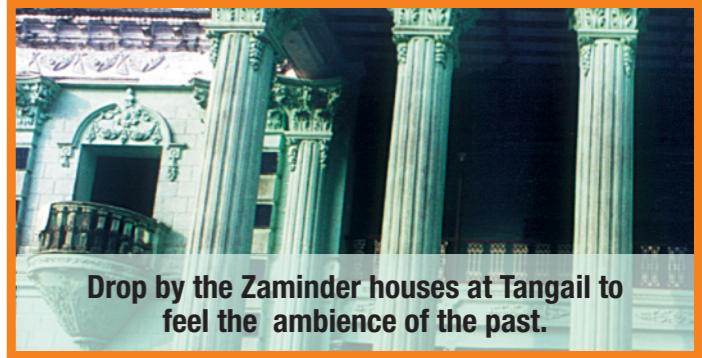


Star Holiday

next in line



Drop by the Zaminder houses at Tangail to feel the ambience of the past.

DHAKA SUNDAY APRIL 6, 2003



SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN



SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

A lonely hike along the Naf river (Left); the river looks serene with the Arakan mountain range frilling the background (Right); brightly painted Sampans dot the Teknaf sea beach (Bottom).

Night by the Naf

wild watch

Wild animals that can be seen along the Teknaf peninsula are **elephants, wild boars, hogbadgers, barking deer and pigtail monkeys**. Birds like **waders and some elusive pheasants and black birds** can be seen on occasions.

fact sheet

Position from Dhaka: Extreme south
Distance: Around 510-km
Journey time: 11 hours (appx)
Road condition: Good, foggy on winter nights
Places of interest: Sea

IT was like no other night. A muted half-darkness hangs around us. Nothing sounds. Not even a cricket. You can even hear your own breath.

The Naf looks silvery in the moonlight. Through the misty river, a boat slowly crosses over to someplace. Maybe to Myanmar. The hills yonder look unreal shades in the moonlight. A breeze ruffles up ripples in the river.

We sit on the Ne Taung pyre. A wooden pyre that juts into the Naf river. At the end of it is a platform from where travellers board the sea truck that ferries between Ne Taung and Saint Martin's Island.

The sea truck is a nice little thing. Tourists can sit on wooden benches in a watertight hold. Or loiter around on the deck. Every day, at around 10 in the morning, the sea truck sallies out to the only coral island of Bangladesh, and comes back at 6 in the evening.

This is the most convenient and safest mode of transport for island lovers. For a roundtrip Tk 200 is quite a bargain. But getting the ticket is what one should worry about as we found out in the morning.

When we planned to spend a couple of nights at Ne Taung we also thought of Saint Martin's as another destination. From the

Cox's Bazar, we hired a microbus for Tk 890. The dirt-caked seats reek of sweat. The daredevil driver sped through the narrow, snaky mountain road.

Every time, a pack of humans on the move appeared on the roads, hanging wildly onto a decadal-old four-wheel drive 'Chander gari', our hearts sank. Somehow, we got a new lease of life.

One and a half hours later, the motel came into view. Set against hills and forests, the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation's Ne Taung resort looks like a dream house built on cakes. The rooms are impeccable. Sit on the veranda, and the Naf river with the shadowy mountains in the background will come into view. The motel garden is nicely trimmed, decked with bright flowers. You can sit there for hours and laze.

We threw our backpacks into the room and drove to Teknaf. One wonders why people craze for Cox's Bazar when the Teknaf beach with all its bounty offers a lonely retreat and greenish seascape. No prying eyes, no vendors selling soft drinks. You will be left to yourself.

Rows of huge sampans in bright stripes décor the sea beach. We climbed on them and feigned to be on a fishing trip. We unfurled a dragon kite and let it fly beyond the vision in the sea wind. We ran



TOWFIK ELAHI

wildly, laughing. We sprinkled sands on each other. We rolled on the beach and we were caked with sand.

Tired, we trotted back and sat under a tree by the sea beach road. A man was selling green coconuts, as if only for us.

The Teknaf bazaar was the natural next stoppage. And just beside it is the famous *Mathiner*

Koup (Mathin's well) inside the police station. Here, cop-cum-novelist Dhiraj Bhattacharya had that famous love affair with Mathin, the daughter of the tribal king. Mathin used to come to the well every morning to fetch water and frolicked with the writer.

But late, Dhiraj acted cowardly and went away to Kolkata, promising to come back which he

never did. But Mathin, true to her love, stopped taking food and slowly withered away in death. The sad love story is still remembered in Teknaf.

But before you get too melancholic, you will find yourself walking to the bazaar in search of some smuggled goods. And things are really cheap. From there, we chose to hike on way back to Ne

Tauf. From the Teknaf Bazar, it was about four and a half kilometres. The wind blew cold, the trees murmured. Small children trotted up the hills in light foot and in lighter hearts.

An hour or so later, we were so hungry that we could eat an elephant. The food was unlike any Parjatan food. But we were in no mood to mind the bland, hot food.

The next day, we went to the sea truck terminal for ticket to the Saint Martin's. But the trip was already booked. We had to get the ticket from the company's Kalatoli office in Cox's Bazar.

So, we settled for exploring the hills behind the motel. Huge *shal* leaves sailed down in amplified rustle. A mongoose ran in terror. Birds chirped. Tired, we sat under a tree and sipped cold drinks. The river simmered in the sunlight. Life seemed tranquil and worth living.

And the night on the Ne Taung pyre passed very slowly as we lied on the platform. The full moon traversed to the west. We listened raptly to the soft pattering of the river. With all the charms of the hills, the moon disappeared beyond the broken cliffs. We got up and headed for the sleeping Ne Taung motel.

INAM AHMED with TOWFIK ELAHI

Budget

2 nights / 3 days (For a group of six)

Dhaka-Cox's Bazar A/C bus fare - Tk 4,200

Microbus rent (Cox's Bazar-Teknaf and vice versa) - Tk 2,000

Non-AC room rent (2 nights) at Ne Taung motel - Tk 3,000@Tk 500/room

Local travel - Tk 400

Meals - Tk 5,000

Total - Tk 14,600

Travel tips

It's going to be beach time. So, swim suits are a must.

Don't forget your sunglasses, sandals glare.

A pair of shorts.

Take sneakers or ankle boots for trekking.

But when in the beach, sandals are the best.

Sun cream will save you from burns.

Take a first aid kit that must contain paracetamals, anti-septic ointments. Take enough bandage to apply in case you get blisters from walking.

Take water bottles to sea beach, it is a rare commodity at Teknaf.

Rickshawpullers are terrible. So, always fix the fare before taking any ride.

Do not litter. Keep the beach clean.

You can take a beach ball or a cricket bat and a ball to play on the beach.

Take a tissue paper box

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Tour operators

Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation
Tours and travel division.
233 Air Port Road, Tejgaon. T # 8117855-9

St Martin Tourism Ltd
37/B Parana Paltan Lane; T # 9338431, 0171883993, 0171488787

Prime Tourism Network
Z.R.K. Mission Road Motaleb Mansion Room 506, T # 7111990, 9562430

Guide Tours Ltd
Darpan Complex Plot 2 Gulshan 2nd Circle. T # 9886983, 9862205

Bangladesh Expedition
4th Floor, Sheraton Health Club, T # 018227387

Journey Plus
40/A Aziz Super Market (1st Floor), Shahbagh. T # 8628577, 9660234

Bengal Tours Ltd
House 45, R # 27 Bloc-A, Banani. T # 8820716, 9885940

River a" Green Tours
Mohiuddin Helal H # 47(4th Floor) R # 17 Banani, T # 826759, 018224593

Green Channel
H # 5, R # 17 Bloc-E (5th Floor), Banani. T # 8818557, 018314820

Tour offers

Uzbekistan Airways Package
Dhaka-Tashkent-Bukhara-Samarkand-Tashkent-Dhaka (5days/4nights), \$890 for group of 10 (4-Star Hotels), \$700 (budget hotels); \$965 for group of four (4-Star hotels), \$760 (budget hotels). Airline will assist in visa procedures.

Singapore Airlines
Dhaka-Bali-Dhaka (4days/3nights) \$299 plus \$20 for war time surcharge. Airline will assist in visa procurement. Tel: 9883259

Malaysia Airlines
Dhaka-Kuala Lumpur-Dhaka (3nights/4days) \$330 Airlines will help with visa 50%-60% discount on First and Business class tickets for Standard Chartered Priority and Credit Card members. Stay 5 days/4 nights free of charge in Malaysia at 5-Star hotel. Tel: 8621557-64

City Cell-Phuket Air package
3 nights/4 days in Bangkok \$267 Tel: 9139777-9134982

Guide Tours
Dhaka-Sundarbans-Dhaka (5days/4 nights) Tk 5,600 per person. Tel: 9886983