

Star WOLIDAY

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THAILAND



PART 2 Sundarbans Sonata

THE first morning on the River Poshur en route to the Sundarbans dawned with a calm punctuated with chirping of birds. We found ourselves anchored as we had our breakfast of pancakes made by our host Manju, with honey from the hives of the Sundarbans, and ghee fried luchi with a thick spicy preparation of split Bengal chick peas.

By the time we were finished, the boat was moving again. Signs of human habitation were becoming sparser, with golpata or nypa palm thatched huts on the banks every now and then, and occasional tin roofs with sunlight reflecting from them like eyesores. We were already

country. Moreover it is a regulation to have guards with trekkers in the forest.

Soon we entered a much narrower river, the Sela, with tree tops on the banks occupied by rhesus monkeys and birds of a plethora of varieties, that I could not even imagine seeing together in one place except in a zoo. I and Zakir were basking in the afternoon sun on the top deck sucking in the absolute wild beauty as much as possible, and he showed me a hoopoe or a hudhud or mohonchura in Bangla, a bird quite endangered now.

A brahmini kite or shonkho chil flew out of a tree, made a circle over

Then we sighted a herd of spotted deer on the right bank, as dusk was descending upon us, accentuating the all encompassing grey of the forest soil, and soon the night fell with stealthy quietness of a jungle.

Very early in the next morning, we were off to Kochikhali island on a smaller boat, through a canal. The total jungle was simultaneously surreal and fearsome. The forest was so dense that we were not being able to see more than only a couple of feet into it from the boat. Aerial roots of mangrove plants were jutting out in thousands on the grey sandy slopes of the banks, some of them covered with crystals of salt.

Our boat engine was turned off and we were moving forward using a punting pole. A crested serpent eagle was resting on a tree top until it was chased away by a brahmini kite. Soon I spotted a beautiful multi-coloured black-capped kingfisher or kalotupi machhanga on a tree, and Zakir spotted a black drongo or kalo finga and a parakeet or tia. As I was climbing down from the boat right behind the boatman, he stopped me from stepping forward as I was about to step on a pugmark of a tiger. Manju looked at it and said, "Not very old, it was a medium to large tiger, probably went by here this morning." I decided to be brave, at least in

projections. We formed a single file, bracketed by an armed forest guard at each end. One of the guards, Mominur told me, usually tigers don't come near a large group of humans unless it is desperate or trapped in a confrontation. So we entered the forest into knee high cord grass hiding thousands of prickly aerial roots underneath and surrounded by keora, sundari, and gewa trees, which were hyphenated by tiger ferns or hudo and phoenix palm or hetal, with occasional clusters of nonajhau glistening with dew, reflecting the early soft rays of the sun, as if made of glass.

It was an ideal habitat for tigers,

sometimes go to have a drink of water. There was a smaller ditch surrounded by a bush near the pond. We peered into it and found bones and a skull of a deer scattered in it. On the rim of the ditch a deer skin was still discernible. We looked at each other in silence, and then moved to the other end of the island to board the Andharmanik again for breakfast, as the bajra headed towards Kotka island through the Bay of Bengal.

We landed on Kotka to find the forest department range office building ripped away by the recent cyclone, Sidr. As we entered the forest of sundari and keora trees,

bowed, because the foliage overhead was very low. Tigers quite often stalk that area of the island now since the other parts don't provide them with enough cover. It was becoming denser and denser as Zakir was walking right in front of me behind Mominur. He suddenly spun around and faced me with a grim look on his face and whispered, "Bagh! Do you smell the stench?" My heart leapt to my throat as a tremendously acrid stench hit my olfactory senses. Zakir was convinced that the stench was of tiger's urine or its body odour left on the trees. It was a bad spot to meet the beast. So, Mominur repeatedly blew his whistle to let any carnivore know that we were passing by and we didn't want a confrontation, as we hurriedly found our way out of the tight spot.

After having our lunch on the bajra, we set out to Kotka once again, quite seasoned in only a day in the forest. We approached the Kotka beach through the meadow of Jaamtola, past the forest department watchtower. Jaamtola is the playground for Bengal Tigers, and a grazing field for deer, many of whom become food for the big cat. Here on the shore, Zakir had photographed the Queen of Jaamtola, a radio collared tigress, in the aftermath of Sidr. As we got to the Kotka beach crossing the vast meadow of cord grass, hetal, tiger ferns, and black berry trees, we found the entire beach front wiped away by the wrath of the recent cyclone. The destruction was depressing, but then again fresh wind of hope was blowing in from the wide horizon of the bay. It was getting late and quite dangerous to cross the meadow after dark, so we headed back to the capital, watching herds of deer grazing in the meadow.

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at the fringes of the Sundarbans where mostly fishing villages are situated, dotting the river with fishing nets.

We entered the forest area before lunch, which was evident by the total absence of any human habitation around, and by the dense forest on the banks.

Two forest guards from Chandpai range office of the forest department joined us down the stream in the afternoon, because one of the occupations in the Sundarbans area is piracy, and the Sundarban pirates are known as some of the most brutal in the

our boat, before diving towards the water on the starboard side of the bow just to take off again with a fish in its claws. Then came a flock of lesser adjutant storks, or modontak in Bangla, on the left bank. Soon a flock of great egret or boro bok flew overhead.

Ganges dolphins' momentary jumps out of the water gave rise to murmurs on our boat.

At Mrigamari island, someone yelled, "Crocodile!" And I looked to the left to see a full grown crocodile, at least fifteen feet long and about four feet wide, dashing down the slope of the bank into the Sela.



and burrows like the ones tigers usually make for themselves, were around us in abundance. The usual elusive nature of tigers was the only chance that we had for not facing one. My heart was racing in fear and in anticipation. After about fifteen minutes of walk, we came out on a vast meadow of mostly cord grass or reeds, sprinkled with tall palm trees and shimul trees, a local variety of cotton plants. Tigers during the day sometimes lay lazily on beds of cord grass in that meadow. I was told. We came across a pond dug by the forest department, where tigers

there was no foliage on those. Among thousands of tall naked whitish trees, thousands more were lying around uprooted, as if the grim reaper had gone through the forest. We went in deeper, to find small herds of deer foraging through the woods, and saw signs of newly budding leaves on the trunks of some sundari trees lying around. Mominur got a little more adventurous and led us to a section of the jungle where the vegetation is denser with gewa trees much less harmed by Sidr, and not that tall but densely grown. We were walking sometimes with our heads

