

Climbing a moutain

ALASDAIR MACDONALD

Where do you begin with an article about 'Tourism in Bangladesh'? Well, when stuck it makes sense, as the adage goes, 'to begin by writing what you know.'

So, what do I know as not-quite-a-tourist in Bangladesh having lived here for two years but still a foreigner with a distinct perspective? After all, as a photographer I travel around the country to a greater degree than most foreigners and often a great deal more than most Bangladeshis I know. But, having been asked to write a piece 'from a tourist's perspective' I found it difficult to know where to begin sorting my thoughts. Which is quite fitting, I suppose, as most foreigners find their experiences of Bangladesh quite a mixed bag: good and bad, infuriating and charming, incredibly beautiful and outright ugly.

In the end I decided to dispense altogether with the typical

article on tourism, and use this space instead to share some unasked for, perhaps unwanted, observations with those in the so-called 'tourist industry.'

I will not beat around the bush any more: Parjatan in its present form must go! What motivation can there be for any hotel manager or hotel staff to provide friendly service or even attempt to attract tourists to fill their hotels, when with an *empty* hotel their wages remain the same low and the workload matches.

Tourism must be privatized. Bangladesh is a product to be sold to the world. This obviously means marketing its assets. What are they, I hear you ask?

Well, here's my top three: firstly, the Sylhet and Moulvi Bazar regions offer a virtual Garden of Eden. The tea estates can be packaged and presented as a romantic idyll for tourists and deshis alike. But, Westerners, in particular, have a penchant for the 'colonial experience' as hardly needs to be proved by

looking to India and their recent boom in luxury Raj-themed hotels. Many of the traditional Zamindari houses and Rajbaris around the country also provide a perfect backdrop for such developments.

Secondly, the Chittagong Hill-tracts offer a unique experience of a borderland area where one distinct region and culture transforms into another. South Asians become Southeast Asians before your very eyes.

Last, by but no means least, Bangladesh's greatest tourist asset by *any* standard is of course the Sundarbans: one of the world's truly extraordinary habitats. But how would you know? It is easier to travel in comfort around remote areas of the Amazon or Sub-Saharan Africa these days than it is the Sundarbans. Moreover, the chance to do so is fast disappearing through the ambivalence and inaction of an entire population that sits back and watches as a few greedy individuals plunder

one of the earth's greatest resources. Hey, it's not just Bangladesh who will lose out when the remaining percentage of the Sundarbans has gone for good.

Let us face some hard facts. Given the current trends in global tourism, post 9-11, the Bangladeshi tourist industry is facing an uphill battle, and in a country as flat as this one you probably have little experience in climbing mountains while fighting. But there is some hope on that flat horizon. The highway through Bangladesh and Burma, connecting India to the rest of Southeast Asia, must be realized, and the country must be ready to cater to the flow of over-land tourists. Perhaps it will be just a trickle to start with, but throughout Asia, time and again, the same trend has been seen. Where the backpackers lead, the rest and the rich! will follow. So, be prepared...



State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Mir Mohammad Nasiruddin talks to The Star City

Tourism's changing times

SOHEL ISLAM

A cabinet sub-committee headed by the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism may be able to solve many of the problems faced by the tourism industry, believes State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Mir Mohammad Nasiruddin.

The government might form this sub-committee with an intent to ensure better coordination with representatives of the ministries of home affairs, communication, power, forest and tourism, revealed the state minister during an interview with Star City.

"It is often seen that while we are developing a tourist facility, related work of other services like electricity, roads etc. don't progress at the same pace. If the sub-committee work and coordinate effectively, it could resolve many of the problems without waiting for the government's decision and approval," said Nasiruddin.

The state minister said that a number of groundbreaking steps had to be taken first to create a better environment for the tourists in this country.

"We are yet to initiate the process of issuing port entry visa for the tourists. Because of this many are not coming to Bangladesh. Now the government is thinking of introducing it. That would create a positive change in the industry."

Nasiruddin blamed the past governments of neglecting the potential of tourism.

"During the last 30 years, no government took this industry seriously. I have initiated some steps to make it a viable sector."

The Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC) is now acting as a regulatory body of a flourishing private sector in the country.

"We have privatised some of the government controlled motels. Other than the Saikat in Chittagong, every motel is now run by private enterprises and it will remain that way. The government will be benefited through this process."

"Prabal, a motel in Cox's Bazar, used to incur a yearly loss of atleast Tk 5 to 6 lakh. After privatisation, we have received Tk 36 lakh from it last year. By handing over the motels to the private operators, we are sending a message to the BPC that if they don't pull their socks up, other facilities could also go to private entrepreneurs," said the tourism minister.

"After my assumption of the office, Cox's Bazar has gone through a sea of changes. If you go there now, you will notice a definite improvement in cleanliness and service," he added.

The recently formed Sea Beach Management Committee, which is comprised of the local MP, Cox's Bazar's administrative officials and others, is making things better said Nasiruddin.

Nasiruddin said he deserved some credit for making the BPC more modern in its outlook. "In the past, civil servants who were close to their retirements, had been employed as the BPC chairman. With that kind of mentality, could you ever expect dynamism in this sector?"

"I have ensured that the chairmanship goes to a young, dynamic and energetic person," said the state minister.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has announced three spots-- Cox's Bazar, Kuakata and the Sundarbans as special tourist zones of the country. Nasiruddin feels that there are a number of unexplored areas in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) which are just as special.

"I would like to include CHT as a special

zone as the culture and tradition of the tribal people, the beautiful landscapes and the surroundings of Kaptai etc. can be a huge attraction for the tourists.

"Two new motels with decent facilities at Khagrachari and Bandarban will be built and the Parjatan motel in Rangamati is being renovated," said the state minister.

Nasiruddin was critical of the excessive cost of accommodation in this country. While a five-star hotel room in Singapore can be availed at USD \$40, in Bangladesh, it is around \$200.

"Tell me, why would people visit our country if the rate is so high? We should give tax-rebates to the hotels so that they can charge reasonably."

Nasiruddin felt that control of historical places across the country should be put under the tourism ministry instead of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

"Most of the historical sites are now in a dilapidated condition. If we can develop these sites and arrange some income generating activities there, it would not just bring foreign currency but also keep the places in good shape."

The tourism minister informed that a tourist network has been planned which will revolve around Chittagong city, the future hub for the tourists.

"Work is already underway to convert the Saikat into a three star facility. It will be the centre of information, professional tourist guides and transportation for the tourists," said the Nasiruddin..

"I have declared 2004 a year for the tourists and I expect a good flow of visitors to Bangladesh," added the state minister.

A Sri Lankan in Dhaka

Bangladesh, what a place to go? A question asked by many when I decided to come here. Prone to floods and other natural disasters, I was told that there would be nothing else but fish for food.

Were these the reasons not to come to Bangladesh? I guess not and now that I have been here for almost a decade, I have found myself more accustomed to everything I was told about Bangladesh.

Living in the posh, diplomatic area of Gulshan in the city, one would think that it was the most beautifully kept and disciplined part of the country. No it is not, and coming from a small country like Sri Lanka, I could see many differences between the two.

I expected Dhaka, the capital, to be clean and at least partly pollution-free. Well I should not have had high expectations. After all, Bangladesh is just another developing country as Sri Lanka, and we all come from the same region.

Yet I could not help but wonder, why I never saw tourists in the city. The commercial capital Colombo is in abundance of tourists, even though the flow of tourists was slack during the peak periods of its ethnic troubles. Walking in the city of Colombo one could see the sojourners at almost every nook and corner, a sight I miss very much in Dhaka. Whenever I found a foreigner in Dhaka, the person was here, either for work or on some official business. But then how could I compare Dhaka to Colombo?

What attraction do I find in the city of Dhaka? Other than the free open space of the parliament complex, the Ramna Park, the National Museum, the Wonderland Amusement Park, the Fantasy Kingdom and a long drive along the Ashulia Road, there is nothing else to be found.

Colombo, a modern city still has reminders of its colonial past. Its busy market places, Buddhist and Hindu temples and mosques

contrast with the high-rises, smart shopping malls and a multi-national chain of hotels is a blend of old and new, east and west. About seven five-star hotels apart from four, three, two-star hotels, are in plenty. State-of-the-art communications and cyber services are available too.

The Dutch period and Colombo National Museum, the old and new Parliament Houses, and the Zoo are sightseeing highlights. Colombo offers visits to one of the world's leading tea auctions, seasonal Buddhist and Hindu pageants, international cricket tournaments, plush casinos and evening entertainment.

Good roads and rail transport link Colombo with all tourist resorts. Many cruise lines call at the Colombo sea-port.

Dhaka lacks the tourism infrastructure - no suitable accommodation, no sightseeing sights in the city, no evening entertainment and no religious pageants. Splendours such as the Ahsan Manzil and the Lalbagh Fort,

which were left behind by the Moghul rule and many historical structures, have been neglected due to maintenance faults. Narrow streets and inconvenience in travelling to such places of value has once again made these forgotten sites. If the old buildings were restored to its original beauty, Dhaka, the once modern city, no doubt would regain its lost beauty and flourish. A rickshaw ride round the city on a quiet summer evening would be an attraction one would not want to miss. Dhaka's hospitality and delicious Bengali food will make one want to visit it over and over again.

Yet, after nine years, I am still in Dhaka. I love it with its entire have and have-nots. Hopefully the authorities will do what it takes, to make tourism a booming industry in this country, so that all could proudly stand up and shout "Amar Sonar Bangla!"

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Not a paradise for backpackers

CITY CORRESPONDENT

What happens to a backpacker when he arrives in Bangladesh? In most cases, as a foreigner coming from Europe, America or some Asian country, he (or she) is shown an expensive hotel to get through the night. In Bangladesh there are hardly any decent hotels within the range of these not-so-well-off tourists. Backpackers, forming a great number of the global tourism industry, are either forced to rent a cockroach infested hotel room for a very cheap rate or go for a top hotel, which he often finds hard to afford. In the districts outside Dhaka, the visitor however does not have any choice but to rent whatever is available. In some of the district headquarters, tourists might find some decent accommodation but in

many other cases hotel rooms are dirty and unhygienic. In rural areas a backpacker would probably feel a lot safer with his accommodation. He would definitely find it difficult to fence off offers from the hospitable villagers. He just has to be careful to choose which one to accept. Here, the home of the village chairman or a member of the Union Parishad could be safe and comfortable.

One of the main ingredients to attract tourists is accommodation. Backpackers arriving in Bangladesh are usually experienced ones, who arrive here with precise guidelines. Bangladesh has not been able to attract thousands of first-time visitors to Southeast Asia. It is due to lack of a whole range of items, including good, cheap accommodation, western backpackers look for.



The deltaic plains of Bangladesh and its hard working people with a rich cultural heritage could attract tourists from all over the world.

Tourism industry on the rise

AVIK SANWAR RAHMAN

Bangladesh is expected to receive 2.16 lakh tourists this year followed by 2.27 lakh in 2004 and 2.42 lakh in 2005, according to the Pacific Asian Travel Association (PATA) forecasts.

Tourism can be part of collective efforts to cut global poverty, says Shahabuddin Ahmad, advisor to PATA, a multinational non-profit tourist organisation, of which Bangladesh is a member.

Over the last 50 years, tourism has emerged as a force having economic, social and political impact because of its cross-border nature.

The number of tourists trav-

elled beyond their countries has increased from 25 million in 1950 to 644 million in 2000.

The economic importance of tourism has proved so high that it is rated one of the five top export categories in 83 countries and main source of foreign exchange earnings in 38 countries.

America recorded a 27.27 per cent growth of arrivals before September 11, 2001 whereas Europe recorded the fastest growth with a substantial increase in arrivals by 9.01 per cent.

According to the 2001 Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation report, India among South Asian countries contributes the highest number of tourists, which is 37.69 per cent of the arrivals in Bangla-

desh. Europe accounted for 24.22 per cent of the tourist arrivals in Bangladesh, with the UK having 67.92 per cent of the European share.

Europe and South Asia together accounted for 69.77 per cent of the tourist arrivals in Bangladesh.

The remaining 30.23 per cent were contributed by the US with 9.28 per cent, the Middle East with 1.84 per cent, East Asia and the Pacific together with 18.31 per cent, Africa with 0.75 per cent and other regions with 0.05 per cent.

International airports continue to be the main ports of entry with 76.46 per cent arrivals in 2001, up from 76.06 per cent in 2000, and

the rest 23.54 per cent in 2001 used the land ports, down from 23.94 per cent in 2000.

People travelling to Bangladesh mainly for tourism account for 18.56 per cent and 16.47 per cent for business.

Last year, the world summit on sustainable development in Johannesburg, Africa, resolved that tourism should play an active role in reducing the global poverty 50 per cent by 2015.

It is in line with that resolution that the World Tourism Organisation has adopted the slogan "Tourism -- a driving force for poverty alleviation, job creation and social harmony" as the theme of World Tourism Day on September 27, 2003.

Foreign exchange earnings from tour other travels (Year 2001)	
Year 2001	Taka in million (Total)
BUSINESS TRAVEL	83.20
Official travel	1.50
Other official travel	41.00
Commercial travel	35.10
Non-official delegate	5.60
PERSONAL TRAVEL	2570.60
Medical	Nil
Student	118.70
Trainees	39.70
Excursionist	1.00
Tourists	2264.10
Pilgrimage	1.00
Sports & Culture	0.30
Passage money	Nil
Ticket under WE-A/C	6.40
Ticket outside WE- A/C	68.90
Other NIE	70.50
Other NIE TOTAL (taka million)	2653.80

Source : Bangladesh Bank