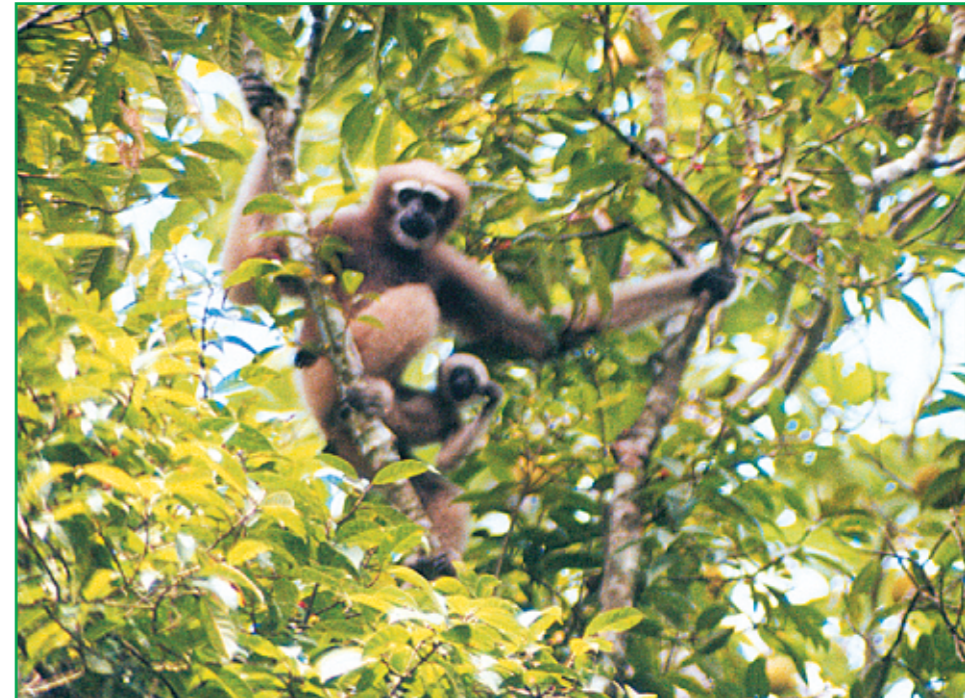


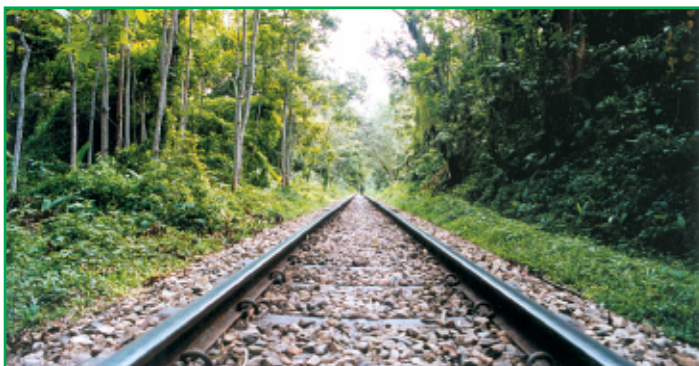
Star W O L I D A Y

DHAKA SUNDAY JUNE 29, 2003



LOCATION > LAWACHHARA, MOULVI BAZAR. CATEGORY > FAMILY / ADVENTURE

The Gibbon Trail



Clockwise: Carpeted road running by the forest The spot where the film Around the World in 80 Days was shot Another road meanders Walking through the semi-evergreen forest of Lawachhara A chhara is always a mysterious place to trek The mother gibbon's curious look with her child in lap Walking a trail is always rewarding Jackfruits being taken to market A tiny frog waits for its prey The gibbons' food fruits from the forest

THE sun was yet to rise. Only a pseudo-dawn light hung around and sounds poured in. It seemed birds of every kind were all around -- hiding behind leaves and branches and darting out of cover in riotous colour and beauty. We knew it was the perfect time to watch the white-browed gibbons -- ulluk as we call them in Bangla -- the only member of the ape in the subcontinent. I have never seen one before in my life, though called several times in paternal wrath. Would they be like me? That childhood unease rose again in me.

Our microbus slowly coasted along the highway to Sri Mongol. On either side of the road, emerald green tea gardens, fresh from overnight shower, cascaded away. A thin mist hung above them. It was still too early for the tealeaf pickers to begin their work. Without them, the gardens looked missing something. In a golden flash, we saw two rare Chestnut bittern flying into a small pond. The first of the humans came in view. Pushing two wheeled carts full of pineapples, liches and jackfruits and on their way to the market, they appeared on the wet, winding road.

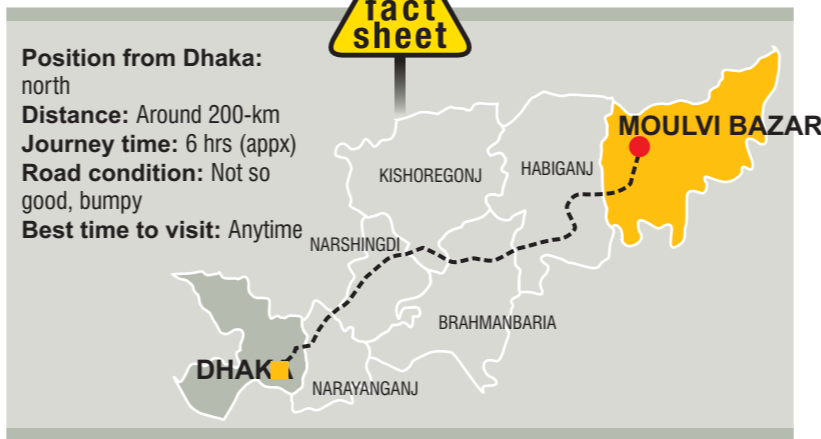
About a kilometre farther, we suddenly entered the Lawachhara forest zone and the scene changed abruptly. On both sides, trees towered high, almost offering a canopy overhead. And the sound and light changed just as quickly. An unknown buzz brought back memories of the city childhood when I used to wake up to the sound of a propeller-powered

airplane droning at Tejgaon Airport. You can still experience it at ZIA if a GMG plane idles. Only, this came from crickets.

We stopped and piled out of the car. Yesterday's summer heat was absent, it was rather cool. A wind stirred up and droplets fell on our heads. We walked on. About a kilometre up, a lane turned left, frilled with trees, trunks white-washed. The forest department office came in view.

Flutters startled us and we saw a flock of Emerald Doves

we took a turn, the movement in trees caught our sight. Huge black figures jumped from one tree to another some 125 feet from the ground. Our hearts skipped a few beats. We looked in awe at the great gibbons -- two black males and a golden female. Clutching a baby to her chest. They also looked down at us in wonder and hooted loud. Tailless, and faces a little tapered, they almost looked like humans. Their long, powerful arms showed how they could haul all the weight so easily so



Position from Dhaka: north
Distance: Around 200-km
Journey time: 6 hrs (appx)
Road condition: Not so good, bumpy
Best time to visit: Anytime

flying off the roadside. I had seen them at Kataban pet shops before, but never in the wild.

Just behind the forest office is the famous Chloroform tree shooting out at least 150 feet into the sky. It's a rare tree, as we know. A signpost also vouches for its rarity. A movement in the trees caught our eyes -- a flock of monkeys. As Zakir aims his camera, two small mangy dogs materialised and started howling at him. The monkeys jibed at Zakir. He was too scared to click the camera, lest the dogs bite him.

But before he fell almost unconscious, we heard the whoops. It seemed that a whole herd of gibbons had descended on the forest, raising a call riot, loud and clear. We silently followed a path through the thick forest in dappled mysterious shade. The morning sun could hardly reach here. We tried to make as little sound as possible, keeping our ears open for the direction of the calls.

The forest turned even denser. As

high up in the trees. The mother let the baby crawl to a branch momentarily and then scooped it back. Our cameras clicked, our eyes glued to binoculars, our neck ached from the sharp angle.

After about an hour of hooting, looking down and ripping leaves, they melted into the forest. We checked our watch -- 9:00am, the time for them to disappear. We pushed farther into the forest and stepped into a chhara (creek). Before that Zakir forced us to take anti-leech measures -- a concoction of mustard oil and ground tobacco leaf rubbed on our legs.

A steam trickled down from somewhere. A canopy of bush covered us. We listened to the silence of sunlight trickling through gold and green canopy of trees. The sound of winds swishing through the leaves. We walked on through the whitish sandy creek in a strange silence. Full of life, only diminutive. Insects of all kinds -- six-legged to eight-legged -- crawled around in their wild colours. Strange frogs brooded in suspended animation on leaves. A red crawler stopped and looked us -- intruders. A baroque of fine architecture on its shell.

It was eleven in the morning and becoming extremely hot and humid. The water bottles were all empty. We checked with Zakir's GPS which he so fancied about. We have already trekked four kilometres and got two more to go back. So, we called it a day for Gibbon watching and returned. We crossed the rail line that runs through the forest. We were at the exact point where the film director, Michael Todd, shot the trail journey sequence of the famous 'Around the World in 80 Days'. We could well see in our mental frame the train in the movie huffing and puffing through the dense forest.

INAM AHMED with KHOSRU CHOWDHURY

Touroffers

Thai Airways Summer Holidays Bangkok 3days/2nights. Business class: From \$538 to \$718 (Depending on hotel class and accommodation). **Economy class:** From \$373 to \$558 (Depending on hotel class and accommodation)

Emirates Airlines Holiday Package: Dhaka-Dubai-Dhaka. Economy class ticket, meet and assistance at Dubai Airport, Airport-Hotel-Airport transfers, 3 nights Hotel accommodation, Additional 10kg free baggage on return flight. **Prices:** \$600 (Twin sharing) and \$695 (Single).

Budget

Microbus fare (7-seater) - Tk 3,000
 Fuel- Tk 3,000
 Food - Tk 2,000
 Room rent Tk 1,200 (three rooms for one night)
 Total Tk 8,200

Traveltips

Leeches are rampant in the forest, especially if it is monsoon. So, take a concoction of grounded tobacco leaf and mustard oil. Rub it well over your exposed parts.

Always wear sneakers or trekking shoes, never go barefooted because of leeches.

Take raincoats or umbrellas.

Take plenty of water. It is going to be extremely hot in the forest.

Take some anti-septic ointment as protection against biting ticks. Take paracetamols because if these ticks bite you, you are going to get fever.

Take torches.

Take binoculars -- the more powerful the better it is.

For photography, don't forget to take at least a 400mm zoom.

