



# Into the heart of the SUNDARBANS



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"Do not panic and do not run," the forest guard murmured, raising his hand to stop us.

He crouched slightly, loaded his rifle, and pointed to the fresh pug marks in the mud. "I can smell it. A tiger is near."

For a heartbeat, time seemed to stall. The mud beneath our feet felt heavier, the silence thicker. Somewhere in the dense mangroves of Kochikhali, deep inside the Sharankhola Range of the Sundarbans, the unseen king of the forest was moving.

At that moment, adrenaline kept fear at bay. Only later, back on the boat, drenched in sweat and mud, did we truly grasp how close we had come to crossing the line between awe and real danger. We had forgotten, for a while, that we were in a place where nature is wildly, beautifully dangerous.

I've always loved exploring new places, but I'm not reckless. Yet sometimes, when curiosity and adrenaline team up, caution takes a back seat. The journey to Kochikhali was one of those times. What began



as a calm exploration gradually drew us into Bagher Dera – the Tiger's Den, where tigers rule.

We were part of a three-day eco-tourism workshop organised by the Economic Reporters Forum (ERF), with about fifty participants cruising rivers, exploring canals, and attending seminars together.

We set off on a calm October night, boarding the modern, air-conditioned MV Aral Sea from Khulna. The river air felt cool and faintly salty. From the upper deck, we watched the city lights fade as the vessel slid silently into the labyrinth of waterways. Moonlight shimmered on the dark river, and the Sundarbans slowly unfolded before us.

Over the next couple of days, we crossed miles of rivers – the Pashur, Shela, Betmore Gang, and countless smaller canals

that spread like veins through the forest.

During the trip, we stopped at Joymoni fishermen's village in the Chandpai Range, the Andarmanik eco-tourism spot, Dolphin Tower, Kotka, Jamtola Sea Beach, Kochikhali, and Dimer Char. We wove through narrow canals on small boats – sometimes floating in serene silence, other times with hearts racing at every rustle of leaves.

The next morning, a thin mist hung over the river, blurring the line between water and sky. The ship drifted gently, flanked by winding canals and banks thick with keora, sundari, gewa, goran, and golpata. Though the vessel offered every comfort, most of us gathered on the open deck, leaning on the railings, mesmerised by the view.

From the main rivers, smaller canals branched off and disappeared into the forest. Dense walls of keora, sundari, gewa, goran, and golpata lined the banks. The forest stood quiet, almost watchful.

Except for cargo vessels, small wooden boats carrying fishermen and bawalis occasionally came into view. A little later, the industrial skyline of Mongla briefly emerged, a reminder of human encroachment, before fading into green again.

Soon, we entered the Shela River and reached Joymoni village in the Chandpai Range – the last human settlement on this side of the Sundarbans.

Thatched huts stood along the riverbank, fishing nets hanging in the sun. Most villagers are bawalis, fishermen, and mouals, whose lives depend entirely on the forest. Women sorted freshly caught crabs, children ran barefoot along muddy paths, and small boats rested near the shore. Just beyond the settlement, the silent and

indifferent forest resumed, a reminder that life and wilderness here exist in a delicate balance.

At Andhar Manik, we boarded small boats to navigate narrow canals. As we moved deeper, the canopy thickened and sunlight filtered through the leaves, scattering patterns across the brownish-green water.

Every sound felt amplified – the dip of the oar, the ripple of water, the call of distant birds. The canals curved like veins through the forest, pulling us further inward. We visited landmarks along the way – the Dolphin Tower, Jamtola Sea Beach, Kotka, Kochikhali, and Dimer Char – each revealing a different face of the Sundarbans.

The next day, we roamed along Kotka Sea Beach, where sea, river, and forest merge to create a unique sight. Uprooted trees lay scattered across the sand, their twisted roots telling stories of storms and tides. Tourists walked along the shore, climbing fallen trunks for photographs. Sometimes, deer ventured out from the forest, crossing the open sands with graceful caution.

Reaching Dimer Char required navigating narrow canals hemmed in by thick mangroves. The air was heavy, alive with bird calls and the rustling of leaves. Kingfishers flashed briefly through the bushes, while storks glided overhead.

As evening fell, the forest transformed. The golden light softened into shades of orange and violet over the quiet river.

Gliding through narrow canals, we reached Dimer Char, which was full of white kash flowers swaying gently in the breeze. Laughter filled the air as team members posed for photographs, while others played football on the sandy ground.

As darkness set in, the silence of the forest deepened, broken only by the splash of water and the distant cries of birds returning home. It felt



peaceful – almost sacred – as if the forest itself was breathing and resting.

The real adventure began at Kochikhali, in the Sharankhola Range. This area, behind Tiger Point, is more frequently visited by tigers.

Around forty of us decided to walk from the ship toward the Tiger Point Watch Tower. The first stretch was easy. But beyond the tower lay a 1.5-kilometre trail through dense mangroves, muddy canals, and tall reeds – one of the most dangerous paths in the forest.

Some turned back after hearing of the risks. Others, driven by curiosity and courage, pressed on.

Leading us was forest guard Faruk Sardar, a Chinese rifle slung over his shoulder. His presence was reassuring. A few participants quietly recorded voice messages for their families – just in case. That silent act spoke volumes.

The trail soon grew hostile.

The first stretch led us through tall reeds – the kind of place where tigers hide, watching silently. But the real challenge lay deeper in the forest: knee-deep mud, thorny vines, hanging creepers, and narrow trails. Our feet sank into the thick, sticky ground.

Moving through the sticky mud, every step was heavy and every rustle suspicious. Eyes sharp and ears alert, we moved cautiously, never sure what waited ahead.

Among us were ERF President Doulot Akter Mala and three other female members, their resolve unshaken. Courage, in that moment, had no gender.

Then Faruk stopped.

His senses, sharpened by years in the forest, had detected something unseen. The tiger's scent was fresh. Pug marks were nearby. The animal was close.

No one spoke. The forest seemed to listen.

Later, Faruk told us this part of the trail had probably never been walked by visitors before. The thought filled us with fear – and a strange pride.

When we finally returned to the boat, exhausted and covered in mud, the forest stood quiet behind us, as if guarding its secrets once more. We had entered the tiger's realm and left unharmed, not by skill or strength, but because nature allowed it.

It was more than an adventure; it was a lesson in humility. In the tiger's realm, man is not an explorer but a respectful visitor – one who walks carefully, listens closely, and leaves quietly, with a heart full of awe and gratitude.

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