shopkeeper round the corner could be your adult Krishna slaying demons played by the friendly bank manager or the doctor of the local hospital or the teacher of the village school. In the past couple of years, Majuli has also seen many foreigners, particularly young girls from France, playing the role of Krishna's Xokhi (buddies) at the various stages during the Raas Festival thanks to the effort of French writer-traveller Nadine Delpech and her Paris based [Préserver Majuli](#) “This goes on to show that despite its strong religious roots, Raas is a very liberal festival where everyone is welcome not only to watch it but also participate,” says Kuntal.

If you want to promote the Raas Festival but wary that the basic Me:Po Okum may not be up to your clients' standard, how about we work on a special Group Departure where we charter a superbly comfortable [River Boat](#) (check the photo gallery) and anchor in



*Majuli has been celebrating the Raas Festival for the past 200 years.*

*Photo Courtesy: Arun J Bharali*

*For more of Arun's photos visit - <http://www.flickr.com/photos/44971586@No4/>*

Majuli for 4 nights during the Raas Festival? A team from Sita was on a week long cruise on this boat recently and has experienced it first hand. There are 14 spacious twin bedded fully air conditioned cabins and your guests will be accompanied by a brother-sister duo who owns it. The sister is a super Chef. And here are some insider tips from Kuntal of our Destination Knowledge Centre for inspiration... “For an insight into a more traditional performance during the Raas Festival, head to the Dakshinpat Xatra (monastery) where all roles are played by the Monks; even those of the women characters. The Natun Samagauri Xatra celebrates Raas entirely with Masks for which they are world famous in Majuli. And don't miss the one in Garamur where organisers invite film stars from the Assamese Film Industry to play various roles. It's the latest and has added a glamour quotient to this medieval Festival. Great fun”









## Meet us at the Upcoming Trade Shows

If you wish to schedule a meeting, do e-mail us at  
[info@sita.in](mailto:info@sita.in)

Trade Shows	Booth No.	Whom to Meet
<b>UITF</b> Kiev 27th - 29th March	Trade Visitor	Deepak Sharma
<b>MUNDO LIBAO WITH ABREU</b> Lisbon 6th - 7th April	695	Ganesh Shankar, Sunil Dangwal & Nelson Cortez
<b>Great Indian Travel Bazaar</b> Jaipur 14th - 16th April	Booth No 44 & 45	Neeraj Bhatt & Philip Thomas
<b>WTM Latin America</b> Sao Paulo 23rd - 25th April	Booth No K14	Dipak Deva & Neeraj Bhatt
<b>KITF</b> Almaty 24th - 26th April	Trade Visitor	Deepak Sharma
<b>ATM</b> Dubai 6th - 9th May	AS 6174	Philip Thomas
<b>OTDYKH Leisure Fair</b> Moscow 17th - 20th September	Awaited	Ernest Dias & Deepak Sharma
<b>TOP RESA</b> Paris 24th - 27th September	Awaited	Philip Thomas & Valerie Chalopet
<b>FITA</b> Mexico 26th - 29th September	Trade Visitor	Neeraj Bhatt
<b>IATO Convention</b> India Awaited	Trade Visitor	Neeraj Bhatt & Philip Thomas
<b>ABAV</b> São Paulo 4th - 8th September	Trade Visitor	Neeraj Bhatt

# Trade Shows

