



Travel & Tourism



Rocket Steamer to Mongla

by Gemini Wahhaj

AFTER an unbelievable car ride through the twisted streets of Old Dhaka, resplendent with palatial mansions, carved verandahs, and streetside bazaars, we reached the Sadarghat ferry station at about 5 pm. I was struggling to get over the bridge with my two heavy bags, when I looked ahead of me and gasped. There were hundreds of ferries, rocket steamers, launches, and more kinds of bigger boats than I can describe. The bigger boats rocked majestically on the water, as people milled about on their roofs.

We entered our boat, the Gazi Rocket Steamer, which apparently provides the best out on the deck. The sun was just setting, a beautiful bright orange disc on the waters. I fished out my camera again. Below deck, small boats passed by surprisingly quickly on restlessly shimmering waters, manned by a standing sailor. Ferry bazars sold bright yellow bananas, cauliflower, and sandwich bread. A young man arrived with a bag over his shoulder, followed closely by a family lugging a household of belongings. So these are what

reflected off the waters. Then came the Wheel billboard, showing a huge green Wheel soap. A cool breeze floated off the waters as I stood on deck. Slowly the city and the port drifted away. The noise of the engine died out, and all I could hear were the waters and the boats paddling in the night.

The Botany students came out on deck just as we were passing under the Buriganga bridge. They spent a great deal of time searching for the mpon

denits were sent off deck for fear of catching a cold. I had retired myself to my first class cabin. I thought it very pretty. A set of curtained windows opened out on the deck. The bed itself was long and narrow, with a fan overhead. I had my own sink with a Cosco face soap, and a side table with a bottle of mineral water and glass. But soon, jokes about Noakhali beckoned me back on deck. It was about 10:20 pm. The students were back on deck, bundled in sweaters and shawls, and identical white caps announcing Educational Tour 95.

on the current that followed us, looking like a sea-monster. A narrow red bridge on stilts stood resplendent in the bleak landscape. And then the scene changed again to a densely populated bank with huge trees. We passed Shekherhat high school, and one of the professors smiled. "I taught here for two days," he said. Two boys rowed a boat, while a woman in black burkha sat in the middle. A sailor with orange shawl and blue checked lungi followed. Red bougainvillea against green trees. "Not a local flower," the professors warned. A boat with earthenware piled eight stories high, held by bamboo walls. The Azan again, sounding loud on the waters. Music from another ship "Sagar One", a resting cow, a dog on its hind legs, all as still as the landscape.



Steamers and launches at Sadarghat, Dhaka

service between Dhaka and Khulna. We passed the third class cabin and climbed to our first class quarters on the second floor. I was travelling with the Botany department of Dhaka University, bound for an expedition to the Sundarbans. Their project was to collect data for a field project, mine to get as many travel stories as I could note down.

The first class consists of a huge lounge with a TV set, dining tables and couches, and separate cabins that open out on the deck. The teachers sat around the table planning the Botany trip, while I escaped

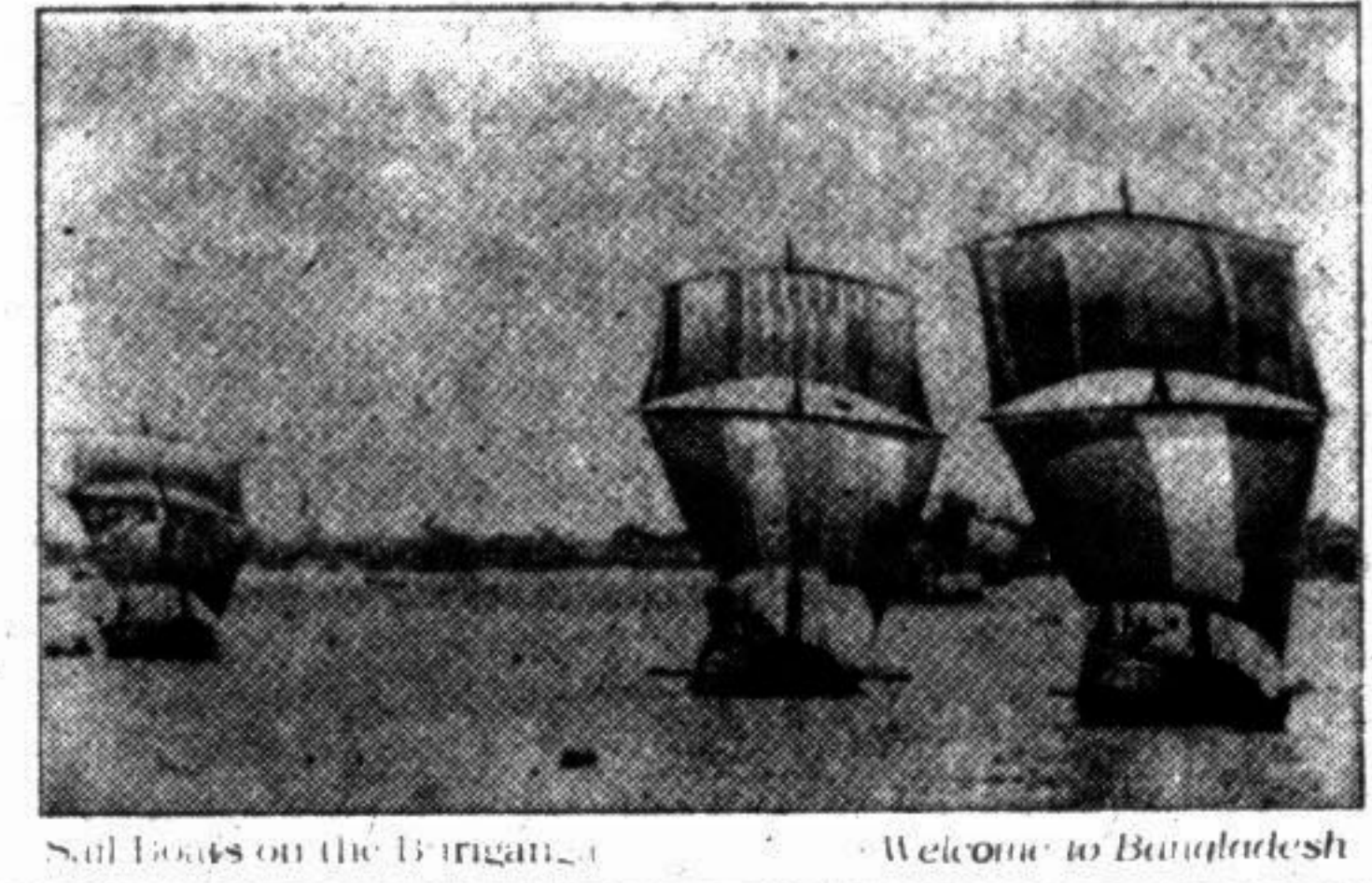
apparently it was two days after the Purnima. But they walked all around the deck in vain, no moon was seen. A map on the wall of the first class lounge made our route clear. We were now on the Buriganga. Later, the Buriganga and Dhaleswari would mix together to form the Meghna. The teachers sat inside and talked, alternating between scientific discussions and university stories. We watched a Humayun Ahmed drama at night and awoke the German tourist on board. Dinner was a sumptuous feast cooked by the field trip party's personal cook. The stu-

We were approaching Chandpur. The moon was visible at last. Not just visible, but resplendent in a pitch black sky, riding silently on the waters. Its reflection stretched from the horizon all the way to our deck, right on the waters below us. We approached an island, the moonlight at its back, and then passed it. It was absolutely dark, so we couldn't see anything. But the sounds of a *milad* sounded over and over again on the silent waters as we moved away. We reached Chandpur at about 10:30 pm. Red, green, white, and yellow lights shone at a very busy-looking port. The lights rippled on the waters in the night in surrealistic patterns. On land itself were old open buildings, crowded shops, and parked boats. We heard sirens again, and noisy engines. Our boat kept turning as we parked, so that we saw the moon on all sides, ahead of us, then on the side, and then behind us. We huddled in the cold, enrapt by this play of color and dark, silence and noise. The motor engine itself, which would be a disturbing addition to the various noises of a city, was now the sole sound. It played itself like music, bursting out upon the silence at times, heard in groans from a standing boat, or on a launch as if it chased the silently moving canoes.

We stopped at Barisal at 5:20 am. I stood on top of the landing bridge and watched the passengers get off. It was still dark and cold. Families emerged on the bridge below

in woollen coats, dragging heavy bags — a man in red shawl, white *punjabi* and blue checked *lungi*, a woman in a green printed sari and embroidered red shawl carrying a sleeping child over her shoulder. For breathtaking whole minutes, I watched this silent procession of color in the dull light of the single bulb on deck. A tin building proclaimed BIWTC Barisal. Workers carried ladders and furniture on board. Passengers boarded as the Azan sounded. Far away on the land, red and yellow electric lights glittered on a building — either an early morning wedding or a very bright town. Disjointed instructions and shouts followed the passengers and furniture on board, and then we began to move again.

When I woke up, we were in Jhalakati, passing through a man-made canal, with high land on either side of us. Rickshaws and people passed on these. Coconut trees, banana trees, pineapple groves, flowers, and then the embankment receded further. A small boat danced on the waves, carrying *dhap*, and in places land had been dug out, leaving huge trees standing on just cubes of earth. The landscape changed constantly: date palms showed in the foreground and rice paddies beyond, mud-covered fishermen collected their spoils off the nets, dropping them into buckets, and cowboy walked his cow leisurely. The sun traced out the wave patterns



Small boats on the Buriganga. Welcome to Bangladesh

Travel Briefs

Baby born in mid-air: A Kuwait Airways B747, bound for Bangkok and Manila, made an emergency landing at the Dubai airport recently after a Filipino on board gave birth to Mohammed, a healthy two-and-a-half kg baby boy. Fatima Mamadra, 35, a housemaid from Kuwait, went into labour on board flight KU411 soon after it took off from Kuwait at 12:20am. — *Monitor*

ZIA services unsatisfactory: Representatives of the foreign airlines operating in Bangladesh have expressed their dissatisfaction over the services provided by Bangladesh Biman at the Zia International Airport (ZIA). The services do not commensurate with the handling charges, which are disappointingly high. It is said that the situation did not improve despite continued representation to appropriate authorities. Foreign Airline Representative Committee (FAREPCO) has sent a letter to the state Minister of Civil Aviation regarding this matter.

Air crew awarded: Gulf Air on January 21, 1995 awarded five cabin crew for the part they played in delivering a baby on a recent Gulf Air flight. Head of inflight services Tony Finlayson Green presented the crew with tokens of the Airlines appreciation at Gulf Head Quarters in Bahrain. — *Monitor*

Chinese airlines in red: After 20 years of dictating conditions to their customers, Chinese airlines are facing unprecedented losses, domestic newspaper said. The Economic Information Daily said only three of China's nine major airlines are making money and 12 of 13 local airlines are in the red, with their occupancy ratios in the first eight months of 1994 the lowest in 10 years. — *Monitor*

Ctg Port to improve services: The present management of the Chittagong port has initiated a number of reforms for extending better and prompt services to the exporters and importers to meet the increasing trend of merchandise. The initiatives have been taken under the leadership of the present chairman, Mr Md Omar Hadi. He took a number of steps with a view to developing it as one of the best sea ports in Asia. — *Bangladesh Shipping Times*

BSC increases activities: The national shipping line of Bangladesh, BSC has increased its activities during the fiscal year 1993-94. It has increased its income in Bangladesh-Singapore-Bangladesh feeder service, Bangladesh-Far East-Japan and Bangladesh-Pakistan-West Asia are the other major routes where the corporation improved its earnings. — *Bangladesh Shipping Times*

Eurostar train service draws Europeans closer: The three hour journey between Paris and London, offered twice a day in each direction, heralded a new age in continental travel. It will draw European peoples closer together effectively by establishing a land link with Britain. Plans call for the high-speed rail network to be expanded across the continent. Ardent Europanists believe that cutting down time and distance between the continent's urban centres will break down national barriers — both real and psychological. — *Bangladesh Shipping Times*

Sonargaon employee nominated: Kazi Nazmul Hossain, a telephone operator of front office dept., has been nominated to compete in the Pan Pacific Hotels and Resorts Employee of the month 1994 award. Nazmul was also nominated earlier ten times by his department to be the best employee of the month. — *Sonargaon Tattler*

New AI flight to London: A weekly Air India flight on the Madras-London sector was introduced recently, fulfilling the long-felt need of the travel trade and passengers of this metropolis. The flight, which is being operated on Tuesdays and Fridays was inaugurated at the Madras airport. — *Monitor*

Swissair flies directly to Taiwan: Swissair will begin flying a new direct route from Switzerland to Taiwan from April. In the first direct air links between the two countries. An agreement signed in Switzerland will allow three direct flights a week between Taipei and Zurich. — *Monitor*

Dragonair Manager for Kota Kinabalu: Dragonair has appointed Olivia Wong, as Manager, Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei. Wong will be based in Kota Kinabalu and will be responsible for the operational, marketing and sales functions of Dragonair's East Malaysian destinations. — *Monitor*

Qantas points at Accor Asia Pacific: New to the Qantas frequent-flyer plan (FFP) is Accor Asia Pacific, a chain with 63 hotels around the region. Members will receive 500 points per night as well as a number of other benefits. — *Monitor*

Best supervisor of the month: Jones Games, head cook of Sonargaon hotel, was nominated the best supervisor for the month of December 1994. Unfortunately he expired prematurely due to fatal heart attack on January 21, at 7:30am. He joined Sonargaon Pan Pacific hotel on March 1, 1981 as head cook. — *Sonargaon Tattler*

BA appeals against court decision: British Airways (BA) recently confirmed it was seeking leave to appeal against a decision by a US court that Virgin Atlantic can proceed with an action against it over the so-called "dirty tricks" affair. A judge ruled on January 3 that Virgin could proceed with a one-billion-dollar (640 million pound) anti-trust lawsuit against BA in the US courts. BA has filed papers with the judge in New York but the request needs two authorizations before being presented at the US court. The process may require six to ten months. — *Monitor*

Emirates honours agents: 1994 was a very memorable year for the Emirates. It has, for the first time, made a net profit of US\$ 24.39 million. The airline will acquire two more aircrafts this year, which will allow them to serve people better. The senior General Managers of commercial operations and of cargo, Emirates handed out awards to top 10 travel agents and to top ten cargo agents, respectively. — *Monitor*

Emirates' Luxury Programmes: Emirates, the international airline of the UAE, has become the first carrier to offer complimentary luxury breaks in Dubai for First and Business Class passengers flying between the Far East and Europe. This brand new, exclusive travel incentive has just been launched in markets throughout the Far East and Europe, and is valid until May 31.

It offers Emirates' First and Business Class passengers two nights complimentary hotel accommodation and a choice of complimentary leisure activities in Dubai, the luxury break offer may be used on the outward or inward journey. Emirates' luxury break offer is applicable on normal IATA First and Business Class fares, for one-way, a round trip or a circle trip. — *Emirates*

New shipping rules: New navigation safety rules on international shipping in the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles Straits have been successfully implemented. For the first six months of implementation, all Turkish and foreign ships have adhered to the rules. Turkish put the rules into effect on July 1, saying they were needed because of the increase of maritime traffic since 1936. About 60 percent of the 45,000 ships which pass through the straits each year carry natural gas, chemicals, oil derivative and nuclear wastes. — *Monitor*

STRESS-FREE TRAVEL

CAN the impact of jet lag be softened? Absolutely, say the experts. There are lots of things you can do to minimise the effects of long distance travel. Some of them are listed below. All can be helpful in coping with the discomforts caused by crossing time zones.

Start out fit and rested. Wear loose clothing and comfortable shoes. Once on board, loosen that belt, slip off those shoes, wriggle your toes and relax.

Eat lightly before, during and after your journey. High fibre foods such as fruit and vegetables and carbohydrates like bread, rice and pasta are easier to digest, can help you relax and will encourage your digestive system to operate properly.

Avoid alcohol and caffeine the day before you leave and while you are in the air. Inflight, drink lots of water and fruit juice.

Apply a good moisturiser before you leave and during the flight to keep your skin from drying out. Wear glasses instead of contact lenses.

On arrival, go for a brisk walk or gentle jog. Get as much sunlight as you can. Natural light will help your body clock reset itself more quickly.

PACKING: Don't put the following items into your checked baggage: cash, jewellery, passports, keys, tour vouchers, business papers, medicines or objects that are fragile, perishable or irreplaceable.

Put a tag inside your baggage with your name, home address, and home and work telephone numbers plus an address and telephone number where you can be reached in your destination city.

CHECK-IN: Don't check-in at the last minute. You might make the flight but your baggage may not.

CLAIMING: Many bags look alike. Claim yours by check number or name tag.

If a bag arrives open, unlocked or visibly damaged, check immediately to see if anything is missing.

Always report any baggage problems before leaving the airport.

The following exercises will help you combat travel fatigue. All can be conducted in the comfort of your seat without causing inconvenience to your fellow passengers. Sit up straight, breathe normally and, unless instructed otherwise, do the exercises slowly and evenly. Do only as much as is comfortable for you. Always check with your doctor before embarking on this or any other exercise programme.

- 1) Move head slowly to the left, hold for 5 seconds then slowly to the right, hold for 5 seconds, return to centre. Do 5 times.
- 2) Drop chin slowly towards chest, hold for 5 seconds, return to centre. Do 5 times.
- 3) Touch left ear with left shoulder, hold for 5 seconds, touch right ear with right shoulder, hold for 5 seconds, return to centre. Do 5 times.
- 4) Rotate left shoulder 10 times. Rotate right shoulder 10 times. Roll both shoulders forward 5 times. Roll both shoulders backward 5 times.
- 5) With both hands held in front of you, form loose fists. Open and close fast 10 times.
- 6) With both hands held in front of you in loose fists, rotate left hand 5 times, rotate right hand 5 times, rotate both hands 5 times.
- 7) Squeeze buttocks together, hold for count of 5, release. Do 5 times.
- 8) Extend both legs. Point left foot forward. Move foot up and back. Return. Point right foot forward. Move foot up and back. Return. Do 10 times.
- 9) Raise left foot. Rotate in inward direction 5 times and in outward direction 5 times. Lower to ground. Repeat with right foot.
- 10) Point both feet slightly inward so that the big toes are touching. Press together, hold for count of 5, release. Do 5 times.

Travel Editor's Note:

How About Paying Guests ?

STAYING at someone's house as a paying guest would be an excellent way to experience Bangladesh, not only for the foreign visitor but also any local Bangladeshi sightseeing in another part of the country.

In Europe and America, tourist bureaux carry a comprehensive list of hotels, motels and other accommodations of every price range, including private homes willing to put up a guest. Descriptions will include room size, facilities, rent, and such details as the provision of breakfast. The bureau also provides a phone number, address and detailed instructions to the home. Such bureaux are conveniently located near airports, train stops, bus terminals, and rest areas on the highway — wherever a weary traveller may get off a public transport. And the paying guest accommodations are just people eager to show the local attractions to a tourist and make some extra money.

While staying at a home in Khulna, I noticed many things I would have missed in a hotel. Food was cooked on a clay oven, dating took place across verandas, and bathing at noon, standing outside in the sun. A singing teacher climbed over the roof of her house to cross to ours in order to give a nine year old her daily voice lessons. I also climbed up on the roof, and picked *kool* and guava from trees. These are all memorable experiences for me.

Paying Guest homes need to have a few basic accommodations. Homes in Bangladesh catering to the westerner should have proper bathroom facilities, towels, toilet paper, provisions for hot water, good clean drinking water, and a room affording enough privacy. Home owners can offer fishing at a nearby pond, walking trips on abandoned railway tracks or to a nearby nursery (Bangladeshi suburbs are rich in nurseries), the local schoolyard, or, best of all, a ride on a canoe with a singing sailor.

— *Travel and Tourism Editor*

Airport Repairs May Continue For Sometime

Zia International airport needs to be repaired. Unless the runways are repaired, they will soon fall short of the international standard for landing or take-off. The problem is that repair plans have stretched long beyond the original schedule. Repairs should have started in November, but actual work may not start till April. At the moment, daily preparations consist only of dumping stones and pebbles on the runway.

The airport closes down every night from midnight till 8 am for repairs. Every airline has had to change its schedule to accommodate the new hours, especially the European airlines, since most of them come in at night. The most affected airline may be Biman, since many of its flights used to arrive late at night or early in the morning.

During the day, the already crowded airport is chaotic. Sometimes ten flights come in

at a time, a situation that the airport is just not equipped to handle. The visitors crowd outside the airport has to be seen to be believed. — *GW*



Traffic jam of Dhaka-Tangail highway. Rolling countryside beyond. — *A.K.M. Enamul Huq*

The Bangladeshi Highway

BANGLADESHI highways are different from the expressways of other countries. First of all, the Bangladeshi highway is just an intercity road no wider than Airport Road in Dhaka. Secondly, it accommodates four different speeds of vehicles. Common travellers of the road are trucks, buses, private cars, cycle vans, rickshaws, bicycles and even a few live transports.

Nevertheless, road travel in the country can be an interesting experience. Two-way traffic moves on the same lane — after all, the road can only fit one vehicle. When a head-on collision is imminent, one vehicle will simply move off the road into the fields on the side. A common sight is a long line of cars waiting for an impromptu road repair, while workmen (and women) pour some tar on the road. Honking horns, a rare sound on the highways of other nations, also make the Bangladeshi road unique. At night, the lights on some roads are so dim that a moonlit ride becomes literally just that — driving solely by the light of the moon. Another common fear at night is *da-coits*. It is unheard of for a woman to travel as the only passenger in a car, even when she is accompanied by a male

chauffeur. The tree-lined road boasts coconut and banana trees. The road is bordered by miles and miles of beautiful fertile land.

The scenery changes from muddy fields to lush green and then again to mustard fields. As you travel, you will come across partly fields, sugarcane farms, fish cultures and brick baking factories. Bangladesh landscape is unique in its monotony. It is almost uniformly dull in color, varying from mud to different gradations of green and grey, and yet it is starkly beautiful. Relief occurs in the bright colors of a woman's shawl, a farmer's checked *lungi*, or the setting red sun.

Travelling by road in Bangladesh is an interesting experience. The landscape is beautiful and the journey itself is bound to be eventful. But the very sights that afford so much excitement may cause for alarm. Every avoided accident is a miracle. While it may take time to eradicate the problems of highway robbery and protest blockades, it is high time to make the roads wider, improve the quality of road surface, and light the way of the night traveller. — *GW*