

Calm within the Storm

IN THE MIDST OF THE TOURIST FRENZY IN COASTAL ODISHA,
SECLUSION CAN BE FOUND FOR ₹20

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The sudden solitude was overwhelming. This great big expanse of uninhabited shoreline by the Bay of Bengal, bordered by a thick grove of casuarina trees, was a chance discovery. Running parallel to the Puri-Konark highway, the 10-kilometre Balukhand Beach is a nesting ground for olive ridley turtles, home to busy crabs, and lazy egrets—and in that moment, it was exclusively mine.

A few hours earlier, just 15 kilometres away, Puri Beach was thronging with devotees, picnicking families, and boys casually flinging sand at each other. The Jagannath Temple at Puri, site of the famous annual *rath yatra*, attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims each year. The town is also a beach getaway popular with tourists from West Bengal and the rest of Odisha.

In such a setting, seclusion is difficult to find. But the 72-sq-km densely forested Balukhand-Konark Wildlife Sanctuary cleverly conceals a quiet beach. A track through the forest leads to a sleepy office, where visitors can purchase a pass for ₹20 to enter the little-known Balukhand Beach.

The Photoshopped images on the signs by the highway simply don't do justice to the postcard-perfect beach, possibly why it is not a major tourist draw.

Vendors and crowds of tourists are conspicuous in their absence. The crystal waters are shallow and placid, perfect for an afternoon float.

A lone man can be found snoozing under the mid-morning sun, a stack of blue-and-white striped beach towels by his side. Debo rents out towels and mats to the handful of visitors who happen to drop by.

"There are maybe 30-50 people a day," he says. "Most prefer the Chandrabhaga Beach at Konark because it's close to the Sun Temple." Chandrabhaga Beach is the site of the International Sand Art Festival, last held in December 2012. Remains of massive sculptures still line the shore at Konark.

I ask about the olive ridleys that make their way out to this coast each year. Unfortunately, I've missed them. "The eggs are buried in sheltered areas to keep them safe from predators like birds and black bucks," Debo says. Pointing to one end of the beach, he continues, "That's where the

River Nuanai flows into the Bay of Bengal. Good spot for turtles."

The Nuanai river, bordered by thick groves of tamarind and neem, cuts through the sanctuary to flow into the ocean at one end of Balukhand Beach. In a magnificent confluence of black soil and sand, a delta is formed. This is favourable for turtle nesting. But as I sat by the muddy riverbank in complete solitude, listening to the whistle of the wind and roar of the ocean, all I saw was a lone fisherman on the Nuanai, casting his net into the lazy river. ■

VITALS

GETTING THERE Puri is the closest town, around 7 km from the entrance to the Balukhand-Konark Wildlife Sanctuary along the Puri-Konark Marine Drive. Cars and motorcycles are allowed into the sanctuary.

COSTS Tickets to the sanctuary cost ₹20 (₹1,000 for foreigners).

WHEN TO GO Visit the sanctuary and beach early in the day and avoid walking or driving through the forest after dark.

CAUTION Stay away from turtle nesting spots as you could disturb or damage eggs.

Few visitors make it to Balukhand Beach, sequestered in a wildlife sanctuary just a short drive from the bustle of Puri.