

DISCOVER BANGLADESH: THE BIGGEST DELTA ON THE PLANET

Star HOLIDAY

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Part - 1

Swatch of no ground

I was getting bored in Dhaka in the restless early months of this year when I got the invitation to a special treat on F.B. Baba Loknath. I fought with parents, ducked through corporate darts, tricked the weather, and finally made it to the Cabin No. 11 of MV Chhuti, anchored at Mongla port. We were to set off the next morning on a very special trip few have taken before -- a trip to the Swatch-of-no-Ground, a weird deep canyon in the Bay of Bengal, where you can have the rare chance of watching dolphins and whales.

I woke up to the sound of heavy anchor chain being pulled in. The ship was moving. Looking through the porthole all I could see was dense fog. Up on the main deck I met 'Master Shaheb', the captain of this tourist vessel. We were cruising towards Kotka, the last of land where the forest ends some 75 kilometers from Mongla port.

Both sides of the waterways were framed with trees special to the Sundarbans. With the help of the captain I spotted the palm-like 'Golpata' and tall dark "Sundori". Small fishing boats catching crabs and shrimps dotted the river way, and then there were the occasional Shushuks breaking water in their very special way. These odd-looking freshwater dolphins are so quick that only expert eyes can catch their surfacing. While trying hard to spot the Shushuk, my attention turned more toward the magnificent changes in the colours of the water. From muddy brown to deep

chocolate it turned to grayish blue from the reflection of the dark clouds that gathered in large patches. I couldn't help but catch a few snaps of the cloudy canopy before it started to drizzle. Soon the rain became heavy and the ship started to rock on the rough water. Instead of getting scared I was quite excited to feel the sway of the ship as if I was on board the Titanic! Occasionally thunderbolts shot out vertically from the heavens in the distant horizon. The captain decided to drop anchor inside a small creek and wait until morning for the storm to pass over. I was thinking: "If this is the end of my trip, I have nothing to regret". I smiled contently and the rolling sea rocked me to sleep.



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Next morning, the bright sunlight through the portholes woke me up. The ship was still anchored in the creek. Monkeys and deer were feeding on the banks among the mangrove roots. A far off engine buzz was growing louder. I turned around and saw a fishing trawler in the distance. As it got closer I spotted a banner of WDCS:

Whales and Dolphin Conservation Society. F.B. Baba Loknath is a 56 feet motorized fishing boat. It has been fitted with a small temporary cabin which is basically the laboratory-cum-sleeping berth-cum-the equipment room for the WDCS team. Their research is aimed at gaining a better understanding of the dolphins and whales present in our waters and working towards their conservation. This is the second year of their study, using Photo-Identification (a method used to photograph individual animals over a period of time and match these with photos from earlier visits). From December to February, when the sea is calm enough, Rubaiyat Mansur and Elisabeth Fahrni Mansur, two dedicated nature lovers, venture into the Bay of Bengal equipped with digital cameras, laptop, binoculars, GPS and a handful of crew aboard a hired local fishing trawler. Early in the morning, considering the tide, they start for the sea and by the time the sun is glaring, the trawler is some 50 kilometers south of the coast. This is where the 'Swatch-of-No-Ground' begins. The British gave it this mysterious name a long time ago, as they could not measure the depth of this underwater canyon leading towards the Indian Ocean. Here the team starts their work and continues as long as the daylight remains, or the wind is in favor. With binocular focused on the horizon their search for dolphins and whales begins. Once a group of animals has been spotted and is close enough, the shutters of the cameras start going off. Pictures of the injured fins help researchers to identify individual dolphins. So far the team has been venturing mostly along the northern tip of the Swatch. Quite surprisingly they have recorded hundreds of bottlenose dolphins, spotted dolphins, spinner dolphins and Bryde's as well as fin whales this season. And they are guessing there might be Killer, Sperm or even Blue whales somewhere out there.... Later they hope to include further habitat studies in their research and prepare recommendations for appropriate steps towards the conservation of Bangladesh's whales and dolphins. While listening to their experiences and visualizing all of this in my mind, I was bubbling in anticipation. The sky grumbled. It was then that Rubai disclosed that this was the 8th day the team had been sitting out due to bad weather. I kept my fingers crossed.



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For detail information contact *The Guide Tours Ltd.*

[Swatch of no ground Part 2](#)

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