



All over the World
The Travel magazine
Great Rivers – part 3 – Ganges ©
by Robert Shepherd

Hello, this is Robert Shepherd and today we visit arguably the holiest and most spiritual river in the world – the Ganges.

This great river flows from the Himalayas through to the Bay of Bengal in northern India and Bangladesh. Although only the 15th longest river in Asia, its basin is one of the largest in the world and also covers China and Nepal. The river is known as Ganga (gang-ga) in India, named after the goddess of the same name in ancient texts and art.

The Ganges is one of the most fertile of all agricultural regions in the world. Its rice and other crops feed hundreds of millions of people in India and in Bangladesh, where the river is known as the Padma.

The river's 2,520 kilometres is home to 140 different species of fish and 90 different species of amphibians, many of which are near extinction. It is also home to the endangered fresh water dolphins and Ganges sharks.

A visit to the Ganges must include Varanasi, or Banaraz, which is known as India's spiritual capital and the most visited pilgrim destination in all of India. The ghats, the stone steps that lead down to the Ganges river, are the centre of activities in Varanasi. Each day, throngs of local Hindu devotees and pilgrims from afar descend to the ghats to wash themselves, as well as their clothes, in the sacred river. They believe that the purifying water of the river will absolve them of their sins.

An early morning boat ride in Varanasi has become a ritual for travellers and is the best way to witness the spectacle of the age old rituals in the river and on the ghats. Numerous funerals take place on a daily basis and you can witness first-hand families cremating their loved ones before scattering the ashes in the river. The night ceremony also attracts pilgrims, locals and tourists.

As moving as these spectacles are, prepare yourself for some unpleasant surprises. The Ganges is prone to regular flooding and so you might be unfortunate enough to witness dogs feeding off human remains and other carcasses. It will either be the body of a priest, whose body must enter the water intact, or a pauper whose family could not afford to give them a funeral.

All of this contributes to the Ganges being among the world's most polluted rivers, struggling under the pressures of modern India. Environmental initiatives to clean up the river have

failed time after time. One of the reasons is corruption – charlatan do-gooders who raise funds from the locals to clean up the river are never seen again. Other obstacles include a dearth of expertise and lack of help from religious leaders who want to maintain thousands of years of tradition.

Once a rich wilderness full of tigers, lions and other big cats, the plains have evolved into the most densely populated place on Earth. The Ganges river basin has the highest population of any river basin in the world and contains over 400 million people. Nourished by the great river's gift of life, it's easy to see how, despite the pollution and economic problems, this entire region has continued to thrive for millennia.

Stay tuned to EnglishWaves and join us again next time when we visit one of Europe's great rivers, the Danube.