

A Haunting Beauty



Golpata leaves.

The symphony of birdsong begins while it is still dark outside. In the breaking dawn, the two islands to the north and west of our anchored launch appear as distant slivers of earth suspended in the silver mist. They could be two or ten miles away - it is impossible to gauge. To the east, waves break gently on the narrow beach and beyond that, the forest looms, dark and alive.

I am in Sundarban, Bangladesh, on a tourist launch.

The endless forest, big sky, wide rivers, birds and wildlife, mudskipper fish, fiddler crabs, even the sundarban crow butterflies - they comprise an unearthly and dreamlike land. I find my attempt to photograph Sundarban to be a daunting task and its beauty continues to haunt me long after I return home.

Take *Golpata* for example, a trunkless palm tree (*nypa* palm) with strong, large leaves that grows along the riverbanks. The green, yellow and red leaves tilt this way and that, making kaleidoscopic patterns with their reflections.

Other trees include *Sundari*, *Keora*, *Baen*, *Gewa*, *Possur*, *Kankra*. Their sumptuous tropical green seems familiar, but they are strangers to me because I never see them on the mainland.

Their mangrove roots shoot upward from the soil, enabling them to breathe during high tide. Some, like the *Sundari*'s, are smooth and conical. Others can be dagger-sharp, flat or wire-thin.

Shortly after dawn, we board a rowboat for bird-watching. Walking on land here is treacherous because of deep mud and mangrove roots, so boats are preferred for exploration. As we enter a narrow canal, the forest on both sides grows thicker and taller away from the bank. Branches grow horizontally over the water before reaching skyward, making grand archways over the water.

A black-capped kingfisher, with blue feathers and crimson beak, perches on a branch overhanging the water. At our approach, it flies to the next tree, continuing its search for breakfast. Sundarban is home to nine types of kingfishers.

Splash! An immature water monitor, perhaps a meter long, jumps into the water from the bank as our boat approaches an overhanging branch. Just after we pass under this branch, a second monitor dives from it into the water. These lizards can be three meters long when adult.

The event jolts me: surrounded by beauty, danger is never far. The forest, where thousands make their living from fishing, honey-collecting and *Golpata* leaves, can be a cruel mistress. The shadow of the Royal Bengal Tiger, elusive king of the forest, stalks my thoughts. I am grateful for the gun-toting forest guards who accompany us.

But still, the wildlife is approachable and unspoiled. Smaller birds play catch-me-if-you-can with our boat. Deer step back from the bank and stare at us, curious. A serpent eagle, sunning on a treetop, slowly turns its head to acknowledge our presence before resuming its regal posture. A brown vine snake, looped around a bush, its head touching its tail, ignores us altogether.

I feel lucky to be here, paradise on earth.