

Tourism in Bangladesh

Enchanting Place, Chittagong

THE Chittagong Hill Tracts is divided into three districts, namely Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Bandarban. From Chittagong a 77 km road amidst green fields and winding hills will take you to Rangamati, the headquarters of the Rangamati Hill Tracts which is a wonderful repository of scenic splendours with flora and fauna of varied descriptions.

The Hill Tracts is divided into four valleys surrounded by the Feni, Karnaphuli, Sangu (Sankhu) and Matamuhuri rivers and their tributaries. The ranges or hills of the Hill Tracts rise steeply thus looking far more impressive than what their height would imply and extend in long narrow ridges. The highest peaks on the northern side are Thangnang, Langliang and Khantiang while those on the southern side are Ramu,

Taung, Keekradang (3000 ft. highest in Bangladesh), Mowdok Mual, Rang Tlang and Mowdok Tlang.

Famous Kaptai Lake, the largest "man-made" lake, spreading over 680 sq km of crystal water flanked by hills and evergreen forests lie in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The lake was formed when the Karnaphuli river dam (153 feet high 1800 feet long crest) was built for the purpose of hydro-electric power project at Kaptai. The old Rangamati town was submerged under lake water and a new town had to be built later. The lake is full of fish and provides facilities for cruising, swimming and skiing. There are also facilities for angling and short trip by sampan, local name for country boats.

Tribal life
The inhabitants of the Hill

Tracts are mostly tribal. Life of the tribal people is extremely fascinating. Majority of them are Buddhists and the rest are Hindus, Christians and Animists. Despite the bondage of religion, elements of primitiveness is strongly displayed in their rites, rituals and everyday life. The tribal families are matriarchal. The women-folk are more hard-working than the males and they are the main productive force.

The tribal people are extremely self-reliant, they grow their own food, their girls weave their own clothes and generally speaking, they live a simple life. Each tribe has its own dialect, distinctive dress and rites and rituals. The common feature is their way of life which still speak of their primitive past. "Jhoom cultivation" on the hill tops is their main occupation. Some of

them take pride in hunting with bows and arrows. Tribal women are very skilful in making beautiful handicrafts. Tribal people are generally peace loving, honest and hospitable. They usually greet a tourist with a smile.

Rangamati

Rangamati, the focal point of Chittagong Hill Tracts is connected with Chittagong by a 77 km metalled road. The town-ship is located on the western bank of the Kaptai Lake. Rangamati is a favourite holiday resort because of its beautiful landscape, scenic beauty, its flora and fauna, homespun textiles, bamboo handbags, flower vases and silver jewellery and the tribal men and women who fashion them, are other attractions. The tribal handicraft centre run by BSCIC produces many varieties of souvenirs made of bamboo, cane, straw, textile and leather. For the tourists the attractions of Rangamati are numerous, tribal life, fishing, speed-boat cruising, water-skiing, hiking or merely enjoying nature as it is.

Sylhet's Delights

NESTLED in the picturesque Surma valley amidst scenic tea plantations and lush green tropical forests, Sylhet is a time attraction for all tourists visiting Bangladesh. Lying between the Khasias and the Jaintia hills on the north, and the Tripura hills on the south, Sylhet breaks the monotony of the flatness of this land by a multitude of terraced tea gardens, rolling countryside and the exotic flora and fauna. Here the thick tropical forests abound with many species of wild life, scented orange groves and luxuriant pineapple plantations spread their aroma around the typical hearth and homes of the Manipuri Tribal maidens famous for their dance.

The Sylhet valley is formed by a beautiful, winding pair of rivers named the Surma and the Kushiara both of which are fed by innumerable hill streams from the north and the south. The valley has a

good number of haors which are big natural depressions. During winter these haors are vast stretches of green land, but in the rainy season they turn into a turbulent sea. These haors provide a sanctuary to the millions of migratory birds who fly from across the Himalayas to avoid the severe cold of Siberia.

Sylhet has also a very interesting and rich history. Before the conquest by the Muslims, it was ruled by local chieftains. In 1303, the great Saint Hazrat Shah Jalal came to Sylhet from Delhi with a band of 360 disciples to preach Islam and defeated the then Raja Gour Gobinda. Sylhet thus became a district of saints, shrines and daring but virile people.

Its rich potentialities became easily attractive and the 18th century Englishmen made their fortune in tea plantation about 80 km from Sylhet town connected by road and rail. Srimangal, which is known as the tea capital of Bangladesh, is the actual centre of the area. For miles and miles around, the visitor can see the tea gardens spread like a green carpet over the plain land or on the sloping hills. A visit to the tea plantation in Sylhet is a memorable experience. Sylhet, the tea granary of Bangladesh, not only has over 150 tea gardens but also proudly possesses three largest tea gardens in the world both in area and production.

Among the several places of historical interest in Sylhet



Hilly belles: Manipuri dancers

Manipuri Dance

An interesting feature of Sylhet region is the aboriginal tribes such as the Tipperas, the Manipuris, Khasis and Garos who still live in their primitive ways in the hills, practising their age-old rites, rituals, customs and traditions. During festivals such as, Rash Leela (Full-moon night in February) and Dojatra, the attractive young girls dressed in colourful robes, dance with the male members of their choice & love. The Manipuris perform their famous dance, based on allegorical love themes of the ancient mythology.



Rangamati: Bridge at Picnic Hill.

Five-star Views

By Rahat Fahmida

"THE tourists who come to Bangladesh definitely do not want to go around the city in a Limousine or Toyota Cressida. They would love to ride a scooter or rickshaw, or if it could be arranged—a bullock cart. And this would definitely be a novelty to them," said Andrew J. McBurnie, general manager of the Pan Pacific chain of hotels in city—Sonargaon.

In an interview with The Daily Star Mr. McBurnie expressed his concern at the drawbacks of tourism in this country. Having served in this sector in 23 other countries he said one of his most exciting experiences were in Saudi Arabia, where he was in the early 70s. It was a time when the tourist season was almost at its peak and there were many hotels all around. So in order to exist in this competitive surrounding he had to be creative to attract good number of customers.

Regarding Bangladesh, he pin-pointed some major, but other wise overlooked areas in tourism. The fact which he initially and repeatedly stressed was, "The private sector in this country has to come forward, rather than put the earnest on the government to launch multi-million dollar projects. For example, it is the tourism and travel agencies, and Bangladeshi entrepreneurs who should take the initiative. Only then the government would jump on the band wagon. The ministry of civil aviation and tourism will surely back them up."

The general manager of Hotel Sonargaon was sure that tourism is a profitable business for the local entrepreneurs. As he stated that this was mainly because, at the moment there are lot of travellers coming in to Bangladesh, but very few tourists.

People come in here on business and later divert their route to places like—Nepal or Bangkok. And the only way to stop them is to give them the right guidance and proper care and hospitality.

During this past one year since Mr. McBurnie has been in Bangladesh, he found that this country is rich with talents that has to be exposed. For example, people, especially foreigners know about 'Nakshi Kantha' and 'Jamdani'. But where does one go to see for themselves how these intricate works of art are done? "The immense talent in your country is not just being tapped. There is no more time to waste or wait. People have to go back to ABCs and start doing well. One has to remember, as proven by a study, that if someone has a bad time, they will tell five people. Whereas if someone has a good experience, they will tell 20. Hence, there is plenty of opportunity for improvement and catch up with the lost tourists for all these years," concluded McBurnie.

In the last one year here Mr. McBurnie too has exciting experiences of quite regularly spear fishing at Harirampur and also been out with snake charmers and caught snakes. It is a curious fact, of which there is no satisfactory explanation, that enthusiasm for country life and love of natural scenery are strongest and most widely diffused. It is always exciting and interesting to know how delightful, how queer and fantastic people are, at a distance!

needs to be done.

I understand that one of the aid bodies has developed a Tourism Master Plan for Bangladesh but at this stage it has not been made public, nor discussed with the key operators.

For a tourism industry to develop, there has to be a plan and there has to be someone with international experience, to make it happen and they will need a commitment from the government for total support to such a plan.

Bangladesh at the moment cannot offer the following key factors to international tourists:

- A good and reliable transport system.
- A safe and hygienic environment.
- Internationally accepted standards of hotel and resorts.
- Unique tourists destinations.
- International standard duty free and local craft shopping.
- A politically stable international image.

What Bangladesh should do:
Take the tourism Master Plan, make it public, review it with the key operators, refine it to the market, get international assistance and make it happen.

These types of Master Plans are normally very thorough and address all the issues and as such should be used as a starting point.

Whether key private and public sectors are doing enough:
No, I don't believe any of the key sectors have done all they can to develop tourism in Bangladesh.

This view is mainly based on the fact that everyone is taking after their own interest and not working together for the overall development of Tourism in Bangladesh.

The current situation is basically a result of No National Commitment, No Master Plan, No International Experience and everything being too difficult and until these factors are resolved, nothing will improve.

In summary, Bangladesh can have a tourist industry. It may never be No. 1 foreign exchange earners but it can contribute significantly to the countries economy, but to achieve it one has to start from scratch.

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From his vantage point as the general manager of the Dhaka Sheraton, John L. Easton made the following observations on tourism in Bangladesh:

Causes behind Bangladesh's failure to attract tourists:

I do not believe Bangladesh has failed to develop tourism. I think the problem lies in the fact, nobody fully realises what tourism is all about and what

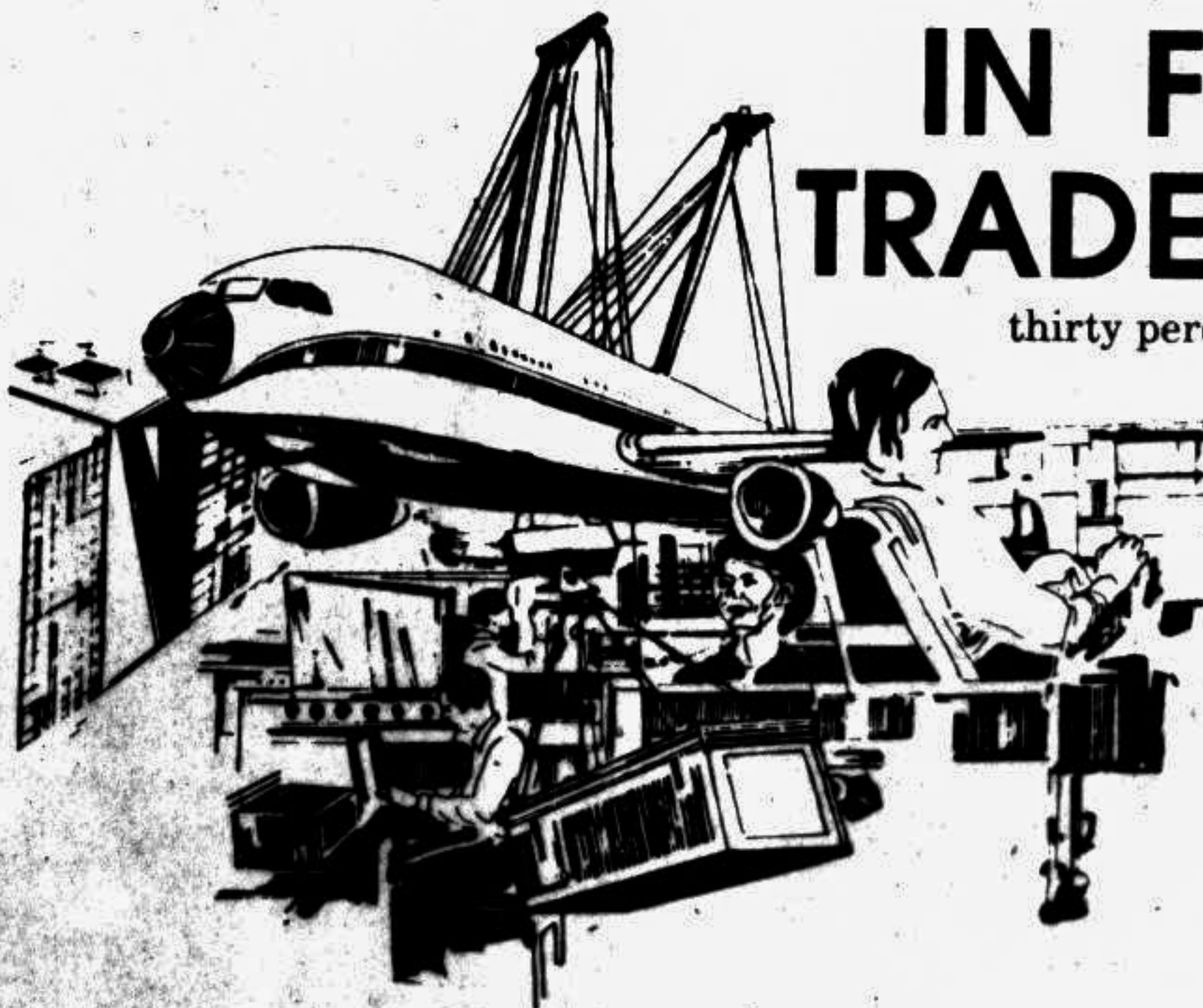
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