

LIFE LESS ORDINARY

FROM A TANGLE OF JUNGLES THAT
COULD HAVE BEEN DRAWN BY MC
ESCHER TO TEA GARDENS SO
BEAUTIFUL THEY SEEM TO TRANSCEND
REALITY, BANGLADESH IS ERUPTING
WITH LIFE. EXPLORE THIS CHARMING,
LITTLE-KNOWN COUNTRY AND FIND
VIRGIN FORESTS, TIGER TRACKS,
CURRIED CRAB, PAINTED RICKSHAWS
AND SEVEN-LAYERED TEA

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in the mangroves is the
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biodiversity

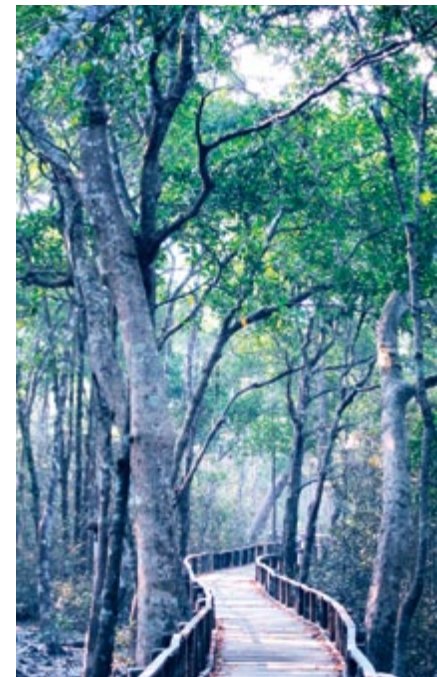
"Pugmarks," whispers Popul, lifting a leaf to reveal a giant paw print imprinted in the silvery mud. "Very fresh – maybe just two days old." Our small group – including two armed guards – is creeping through the Sundarbans' labyrinthine mangrove forest, scattering legions of crabs, mudskippers, insects and birds in our wake.

I am knee-deep in clogging, sucking mud wearing army boots four sizes too big for me, and wishing I had brought something more practical than my green designer handbag. But the atmosphere is electric. As we enter a glade, Popul – general manager of Bengal Tours – stops near a tree and fingers four slashes torn deep into the bark. "Scratch marks," he says solemnly. "We are on the tiger's trail."

Rarely seen by humans, the royal Bengal tiger casts a long shadow over the impenetrable jungles of southwestern Bangladesh. Spanning 6,000 sq km of Bangladesh and 4,000 sq km of the Indian state of West Bengal, the Sundarbans is the world's largest mangrove forest. Splendid in its wild isolation, the mangrove forests teem with life, hosting 330 plant species, 35 kinds of reptile, 400 fish species, 270 types of birds and 42 different mammals. This extraordinary ecosystem has been under management since 1860, and was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997.

Getting down and dirty in the mangroves is the ultimate way to get a true taste of this hotbed of biodiversity. Practically devoid of human life, the Sundarbans offers adventure of the sweaty, botanical kind. I half expect David Attenborough to make an appearance.

We hold our breath with each animal sighting – two wild boars marching through the mud; a herd of exquisite spotted deer twitching their noses nervously; cheeky macaques crashing around in the canopy; a giant monitor lizard high-tailing it into the undergrowth; turquoise kingfishers darting across our path. ⇒



But there's no doubt that the Bengal tiger is the king of the region. At the last census, it was found that there were 440 tigers in the Sundarbans, although local wildlife experts believe that their numbers may have climbed to 600 now.

Tiger encounters are a rite of passage in this beautiful, hostile environment, and the men of the Sundarbans love sharing their stories – how many tigers he has seen, what the tiger did, whether he has saved a human life. The Bengal tiger's reputation precedes it, and today an increasing number of intrepid visitors are making the journey to the jungles of southwestern Bangladesh hoping to catch just a glimpse of this magnificent animal in the wild. They almost never succeed.

After a few hours, our party breaks out of the forest and into a watery tidal

encroachment pierced with mighty tree trunks, exhausted but exhilarated. The Bay of Bengal shimmers in the distance like mother of pearl. Despite the promising signs, there were no tiger sightings today. "Be assured they are watching us the whole time," says Mostafa Chowdhury of Bangladesh Ecotours, who joined our party back at Mongla. "You have to be very lucky to see one."

Perching on a fallen branch carpeted with ferns, Mostafa says he has visited the Sundarbans over thirty times and he has seen only one tiger, sitting on his haunches by the river bank, eyeballing the boat for minutes, before strutting away into the forest.

But that luck can go both ways. Bengal tigers kill some seventy people per year in the Sundarbans – mainly fishermen, woodcutters and honey hunters working in the western range (hence our armed escort). Listening to Mostafa and Popul, I conclude that I am happy with today's efforts – I have ventured deep into the tiger heartland, I have followed tiger tracks for miles, and I have come out with all four limbs intact. We stroll along the

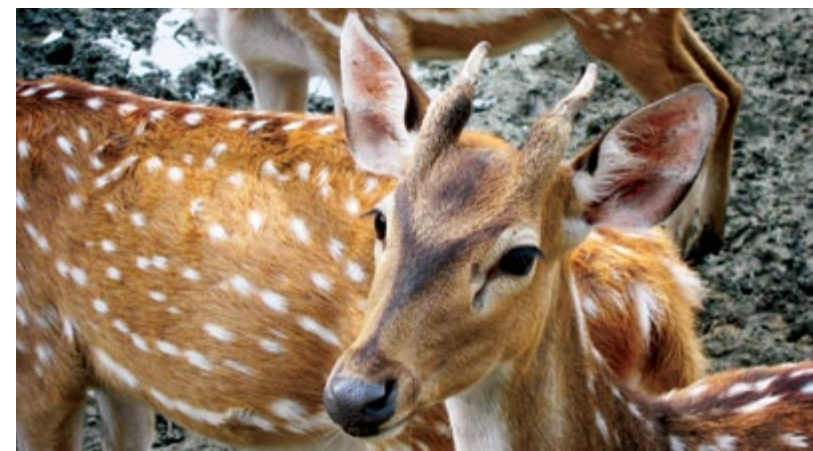
white sandy beach fringing the Bay of Bengal towards Bengal Tours' faithful vessel, the MV Bhela, where the crew has prepared a vast Bangladesh-style barbeque.

It had taken us all day and all night to travel the seventy winding kilometres from the port of Mongla down to Kochikhali, each minute taking the MV Bhela deeper into the Sundarbans and further from civilisation. As the river channels arc, intersect and narrow, the forests crowd the riversides, tangled, twisted and reaching ever closer toward the boat. In the milky twilight, hawks cry overhead as birds dart hurriedly into the forest. But gloomy spectres turn out to be no more sinister than those delicate spotted deer. I decide it's more like Kipling's "great, grey, green, greasy river" than something out of the Heart of Darkness.

Night falls early in the Sundarbans, and our amazing captain navigates into the pitch black as if he were wearing night vision goggles, directing each turn in the myriad watery intersections and avoiding sandbanks ⇒

PREVIOUS PAGE: Winding through the luxuriant mangrove forests of the Sundarbans' eastern range.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Tiger prints in the mud; the beautiful and lonely Bay of Bengal; watching the water lilies from the MV Bhela; Mostafa leads a land trek; "hard trekking" through the mud; spotted deer at the Karamjil Wildlife Sanctuary; the beautiful foests at Karamjil.



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EXPERIENCE BANGLADESH

FOR TEA: NILKANTHA TEA CABIN

In a pretty village outside Srimongal, the Nilkantha Tea Cabin is a local institution that has quenched its thirsty patrons with fine tea blends since 2003. However, it is most famous for its seven-coloured tea, which features seven different teas layered on top of each other. Inventor Romas Ram Gour keeps his methods a closely guarded secret, but the teas include black tea, green tea, clove tea and ginger tea.

FOR WILDLIFE: KARAMJIL WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Accessibly stationed near the mouth of the Passur River, the Karamjil Wildlife Sanctuary offers intimate views of the Sundarbans enchanting cast of wildlife in lush jungle surroundings. A raised wooden boardwalk offers a mud-free stroll through beautiful dappled forests populated by families of naughty macaques. But most excitingly, the sanctuary is a breeding centre for saltwater crocodiles; "Romeo" and "Juliet" will emerge from a green lake when called upon by their croc-whisperer keeper Mr Rob. Awesome.

FOR GUIDES: THE BENGAL TOURS LTD & BANGLADESH ECOTOURS

With two fine, fully-equipped vessels and a friendly crew, The Bengal Tours Ltd (www.bengaltours.com) has been bringing visitors into the Sundarbans ever since this remarkable environment opened up to tourism eleven years ago. Bangladesh Ecotours (www.bangladeshecotours.com) are specialists in eco and ethical tourism, and are dedicated to ensuring that tourism positively impacts the communities and environments visited. Both offer full guiding and tour services, and fabulous English-speaking guides.

ETIHAD FLIES BETWEEN DHAKA AND ABU DHABI FIVE TIMES PER WEEK.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Sunset at the beautiful Madabpore Lake in Srimongal; a local girl working in Srimongal's tea gardens; Modon the elephant at Lawachara National Park; Srimongal is legendary for its brightly painted rickshaws.



Wrapped with virgin rainforests and the finest tea gardens, Srimongal is teetering on the edge of an ecotourism revolution

and other obstacles as if by instinct. After a scrumptious dinner of barbecued eggplant, snapper and fragrant curried crab bought live from some local fishermen, I lie on the deck counting shooting stars and watching the fireflies dress up the forest like magical, flickering Christmas lights.

"Good morning! It's breakfast time!" Morning? Popul is knocking on my cabin door at 5.30am. It's still dark. I change lethargically and join Mostafa and the rest of the group on the deck where breakfast has been laid – steaming hot *roti*, sugar bananas, fragrant Sundarbans honey (courtesy of those brave-hearted honey hunters), steamed vegetables with daal and Nescafe. We cram into the small blue dinghy clutching our coffee cups as a white dawn crawls over the horizon. Our young boatman steers the dinghy down a twisting, slender creek overgrown with jungle to make a long, misty tunnel. The boatman cuts the engine, and we drift into the green.

The forest is surprisingly noisy. The parrots and macaques are shrieking so

loudly they sound like the fans of Liverpool and Everton having a face off. Led by a young stag, a flotilla of spotted deer crashes into the mangroves, whilst an elegant white egret lifts into air with a powerful *whoomph*. Mostafa points out a tree snake looped lazily around an overhanging branch.

By the riverside, mangrove roots finger out of the mud in their never-ending quest for air, while a cast of angry crabs scuttle between them. Still no sign of the Bengal tiger, other than some more pug marks, which Popul thinks are about two weeks old. But as we turn the dinghy back towards the MV Bhela for the last time, I spot a hulking shadow shifting through the distant undergrowth. Maybe it was just a deer.

A few days later over the other side of Bangladesh, I find myself clinging to Russell Alam of Bangladesh Ecotours atop an elephant that is trying to take money from a trembling, terrified-looking young man. In all fairness, the man had offered the elephant the money, and now seems aghast at the waving

trunk reaching out towards him. Russell and the elephant's owner are shouting to him in Bangla that the elephant is friendly. I stifle my laughter and take a photo.

The scene of two Bangladeshis and a blonde Westerner riding an elephant bareback down the road is drawing more than a few curious stares from the residents of the lush northeastern town of Srimongal – almost every passing car, motorbike and rickshaw has stopped to take a photo on their mobile phone.

But the presence of foreigners is no longer big news in this lush corner of northeast Bangladesh. Wrapped with virgin rainforests and some of the finest tea gardens on the Indian subcontinent, Srimongal is teetering on the edge of an ecotourism revolution. Our elephant ride through the 1,250 hectare, orchid-filled Lawachara National Park is my first taste of its paradise offering.

"The elephant's name is Modon," Russell shouts over his shoulder, as our great steed lumbers along cheerfully, pulling vines off jackfruit trees and flapping his frilly, leopard-spotted ears. "He is forty-years-old and his man has owned him for thirty years."

When Modon is not taking tourists on sightseeing trips, he helps his owner drag logs deep in the forest. Their symbiotic relationship has manifested itself gorgeously, with our