

## quicktrip | bakkhali

For Kolkatans who wish to have a secluded yet economical weekend beach holiday, Bakkhali is the obvious choice. The beach is located at one of the 50-odd island clusters of the Sunderban area - famous for its mangrove trees and Royal Bengal tigers. Although there are enough mangrove trees at Bakkhali, thankfully there are no tigers roaming around.

The sea at Bakkhali does not have large waves, and so, is not ideal for swimming. You can enjoy a morning walk through the long stretch of sand to the town of Frazerganj. A cycle rickshaw ride through the rural landscape takes you to the Frazerganj fishing harbour. Add to it a visit to Henry's Island - the holiday spot at Bakkhali developed by the Fisheries department jointly with the Ministry of Tourism.

A bus journey from Kolkata took us to Namkhana, where we crossed the Hatania-Doania creek to reach the other side known as Narayanpur. There is no bridge on this river as it is a thoroughfare of ships. One has to cross by a floating barge (popularly known as 'vessel'). This river separates this island cluster from the mainland and all vehicles cross the river sitting pretty on this vessel.

From Narayanpur, it is a one-hour drive to Bakkhali. The plan was to stay at Henry's Island the first day, and then come back and explore Bakkhali. After a sumptuous lunch of rice and fish at Bakkhali, we headed for Henry's Island in a cycle rickshaw. A brick road about two kilometres before Bakkhali leads to Henry's Island. It is not exactly an island, but an extension of the Sunderban Forest region. The fisheries department has set up a Fish culture project here, where different varieties of fishes are cultivated. The place is named after the European surveyor Henry who surveyed the area in the late 19th century. At that time, the area used to be covered with dense mangrove forests infested with tigers, deer, wild pigs, crocodiles and snakes.

There are two parts of this island - Sector I houses the first Government Guest house called Mangrove. We passed that, and after a ride of another 2.5 km, we reached Sector II, where the other guest house Sundari is located. The building of Sundari has a watch tower on its top from where you can check out the entire area. There are huge water bodies on one side of the Lodge and a dense Mangrove forest on the other. We saw a paddle boat in one of the water bodies.

After tea, we headed to the beach through the narrow path covered with mangrove trees. The beach is a vast affair of sand and dramatically positioned mangrove trees. The sea looked quite far, and as we headed for it, we saw a long, red horizontal

**CLEAN AND GREEN:** (Right) The clean and vast beach at Henry's Island; the Bakkhali beach is perfect for a game of cricket

# MANGROVES AND THE SEA

Located close to Kolkata, the three beach destinations - Bakkhali, Frazerganj and Henry's Island, are a cluster of gorgeous islands worth a relaxing weekend and more, says **Amitabha Gupta**



The Bakkhali beach floor is firm - perfect for a long morning walk or a game of beach cricket. The beach is devoid of any kind of hawkers pestering you, and is serviced by just two tea stalls that also provide chairs to sit on the beach at a mere Rs 5 per hour

The sea looked quite far at the beach at Henry's Island, and as we approached it, we saw a long, red horizontal stretch moving near the sea. On closer look, we found that it was red crabs in huge numbers moving over the beach. The red army fled as we approached them



## Navigator

### GETTING THERE

**By Air:** The nearest airport is at Kolkata, 20 km away.

**By Rail:** Namkhana is the nearest railhead. There are direct trains to Kakdwip from Sealdah Station with link trains to Namkhana.

**By Road:** The state transport buses depart from the Esplanade bus depot in Kolkata at 7 am and 8 am for Namkhana, and the journey

takes about five hours.

### WHERE TO STAY

#### At Bakkhali

Bakkhali Tourist Lodge by West Bengal Tourism - room tariff Rs 400 to Rs 800 (Tel: 033 22437260); Hotel Dolphin, room tariff - Rs 500 to Rs 1,200 (Tel: 03210 225296); Hotel Balaka, room tariff - Rs 250 to Rs 500 (Tel: 225207).

#### At Frazerganj

Hotel Deepak, room tariff - Rs

600 to Rs 1,100 (Tel: 03210 225277, 033 24640081/24633203).

#### At Henry's Island

The only option is to stay either at the Mangrove or the Sundari lodge. The latter is closer to the beach. Tariff - A/C rooms: Rs 1,500, non-A/C rooms: Rs 400-Rs 800, tents: Rs 600; Tel: 03210 225511. Here, lodging is possible only after advance booking from the State Fisheries Development Corporation, Bikash Bhavan,

Salt Lake, Kolkata (Tel: 033 23376470/ 23586832/ 65403292).

### MUST-DO

The rickshaw van trip is a must try even if you have a car. You will get a glimpse of the beautiful countryside in a rickshaw ride. You can also enjoy the sight of the stretch of land mushrooming with huge windmills. There is also a small Ganga temple where the rickshaw driver will halt for *darshan*.

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The next day, we were back at Bakkhali by 11 am, and promptly checked in to a hotel. In the afternoon, we strolled towards the beach. There were a few shops selling sea shell souvenirs on the way to the beach. We also paid a visit to the crocodile breeding centre which was a disappointment. However, as we waded through the shallow waters at the beach, the cool breeze refreshed our mind instantly.

The beach floor is firm as there is a mix of silt and sand - perfect for a long morning walk or a game of beach cricket. The beach is devoid of any kind of hawkers pestering you, and is serviced by two tea stalls that also provide you chairs to sit on the beach at Rs 5 per hour.

Being an early riser, I was rewarded with a picture-perfect sunrise, and a humdrum of activity of fishermen the next morning. While walking the beach towards Frazerganj, I noticed that the mixing of silt with sand made the beach look unclean, although it was very clean. As we neared the Frazerganj beach, we could see giant windmills looming behind the fishermen's huts, and casuarinas trees lined on our right. The windmills generate power for a small section of the locality.

### GREEN SEASIDE:

(Top left) A ruin at Frazerganj; a panoramic view of Henry's Island a place fast gaining in popularity as a getaway

Andrew Frazer, a Lt-Governor of Bengal, fell in love with this beach about 100 years ago, and constructed a house at Narainitala, the nearest village. There are also tales about Frazer falling in love with a local woman called Naraini. Though nothing remains of him in Frazerganj except his name, we came across a run-down house near the beach that locals insisted belonged to Andrew Frazer. We didn't quite buy the story.

Unlike its beach, the Frazerganj harbour is always bustling with activity. Apart from people being busy piling up fish, breaking ice or handling boats, the one activity that attracted me most was the way the fishermen sat in unison repairing a huge green fishing net. The boatmen were pursuing us to undertake a two-hour sea trip to the inhabited island of Jwambu Dwip, which we politely refused.

Back in Bakkhali, we took a new route to the beach in the afternoon. This was through a local fishermen's village. We reached the beach close to dusk, when one of my friend suggested that we visit the local deity Banabibi's temple. It was a brief walk to the left of the beach and then through the trees to the small temple that housed the deities Banabibi and Bishalaksmi. It was dark by the time we strolled back to the beach and sat down on the chairs to sip tea. The beach is lighted with sodium lamps, and you can sit there up to 10 pm. Gazing at the starlit sky, I didn't want to board the Kolkata-bound bus the next morning. ■