

# SUNDERBAN NATIONAL PARK



Ride the Blue Elephant!

## West Bengal, India

Area: 1,330 Sq. Km core area. 2,585 Sq. Km including buffer zone.

Altitude Range: 0-10 m above sea level

Best time to visit – October to March



The Sunderban ecosystem is a unique natural wonder of South Asia and the world. It is the largest contiguous mangrove ecosystem in the world today, with an area of approximately 10,000 square kilometers spread over India and Bangladesh. The pristine mangrove swamps lying at the southern fringe of West Bengal, a state of eastern India, is embedded with 102 islands amidst the emerald estuarine waters of the tributaries of the Bhagirathi and the Bay of Bengal. The area is the kingdom of the famous Royal Bengal Tigers. It is the largest deltaic region in the world which is changing constantly in a series of stages.

The Sunderban National Park named after the Sundari trees which are found in abundance in this region covers an area of 1340 sq km approximately. Other kinds of trees that are found in this region are Garjan, Dhundal, Kankra, and Passur. Interestingly the roots of the dense mangrove (sundari) trees shoot out of the water level.

The region received UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 1997, it being the world's largest estuarine forest – a stretch of impenetrable mangrove forest of great size and harbouring an incredible biodiversity. Fishing, timber extraction and honey collection are the main human activities allowed within Sunderbans.

To the naturalist, the best-known inhabitant of Sunderbans is the Tiger and the delta is home to the largest single population in the world (estimated at 200 individuals). The Tigers inhabiting this mangrove wilderness have become adept at living a semi-aquatic lifestyle. Despite their relatively large numbers, the Sunderban Tigers are not easy to see and are generally strictly nocturnal, resting up during the heat of the day.

Mammals that are easier to see include Wild Boar, Spotted Deer and Rhesus Macaque, while interesting smaller mammals such as Fishing Cat and Smallclawed Otter are occasionally seen. The mangroves also provide a home for many large reptiles such as the Indian Rock Python, King Cobra, Water Monitor and Estuarine Crocodile. The endangered Olive Ridley Turtle also nests here. Regrettably, Leopard, Javan Rhinoceros, Swamp Deer and Water Buffalo have all become extinct in the delta in recent decades, which only serves to emphasise the urgent need for conservation in this globally significant area.

Birds are among the highlights in this watery national park, especially a wide range of wetland birds, colourful kingfishers, and many mangrove specialists such as Masked Finfoot, Mangrove Pitta and Mangrove Whistler. You also have a slim chance of encountering dolphins. Three species occur here – Ganges River Dolphin, Irrawaddy Dolphin and Indo-Pacific Dolphin.



*Sunderbans Sunrise*



*Spotted Deer*



*Royal Bengal tiger*

## Birds in Sunderban National Park

A haven for bird watchers, the park also houses a variety of birds, including open billed storks, white ibis, water hens, white bellied sea eagles, seagulls, kingfishers and whistling teals. The Sajnekhali Bird Sanctuary located between Peechkali and Gomti Rivers is the only place in the park where you can walk and spot a host of birds.

## The Journey

If you want to get the real essence of this forest, waterways are the best way to explore the deep interiors. As you sail you are sure to catch glimpses of the countryside on either side of the river. It is not possible to see the whole area in one day so a night halt in the launch proves to be a good option. This unique experience is a little scary. Soon after sunset, five or six motor launches halt at a place and its dark all around with strange sounds echoing in the night. You are actually left with no choice other than romancing the dark.

The next morning starts with the spectacular sunrise. The launch sails at 5 in the morning. Both sides are covered with deep mangrove forests. At times the distance between the two banks is so less that any animal could attack. Within few kilometers there are watchtowers to spot the wild animals.

However, the most fascinating view of Sunderban is the estuary, which you have to see to believe. As you sail through the deep forest, you suddenly realize that you have entered the sea and there is no land in the near vicinity. To add to the spectacle is the demarcation formed in the water where you can easily figure out where the Ganges meets the Bay of Bengal. On one side you see the blue ocean and on the other side the muddy Ganges.

The views are amazing to say the least and a definite attraction on this trip.



*Estuarine Crocodile*



*Motor Launch for wildlife viewing*



*Sambhar deer*