

# TRAVEL

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PAGE 13



Indian villagers prepare bags of soil for mangrove seedlings at a Mangrove Nursery, a project funded by the British government, at the village of Mathurakhand in the Sunderbans. PHOTO: AFP



The local Goddess of the Sunderbans, Bonbibbi, center, and her brother, Shah Jongli, right, inside a shrine in Bali, India. Every village in the Sunderbans has a shrine dedicated to Bonbibbi, who villagers believe protects them from tigers. PHOTO: AP



A man sits beside a basket of chickens transported by a country boat to market in the Sunderbans. PHOTO: AFP



A boy stands behind a fishing net at Moushuni island, inside the Sunderbans National Park. PHOTO: REUTERS

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The day before I took my daughter to the Sunderbans in northeast India, the *Times of India* reported: "A 21-year-old resident of Patharpratima was killed and partly eaten by a tiger in the Sunderbans ... Buno Bhakta was part of a five-member group that had gone into the Chulkati forest to look for crabs. The tiger attacked when they were returning with their catch later in the day."

I discreetly tore the article out of the paper and hid it. Imogen, who is 11, was already alarmed enough about going to an area where the local wildlife regarded mankind as supper. I was more worried about getting Delhi belly and whether Imogen would be overwhelmed by the poverty she would probably see.

We were going on a volunteering and wildlife holiday in the Sunderbans to test whether children and conservation work mix. Very few travel companies allow children to do volunteering work: most children don't have the strength, skills or patience to do practical jobs, and a lot of the places where volunteering help is needed are physically challenging.

Hands Up Holidays, which aims to blend sightseeing with "meaningful volunteering experiences," can tailor trips to suit the traveler, so children can be included in the plan. I had been lured by the picture of a gorgeous tiger walking out of a forest towards water on the Hands Up Holidays Web site, although it stressed that seeing this elusive animal was pretty unlikely. Even so, Imogen still had concerns after reading about the Sunderbans in *Lonely Planet India*: "Thanks to strategic perimeter fences near villages, the number of human deaths attributed to tigers has dropped from an estimated 200 a year to about 34." "Hmmm — nearly three a month," she said.

The Sunderbans form the biggest area of tidal mangrove forest in the world, spreading from West Bengal in India to Bangladesh. The Indian part of the Sunderbans covers 4,262 km<sup>2</sup>, with 2,585km<sup>2</sup> given over to a national park and tiger reserve. It is only about 90km from Calcutta, where we had spent the first three days of our holiday taking in markets, temples and exhaust fumes. But the journey to the Sunderbans Jungle Camp on Bali Island where we were staying takes five hours — two-and-a-half by car through dusty villages and endless salt water pans to Sonakhali and another two-and-a-half by boat.

Bali Island has some 25,000 people, but no mains water, electricity, roads or cars. People live in homes built from sticks, mud and straw, they burn dried-out cow pats on their fires, and the cows, goats and chickens live in the front yard. After Calcutta, it's heaven. The Sunderbans Jungle Camp is one of 20 run by Help Tourism, a Calcutta-based organization that channels at least 75 percent of its profits to the local people, who share ownership and help run its projects in the northeast and east of India.

Although small — it has six basic, but clean cabins sleeping a maximum of 20 people — the Bali Island camp employs 19 people, provides a water pump for people who previously had to walk a couple of kilometers to collect clean water, helps fund the local school and supplies a medical service. Solar electricity is supplemented by a generator in the evening, and if you want a bath, you ask for two buckets of hot water instead of one. But the food is amazing. Huge vats of vegetable and fish curries, chapatis, rice, and chutneys are made fresh every day.

The camp faces Gomdi Khal, part of the Sazmerkhali Wild Life Sanctuary — an area of reserved forest. Our guide, Tannoy Ghosh, took us there on a small rowing boat, along the river separating the two islands. The river looked about 1km in width, yet Tannoy told us that a tiger had swum from Gomdi Khal to Bali just a few months earlier. The 2.5m-tall fence that runs along the bank, dipping down into the water where creeks led into the island, acts more as a psychological barrier than a physical one to the tigers, which can easily scale the wire.

The next day we were on the water by 6am. We passed six kinds of kingfishers, fish eagles, egrets elegantly stalking along in the mud, monkeys, a lesser adjutant stork, a mangrove whistler, the occasional wild boar and spotted Chittal deer, immense saltwater crocodiles and water monitors. After dinner Tannoy offered to take us on a night walk. "Hold the torch up at your eye level and shine it along the edge of the field," he said. We did, and were rewarded with myriad luminous green jewels twinkling in the undergrowth. Spiders' eyes, he explained. En route he pointed out a spot where a tiger had prowled a few weeks ago; Imogen slipped her hand into mine and we edged a bit closer to Tannoy.

The next day, just after we had started out, the captain of the boat peered through the mist at a beach about 500m away and said, "Tiger!" Everyone jumped up and started arguing in ferocious whispers about whether it was a tiger or a wild boar. "It's too fat and dark to be a tiger," said one of the boat hands. By the time we had reached the beach, the wild boar-like tiger had melted back into the forest, but left clear tracks in the mud. It was definitely a tiger.

That evening villagers staged a folk musical celebrating the forest goddess Bonobibi and the tiger god Dakshin Roy. Afterwards one of the actors told how he had been fishing at night with two friends. He had been sitting in the middle of the boat, and when he looked round, the friend who had been behind him had disappeared. There had been no noise, no struggle. It seems every family has been touched by such a loss.

Our volunteering days were fabulous, too. We "taught" English in the primary school — about 20 four-to-eight-year-olds now roughly know the words to some English nursery rhymes. I wish we had come better prepared. We also planted mangrove saplings in the mud on the river side as a defense against cyclones. The planting bit is easy — you grab a sapling and plunge it into the mud — and you can plant about 200 trees in 20 minutes. Actually walking in the mud, which is knee high and has the consistency of a creme caramel, is something else. As we floundered, about 30 locals collected to watch us. What we lacked in teaching skills we made up for in entertainment value.

While Imogen and I felt we could have contributed more to the island — we should have spent more time planting and less birdwatching — and we got a lot more out of India than we gave back, the low-impact, sustainable tourist practiced by Help Tourism and Hands Up Holidays is vital. We are both desperate to return, especially if we can repeat the experience of staying in and becoming part of a small community.

So if your kids like playing in mud, meeting other kids, fishing and watching wildlife — with the odd shiver-inducing night walk thrown in — this is the holiday for them.



Forest workers watch a tigress as she jumps into the waters of river Sundari Kati, after her release from a cage in the Sunderbans. The pregnant tigress, which had strayed into a village, was rescued by the forest workers after being stoned and badly beaten by villagers. PHOTO: REUTERS

## Many hands make light volunteering

*A new breed of sustainable tourism is perfect for families in search of low-impact getaways in exotic locales*



This image made available on Nov. 20, 2007, shows an aerial view of the damaged Dublar char island near the Bangladesh side of the Sunderbans, the day after Cyclone Sidr devastated the area, killing more than 3,400 people. PHOTO: EPA

