

Travelogue : The Sunderbans

Call of the Captivating, Wild, Seductively Dangerous Sunderbans ~ *Explore the unrestrained charm of the Land of Man-eaters !!*

A World heritage site, Sunderban is a mangrove forest in the vast delta on the Bay of Bengal covering approximately around 10,000km. Two third of the forest lies in Bangladesh and one third in India.

An Incomprehensible Experience. Come Let us take a tour!

On a fine sunny morning you are sailing on a country boat along the crisscrossed rivers, creeks, canals encircling meadows. Plenty of small islands harbour in abundance the famous Sundari (Heritiera fomes), Gewa, Garjan, Goran and the Keora trees making what is call Sunderbans. The entire Sunderban area however, is not covered with forest.

You are on your way to a one day trip to Sajnekhali Tiger Project (Sajnekhali Watch Tower) on a locally hired boat.

Although different opinions are there regarding the naming of the forest Sunderban - the popular belief is that, the forest is named after the Sundari trees. Its wood is used for making furniture and boats.

Sailing down the river you notice the slow change in topography. On your either sides you see the sand dunes, grasslands with a variety of shrubs and trees.

Suddenly you feel a creepy silence as your boat starts sailing through narrow creeks... sailing through the dense and deep forest of halophyte trees. There is an eeriness in the beautiful and quiet atmosphere where the only sounds are the sound of your boat and the flowing river.

You feel as if being watched by someoneperhaps a man-eater lurking in the dense jungle of one of the islands that your boat is crossing?

You may have heard that the Sunderban tigers are good swimmers and they often carry a human prey stealthily from a boat and can swim with it without a slightest noise! Relax. Tigers are shy creatures and usually do not come out in broad day light to hunt.

Your boatmen friends tell you the names of various rivers - Gosaba, Hogol, Kartal. You must be careful in listening to boatmen's advice, not to touch the water. The rivers are full of small sharks locally called "kamote", as well as crocodiles. Sea snakes are common too. Your camera captures the glimpse of a kingfisher or a white-bellied sea eagle.

As you share sandwiches and sweets with your boatmen friends and take a bite of your own (you have taken enough food with you for you will not get anything otherwise. You have also been informed earlier that the Sunderans is a no plastic zone hence you need to be careful not to litter). Pointing at a distant boat, your boatmen friends say, "See the boat Sir. The men on the boat are going to deep forest in search of honey, wax, hoglapata, golpata (local names of leaves of specific trees) or to cut wood (wood cutters are called Bawalis) or to collect shrimps and crabs. Most of these villagers are very poor and many get hunted by crocodiles or tigers."

Finally, you reach Sajnekhali Watch Tower. You see the temple of the goddess Banbibi who supposedly protects the poor villagers who venture into the forest. On the other side of the temple some dummy humans are kept. A few had claw marks on them. Yes, tigers had attacked those mistaking as real humans!

A chill passes along your spine.

These models are used by the forest officials to minimise tiger attacks on humans. A tiger gets an electric jolt (within a tolerable limit of course) on attacking a dummy figure. It is an attempt to warn a tiger not to attack a human. The eerie forest silence is interrupted as a local forest officer informs you about these facts.

At the same time, an uneasy peace makes you nervous, though the officer informs you that this area of the forest is fenced with electric wire. So you are safe here.

You see the fencing yourself as you climb up the watch tower. What an exquisite view of the serene jungle you get to see from the tower! You are lucky to capture a group of cheetal (spotted) deer perhaps a kilometer ahead, in your camera.

The forest is also the home of monkeys, rhesus monkey, mongoose, and flying fox (you regretted having missed seeing one), Pangolin, python.

At last you throw a burning question to the officer "Are all tigers of the Sunderban man-eaters?"

"Many are if not all. Perhaps 1 out of 10 is! There are villages where not a single man is left. Such a village is called village of the widows", is the reply you get.

After spending about an hour there, and also visiting the crocodile park and the museum you are on your way back. The setting sun still is still proving quite hot. Your sunglasses and the hat are at their needed places. Thanks to the boatmen, who drew your attention at the right moment, you could see a somersaulting dolphin!

At your request, your boat is being taken to a village on the river bank. With a little difficulty, you climb up the slippery muddy ridge to reach the village. A group of half-naked children and some women gather round you. Their eyes full with curiosity.

They inform you about the harsh life they live. No, tigers do not visit the village since the village is at a distance from the main forest; but snakes, especially cobras make their life difficult. They don't have any facility of medication or physician. They use their traditional methods to heal a snake-bit patient. It works if it is not too late.

Your boatmen ask you to hurry up, as you still have a long way to go. Moreover, you have to be back to Kolkata that day itself a return journey of around 112 km by bus.

That was just your hurricane trip to the Sunderbans during the festival of Durga Puja.

After such a splendid experience you promise yourself, to visit again on a trip of 4-5 days to see the other sites of the Sunderbans.

Your Travel Guide To The Sunderbans

How to go

To visit the Sunderbans you have to go via Kolkata.

By road

From Esplanade- Kolkata you get direct buses to Basanti. From there hire a boat to Sajnekhali.

Alternately from Basanti take a Ferry boat to take you to Gosaba. You have to travel across the village with the help of a flat-bed rickshaw (locally called van). That will take you to the point from where you get boats to Sajnekhali (approximately 48 kms).

By Rail

From the Sealdah station take a suburban train to Canning. From Canning, a bus will take you to Basanti or Sonakhali . From there you have to take a journey by boat to the Sajnekhali.

What to see in the Sunderbans

There are plenty to see in the Sunderbans. Listed below are a few "**Must See**" destinations.

1. Tiger Reserve at Sajnekhali

2. Dayapur Tiger Camp - opposite to the Tiger Reserve at Sajnekhali. You have to cross the river Pitchkhali. Since it is very close to a deep forest, tigers often come to this point by crossing the narrow river.

3. Sunderbans National Park - The centre of the Sunder Tiger Reserve.

4. Sudhanyakhali Watch Tower - You can spot a tiger if you are lucky. Other animals like deer, crocodiles can be seen from the tower.

5. Sajnekhali Watch Tower - It has the temple of Bono-bibi, a watch tower, a museum and a crocodile park

6. Dobanke watch Tower - you can walk to the forest over the canopy walkway. A thrilling experience!

7. Bhagabatpur crocodile Project - A crocodile farm and hatchery. It harbours estuarine crocodiles. You can't believe that the very narrow seemingly silent creeks can harbor some 20-30 ft long

crocodiles. If you manage to reach there early in the morning around 8am, you can watch the feeding of crocodiles.

8. Sajnekhali Bird sanctuary

Other Destinations (if time permits)

***Sajnekhali bird sanctuary** - adjacent to the Tiger Reserve, a heaven for the bird lovers.

***Netidhopani** - famous tourist spot for its 400 years old temple.

***Kanak sanctuary** - breeding place of Olive Ridley Turtles.

***Haliday Island** - an island that harbours barking deer.

Where to stay?

You cannot see the entire the Sunderbans in a day. However, you can visit any one place and return the same day to Kolkata.

To cover most of the tourist destinations of the Sunderbans you need to have 4-5 days in hand.

It is better to obtain permits; because without them you will not be allowed to enter into many places like fenced-in areas of forests or even some of the watch towers.

The **permits and accommodation** can be obtained from **West Bengal Tourism Dept**

<http://www.westbengaltourism.gov.in>

Forest Rest houses & lodges with combined restaurants providing simple meals are also available but you need to book in advance.

Luxury cruise services by launch are also available in case if you are interested in a structured and time bound tour.

If you opt for **private accommodation**, there are several agencies that can help you. Mentioned below are some of the links. You can have an idea and compare the rates and services too.

<http://wikitravel.org>

<http://www.tripadvisor.in>

<http://www.sunderbantigercamp.com>

<http://www.travelguru.com>

<http://www.sunderbancruises.com> - In case if you are looking for a good cruise service

Best Time to go

October to February

Dos

- 1) Carry a good quality handy cam/digital camera
- 2) Hat, sunglasses, sun-cream, a tiny first aid kit, safety-pins, water bottle
- 3) Wear loose cotton clothes and informal shoes with good grip
- 4) Mosquito repellent cream, powerful torch, a pair of good binoculars
- 5) Carry the documents/permits for you will be needed to produce them at the destination(s)
- 6) A rucksack in which you can keep your stuff so that you have your both hands free
- 7) A pen and a note book

Don't

- 1) Carry plastic bags / bottles. You will be visiting a 'NO PLASTIC ZONE'
- 2) Wear sandals
- 3) Leave your belongings here and there
- 4) Try to venture alone while walking through forest (always remain with your group).

IF YOU ARE AN ADVENTURE-MANIAC

If the silent call of the jungle unsettles you, the murmur of the leaves, the whispering of the breeze, the uncanny silence mesmerise you... so much that you are willing to take any risk

then...

You need to visit the Sunderbans on your own...in an unstructured way, sacrificing a few of your "necessary" luxuries. Just book accommodation through any of the trusted agencies, take ample time in your hand for about 5-6 days, hire a local fisher man's boat and a local villager as a guide and set out on your journey.

Do

- 1) Visit the local villages, get with the village life
- 2) If possible spend a day and a night in any village adjacent to the jungle and listen to the jungle lore of the ancient Sunderbans, and let the jungle lullaby you to sleep at night
- 3) Your local guide can even (if you are courageous enough) take you into the deep jungle, where time stands still and takes you to a different world
- 4) Visit the local school, market
- 5) Join the villagers in a fishing expedition
- 6) Enjoy the local cultural programme

7) Carry small gift items for the children, women. You will touch their hearts. They are very poor; most of them even deprived of their basic needs and have not even heard the names of the items which are inseparable parts of our lives.

And finally.....

DO PLEASE VISIT AGAIN !!