



SPOTTING IRRAWADY

Catching only one on camera takes hours. By Murl Menon

There were about 1000 Irrawady river dolphins at Kratie a few decades ago. Due to the exploitation of natural resources of Cambodia by unscrupulous Chinese, the dolphin population of Kratie and neighbouring Steung Trean has plummeted to less than a hundred. The local population of Kampi are extremely protective about the River dolphin and are making an all-out effort to protect these gentle delicate creatures who show an almost human-like intelligence. Spotting the river dolphin along the banks of the Mekong in Kampi is as exciting as a jungle safari in the wilds of Africa and one must visit Cambodia and experience the magic of spotting the river dolphin as it is a soul-stirring journey.

One starts one's journey in the afternoon and makes the 15-km. drive from Kratie to Kampi by a motorcycle in 30 minutes, as some parts of the village roads are rough and bumpy. The road winds its way along the western bank of the Mekong, and offers spectacular views of the river and the lush greenery surrounding the opposite bank. The wide expanse of the river



at Kratie almost makes it resemble an inland sea, with the waters stretching from horizon to horizon. One can see small bamboo huts, with palm leaved roofs, selling beautiful carvings and artefacts of dolphins and this announces the impending arrival of Kampi.

One stops at the entrance of the boat pier and pays the mandatory fee at the entrance and makes one's way to the slow boats that are parked on the banks of the river. These boats are equipped with diesel engines to cross the fast-flowing river but, on reaching the dolphin spotting areas, the engines are switched off and the boat is anchored by a rope to the mangroves that are scattered on the eastern banks of the river and one begins one's wait for the Irrawady dolphins.

The boat cruise to the dolphin spotting areas takes about an hour and the cool breeze blowing across the river makes one feel cold in the height of the afternoon. Watching the flowing waters of south-east Asia's longest river which starts off as a tiny stream from the divine lake Mansarovar in Tibet and makes its way down through Thailand and Laos, before entering Cambodia and finally meeting the sea at Vietnam, is a hypnotic experience, especially when the engines are switched off.

Dolphins are extremely sensitive to the sounds and the best chance of allowing a dolphin to approach one's boat is to anchor the boat in the middle of the river and wait in absolute silence for these creatures to make the surface at regular intervals to breathe! The appearance of the dolphin is preceded by a special sound which is the cue one needs to start clicking the camera to get a good photograph before they dunk beneath the waters.

Capturing a river dolphin on the camera needs quick reflexes, a sharp eye and a keen sense of hearing. First, one hears the sound of the dolphin as it surfaces to breathe. Next, the dorsal fin protrudes out of the surface, resembling a small rock



DOLPHINS...

jutting out of the waters. A second later one can see its greyish body for a fraction of a second before it plunges into the river, only to surface again, a few metres away before disappearing again. Dolphins always travel in groups and more often than not they move in pairs and it does get tricky when two dolphins surface at the same time! All one can do is enjoy the oxygen-rich air, perch oneself on the edge of the boat and continuously try to be in the present, patiently waiting for these gentle beings to surface. One becomes an expert and trying to spot the fins of the dolphin or watching the trail of surf that could indicate its location.

SWIRLING WATERS

However, the swirling waters of the river, the gently bobbing boat, the mild sunshine and the cold breeze coupled with the patient wait on the boat, makes dolphin spotting an ideal experience to relax to the tune of nature and focus on the present. One almost forgets one's worries and stops thinking of the future as one is eagerly watching the next move of this gentle fish.

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capturing them on a video camera is difficult as they are now seen and now they vanish! However, if one concentrates and keeps one's attention in the present, it is possible to get some amazing pictures of these river dolphins. Going in pursuit of these dolphins is an exercise in futility as dolphins have an acute sense of hearing and race away on hearing the slightest sound of the boat's engine.

Also, dolphins have an aversion to any humming sound and tend to move away from all such sounds. Almost all modern-day appliances like refrigerators, air-conditioners,

washing machines, airplane engines, motor cars, motorcycles and scooters make sounds that affect the brain waves of humans as well as dolphins and increase the amount of stress. Hence, one indicates to the boatman to switch off the engines as early as possible and wait in silence for the dolphins to venture near the boat. Nature rewards patience and, in about an hour, two dolphins, moving in synchronicity, surface near one's boat and continue to frolic playfully around, offering a rare opportunity to capture them on one's digital camera.

However, this itself is no easy task and one can get only a few good pictures after several hours of waiting and watching for the dolphins to surface. After about four hours of waiting, the message spreads among the dolphin community and more of these delicate darlings begin to surface but they keep a safe distance from one's boat, as they become sure that the boat won't start its engines and follow them. The return to one's pier is a journey in serenity, calmness and peace, having successfully completed one's tryst with the Irrawaddy river dolphin. **W**

It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it. -Aristotle