

# IN THE LAND OF THE BENGAL TIGERS

These days at the mention of Tigers, all I, or anybody I know, think of in their heads is, none other than, Shakib Al Hasan! Or Mashrafe Mortaza! And while nothing gives me more pleasure than thinking about our national heroes all the time, it is sad how little we tend to think about the other national treasures.

Why are the Sundarbans "the worst kept secret of Bangladesh?" I resort to this conflicting terminology only because everybody seems to know this place exists, are very much aware of what an incredible asset it is to this country and yet, peculiarly, there seems to be absolutely no keenness amongst the locals to explore, promote or in the least be enthusiastic about what is THE place where I had one of my life's most unparalleled adventures!

I remember the start of the journey for more than one reason. It was one of those days when my day job got interesting, a little out of proportions. I had an event to execute in one of the more underdeveloped areas in Mirpur, Dhaka, where foreign diplomats were expected to speak and the local MP was to inaugurate the opening of a school.

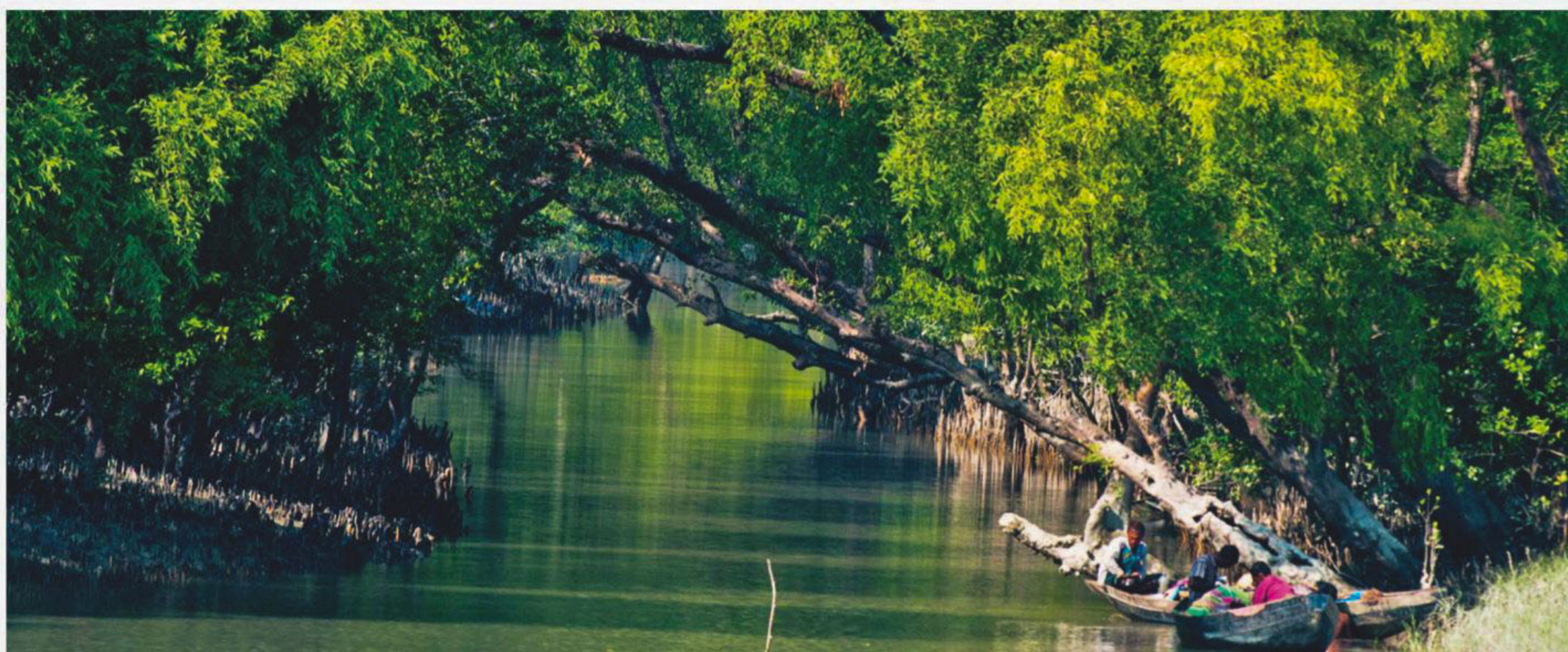
Long story short, in the middle of His Excellency's very enthusiastic speech, the occupants of the house that was our main provider of power decided it was a good time to unplug everything and take the family out on a walkabout!

I remember the resulting events taking place exactly in this order: there were a number of people flying out of their seats while we had a distressed host screaming herself hoarse over a dead microphone, and I found myself lost in the maze of the huts frantically looking for the vanished perpetrator like my life depended on it!

As unbelievable as it may sound, the man was found, the day was saved – Superman had nothing on me! And before I knew, I was excitedly seated in a friend's car, on my way to discover the Sundarbans.

I make the journey sound pretty straightforward when in reality it happened in stages. It involved a bus ride (you could also fly, it is quick but expensive and I honestly would recommend the bus just to prolong the suspense factor) to Khulna, the entrance to the forests.

The best time to do a Sundarban trip is between November and March and I personally loved the environment that March ensured. I still remember the first sight of that ship meant to carry us into the wilderness. It was a beautiful, privately owned



boat equipped to feed, sleep and carry around 20 passengers for five nights.

At the break of dawn, we arrived at the docks where a small canoe was fastened, ready to transfer us onto the big boat. There were welcoming, waving arms from the ship's crew that also consisted of two uniformed, armed security guards and a craggy looking maverick of a captain – also holding a rifle. I remember thinking to myself, this

opt for option A for the hard-core safari experience!

From Khulna, we were headed south to travel as far as Kotka, and then slowly took the loop back. The main purpose was to be in the midst of the world's largest mangrove forest and be synced with its heartbeat, also in time to view the full moon on the third night when we had aimed to be stationed in the middle of nowhere, basking in the

secrets.

This truly wild terrain, slithering along its river channels into the swampy heart of darkness is home to the endangered species - the Bengal Tigers.

Around 400 of them call the Sundarbans home, making this the largest single habitat of tigers on earth. The forest is shared 60-40 between India and Bangladesh and the Indian side is more accessible, but ask anybody who knows and they will tell you that Bangladesh offers the chance to explore it in more depth, promising an unforgettable experience. Its elusive tigers and the off-the-beaten-track adventure is as thrilling as it is serene.

During the day, I remember trekking on foot to follow the local workers, known as maualis, in search of the honey produced by the formidable honeybees in this region. We were stopped in our tracks in the middle of the dense foliage and made to stare in awe at the arrival of a group of wild deer, skirting across gracefully, horizontally from us, following an invisible zebra crossing.

At night however, we broke out into smaller groups with the armed forest guards tailing behind us, to track tigers on foot! No we were not fortunate enough to spot one but the appearance of the paw prints and seeing the forest guards sniffing the air, announcing that the royalties have been in the vicinity, hunting not too long ago, was thrilling enough!

Unsuccessful and flirtatious with nature, it struck yours truly in the dead of the night that it might be a great idea to venture out on a small canoe along the river channels to discover more. With only three other travelers willing to commit to this insanity, we set sail on a channel so narrow and so close to the same level as the embankments, that I am lucky to have lived to tell this tale!

Retiring back to the boat, with the full moon glaring down on us with its full might, we sat huddled in small groups on the deck silently watching the animals and their nocturnal activities come alive before us. The hush that fell across that night though had nothing to do with fear.



should turn out interesting.

The best advice for a Sundarban tour is to book an all-inclusive package; it is value for money. You can get packages for Tk 12,000 to Tk 20,000 per person (US 150 to \$250) from two of the recognised operators: The Guide Tours and Bengal Tours.

If you do not have the time or money to eat and sleep in the mother boat, you could alternatively organise your own cheaper day trip from the river port of Mongla. However, if I were to do it again, I would still

glory of the South Asian "Purnima" that can only be experienced, not explained. The first night though was probably the most surreal, something I am saving up to tell my grandchildren.

This world's largest mangrove forest, stretching a staggering 80 kilometres from the coast is manned on three sides by two of the most densely populated countries on earth - Bangladesh and India – yet remains remote, largely inhabited by people, shrouded in a mist and hugging its own

