



Good morning Aski para

DHAKA SUNDAY JUNE 1, 2003



A dark-blue line of the Garo Hill skirts paddy fields under an overarching sky.

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Position from Dhaka: North
Distance: About 230km
Drive time: 6 hours (appx.)
Road: Good, way to Aski Para is broken
Best time to visit: Except monsoon



LOCATION > HALUAGHAT. CATEGORY > FAMILY

A Garo treat

THE landscape changed as we crossed Haluaghat market. The fields, replete with boro, gently spread away. The trees looked more like trees. The air was distinctly different.

We could feel we are near the border, near the hills. And that we are in the Garo land. They were walking down the roads – the Garos – in ones and twos. Their features were so clear – snubbed nose, slightly Mongoloid eyes, none very tall, well built. And yes, the dress. The women were wearing traditional colourful lungis and blouses; many carrying babies strapped to their back.

We approached through the nicely carpeted road for some more distance. It was unusually empty. We stretched our vision through the threading road as far as we could and yet did not meet a single vehicle for minutes together – unusual for any road in this crowded part of the globe. It seemed as if we walked into a solitary fold. And we liked it.

End of the bitumen road, the microbus hit a herringbone road. And then we could see the hills in the distance. The undulating blue hills with white clouds cottonballing around. A true scene from the postcard. And wow! What are those? A hill of watermelons in the

middle of the field. We stopped the car and scrambled down. We straightened our legs to ease the kinks from the five-and-a-half-hour journey. The farmers were nice and eager to sell and so, we had four ripe, huge watermelons.

A little later, we came to a crossroad and a signpost read: Koroitoli border outpost, Telipara border outpost. We proceeded toward Koroitoli and then had to stop at the first outpost. We explained that we are going to Aski Para and will be staying there for a night. The BDR people were also too nice to let us park the vehicle inside their compound.

We then set out on foot. And soon we realised our folly. The melons now weighed too much to carry. And we also looked ludicrous carrying them on our shoulders. So we flicked open the Swiss knife and hungrily swooped on the melons sitting right by the road. Well, who cares? The melons are sweet like honey and there's no one around to watch our feast.

With heavy tummies, we trundled through the mud road broken in places as streams from the hills run through. We had to fold up our trousers to cross them. A 40-minute walk took us to Aski Para, right by the Koroitoli BOP. Wading through small Garo mud huts, we finally reached the

destination Sanjib Drong's mother-in-law's house. Sanjib's sister-in-law Moloya Chishim was our guide.

The way we were welcomed, we did not feel like

We will be cautious -- we assured them and started the hike. Loneliness is what you can define here. Only hills, trees and butterflies. Tweepers of birds hidden in the foliage fill

narrow trail, a chhara streaming from the Meghalaya hills runs parallel. We noticed holes dug two feet deep into the sandy banks filled with clear water. The Garos use it for drinking. We crossed the Chhara and reached the edge of the bush land. We realised we are so close to the Indian border, only about a few hundred yards away. We sat down and the sun slid down over the hills. Suddenly, we heard a gunshot on the Indian side. Nervous, we decided to come

black at all. Zillions of stars stared back at us, they looked so close as if we could reach out and touch them. And zillions blinked all around us, only they were fireflies. We held our breath in awe and watched the night tick by. We sat by the village road, engrossed in stillness. Only some owls hooted to break the silence. We felt cold and tired, still we could not find the heart to head for bed.

INAM AHMED



Garo faces

SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN



STAR HOLIDAY



Abodes close to nature

INAM AHMED



Lonely cross in peace

STAR HOLIDAY

strangers in the Garo land. Mashi Ma was like my own mom. Mukti my own sister.

We had a quick grab of cakes and biscuits. We slipped into shorts and went to the huge pond ringed by high banks. The water was crystal clear. And we swam for hours in the water among the Garo kids who were trying to get some afternoon cool-off. While we rested on the ghat, we could still see the Garo hills in the distance -- blue against the sky. We dipped again and played water polo.

We decided to take a tour of the Garo hills. But the BDR officials at the Tetulia BOP warned us not to wander off too far. "The situation is tense and the Indian forces are just over there. You won't even know when you cross the line and enter India," one of them told me.

your ears. You see leaves of such intriguing patterns. We wondered at the marvel of nature's design. A big white cross came into view. Standing on a big spacious grassy land it suddenly stops you with a force; you cannot help thinking the Garos lying there dead in the cemetery. The blue Meghalaya hills frill the horizon, making it a serene setting to be laid to rest.

Earlier, we saw another old cemetery -- ferns crawling up its walls, bricks worn away by time, and inside, a tomb peeks through mushy shrubs. It is where the Garos used to be laid to rest when they followed the Sansarek religion, their own age-old faith. Today, about 99 per cent of them have embraced Christianity and are buried in this new place.

We walked on, following a

back. Night fell softly on the Garo land like a fine cobweb. We sat on the home yard with a big pitcher of chu, the indigenous Garo drink, in the middle. The Garo master brewer served around with a finch like scoop made of a strange fruit. He sang in his ancient Garo voice: Oh my Jamuna, I don't know how to run away with you... The Garo drumbeat gave the air a sad edge. We listened spellbound, without really understanding much of the lyrics. Between the songs, the Garos talked about their tales of deprivation with no contempt. We felt that we are watching a National Geographic movie.

The night we spent strolling on the grassy road of the Garo village. It was a moonless night, but not peach

Budget

Microbus fare (7-seater) - Tk 3,000, **Fuel**- Tk 2,000, **Food** - Tk 1,500, **Total** Tk 6,500

Bus fare Tk 840@ Tk 120 per person, **Food for seven persons** - Tk 1,500, **Total** Tk 1,620

Traveltips

Take mosquito repellents -- malaria is common in the Garo land.

You have to walk quite a distance so wear sneakers

Take raincoat or umbrella

Take BDR advice, but the Garos know their land best. Follow them.

It would be very sunny and hot. Take cap and water bottle.

Take shorts for a swim and torches. Aski Para has no electricity

Get a Garo local guide to take you around.

Wheretostay

There are a few hotels in Haluaghat. They are not good and are cheap at around Tk 50 per person.

Alternately, you can stay at the upazila bungalow or Caritas rest house through arrangement. At Koroitoli coal depot, there are two bungalows where you can stay by arrangement.