



Karl-Gerd Meyer, who is on an Asian tour for a year, writes to the Daily Star about his experiences in Bangladesh.

DEAR Gemini: Perhaps you remember, we met on rocket steamer Gazi on its way from Dhaka to Khulna and talked sometime about travel and tourism in Bangladesh. I made up my mind to write some lines. Perhaps you can use these ideas and views of a German tourist.

Let me start with a few words about ideas connected with Bangladesh in Germany. Primarily, the country is attributed only minor importance. It appears, in mass media almost only as a source of report about catastrophes: floods, cyclones, and their consequences. Even school books focus on natural disasters. But they also mention that Bangladesh is a country of low labor costs, making it attractive as a work base for industrialized states.

There is hardly any knowledge about your working agriculture and the remarkably well-developed and maintained infrastructure (transport, communication, energy, water, etc.) So I was curious if this one-sided view gave a fair picture.

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When deciding to travel 3-4 weeks in Bangladesh, I did not have in mind a sight-seeing tour (as in India), or special activities (as in Nepal), but I just wanted to find out under which conditions it would be possible to see/experience Bangladesh. In contrast to the other countries I mentioned, I had no concrete ideas about possibilities and difficulties awaiting me (despite reading the Lonely Planet Guide: Bangladesh).

Before following my itinerary, here are some general comments concerning the organization of my Bangladeshi journey.

Transport: I found organizing transport astonishingly easy. In contrast to Germany, you have a well-developed system of long-distance buses, which run frequently and are extremely cheap by European standards. Whereas nearly all roads are in good repair or un-

Letter from A German Tourist

der construction, the buses themselves do not fulfill all the traveler's wishes. This is understandable, considering your economic situation.

I also tried a domestic flight (Rajshahi to Dhaka) and long-distance rail transport (Dhaka to Sylhet, and Sylhet to Chittagong) - quite comfortable.

quality. I tried nearly all kinds of hotels (from Taka 70 to Taka 1200). What was common to practically all places: they were clean - and noisy. Also, the expensive hotels should be of higher quality: the service standards there are quite behind international standard. In some places, you

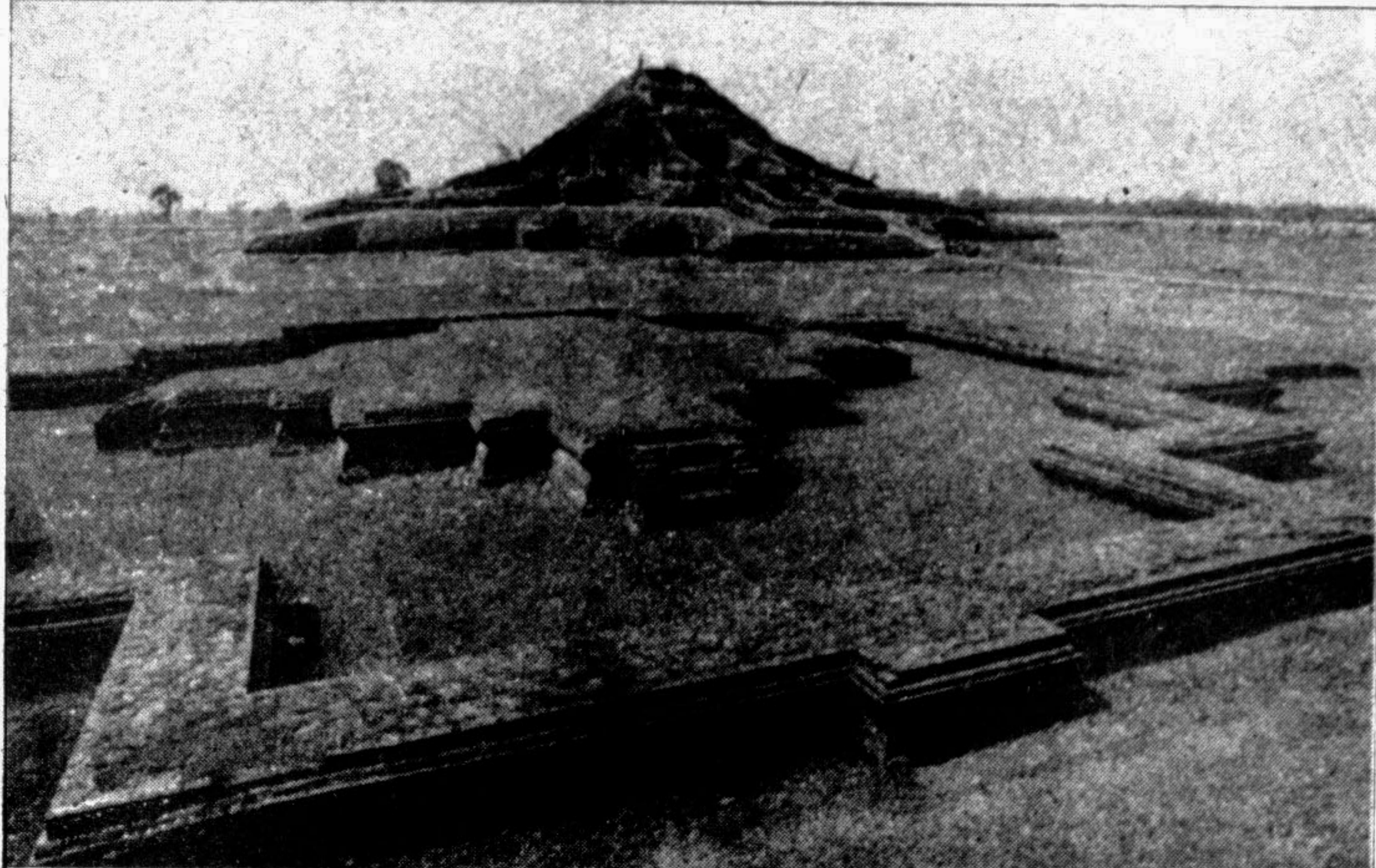
people. This was my most positive experience in the country, specially compared to Nepal, which is very frustrating in this respect.

The Guide Book: My itinerary was based on the Lonely Planet Guide: Bangladesh. Written for backpackers, it has no color prints or

too many surprises or improvisations, even when on vacation. **Bogra:** The town itself was of little interest to me, although it was my first impression of a rickshaw town, extraordinary for a European who is used to traffic jams in towns. It is a good place to see the ruins of Mahasthangarh

in a muslim country is amazing, and the village around me seemed to be a relic of former times. For many Western tourists, this experience could be a major attraction. You won't find any village in Germany which doesn't look like the 20th century.

Dhaka: Well, Dhaka is simply too big, too crowded, too noisy, and too polluted to really enjoy it. Naturally, there are fine spots: the fort, the



Paharpur Buddhist Monastery, Rajshahi

Let me add that I could afford First Class tickets, so I don't know about the other classes. You travelled on the Gazi steamer yourself, so I'll give a very short comment: excellent! There is nothing in Europe comparable to rickshaws, which you find all over Bangladesh. I see it as an extremely affordable transport that limits pollution (exhaust, noise). I avoided city buses: too hectic and too crowded. Well, you cannot hide that Bangladesh is an extremely densely populated country. Wherever you go, there are crowds and crowds of people, something (some) Europeans need some time to get used to. **Accommodation:** As with transport, accommodation is quite easy to find. There are really great differences of

and state-run hotels, like the Parjatan chain. They were quite good, compared to India, for example.

I was only slightly disappointed by your holiday resort in Cox's Bazar. I felt a distinct lack of initiative there to satisfy tourist demands. A seaside resort should offer some attractive restaurants. There is nothing in Cox's Bazar. It is certainly my personal prediction that I favor Chinese food in South Asia. In all the countries I mentioned.

Helpfulness: Concluding my remarks about organization, it was surprisingly easy to travel without knowing Bengali. There was always someone to help. Often I did not even have to ask for assistance. Whenever there seemed to be a problem, there were friendly and helpful

extended descriptions, just practical and very detailed hints. Planning the route, I tried to avoid too many long-distance tours. This is quite easy to do in Bangladesh, which is not too wide (compared to India or Pakistan). Besides some archaeological and historical sites, I mainly wanted to see the countryside, including your huge water system. Finally I followed this route: Siliguri, India - Bogra-Rajshahi-Dhaka-Sylhet-Chittagong-Comilla-Dhaka-Khulna-Cuttack.

I should underline that I am not a typical German tourist, who usually does not travel longer than 3-4 weeks at a stretch and who prefers to have things organized by a tour agency. Germans tend to be perfectionists, and don't like

and Paharpur - both definitely worth a visit. Unfortunately, the opening times of site-museums seem to be fairly unpredictable. There is some really nice scenery, specially around Paharpur. Tourists should avoid the weekend, Thursday and Friday, with its huge and awfully noisy tourists. It is puzzling that these tourists arrive in buses and feel obliged to flood the surroundings with noise. I dare say that Indian music is hard to stand for any friend of classical, folk or jazz music.

Rajshahi: The town I liked best. It is wide with a beautiful riverside, and it is relatively calm and quiet. Visiting Purbia from here was one of the most interesting day-trips I made. The collection of Hindu tem-

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Sylhet: There is some very attractive scenery around this town. On my request, I was invited on a long tour through all of the long-established tea-

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states, including a look at the factory and the company's guesthouse - a view back to colonial times. I was surprised by the warm welcome and generosity of the management. I think it is much harder, or even impossible, to get a guided tour in a German factory/company.

To be continued.....

Hajj: Muslim's Yearly Pilgrimage

by Asiuzzaman

THE popular anecdote about "Bombay Hajj" is well-known to almost everybody. The communication between this region and Saudi Arabia was bad early in this century. People used to travel by passengers' ship from Chittagong to Jeddah to perform hajj. Some of them fell sea-sick and had to disembark in Bombay. A number of them returned after the hajj period and claimed to be hajjis. These were the much taunted "Bombay Hajjis".

Things have changed over the years. Modern communication systems have made the journey easier and more comfortable. Once it took 15 to 20 days to reach Jeddah from Chittagong by ship. Now the same journey takes only four hours by aircraft. In earlier days a small number of affluent

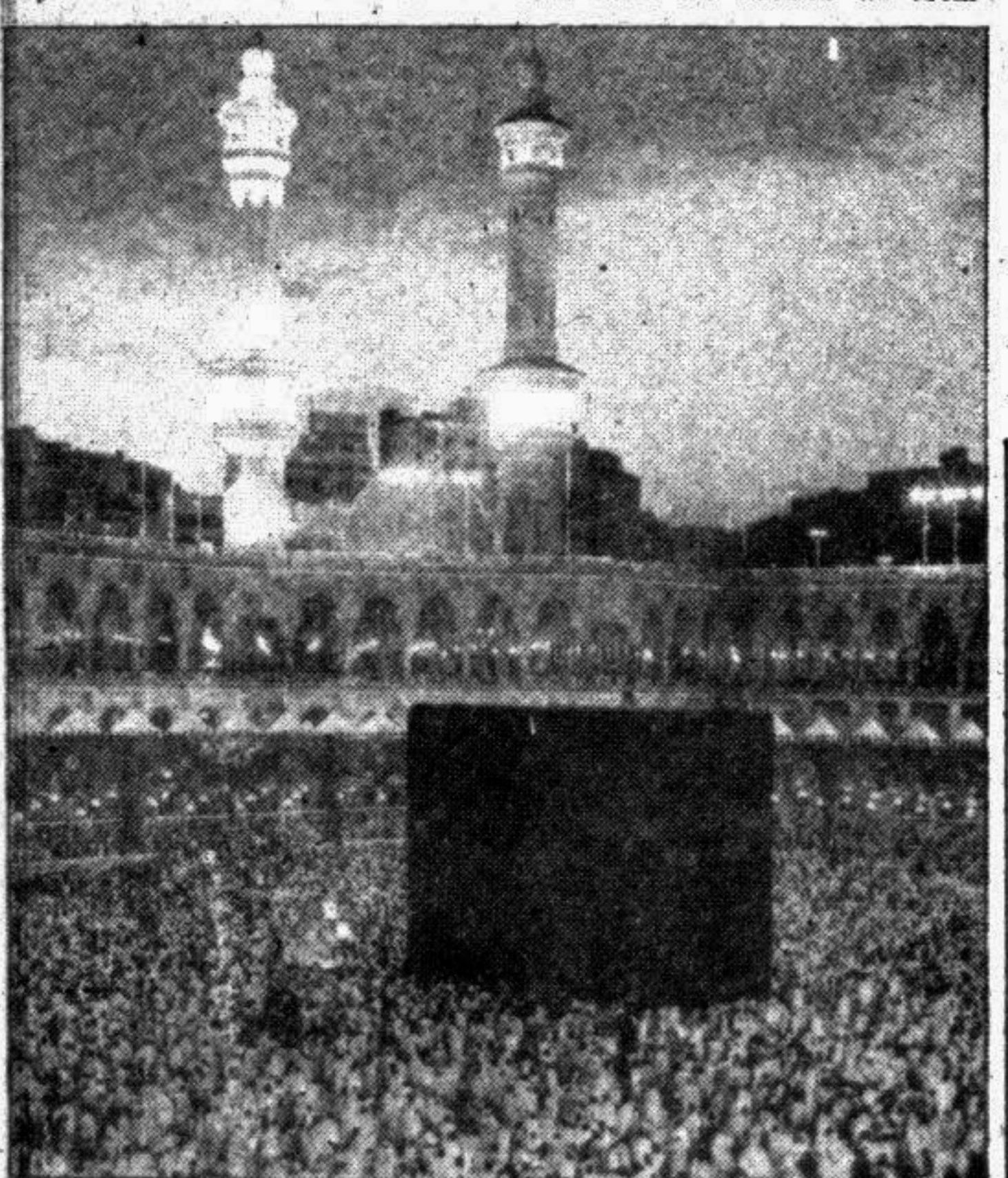
elites used to perform hajj, but nowadays a large number of Bangladeshis perform hajj every year.

Islam has made performing of hajj mandatory for those who have the financial ability to travel to Mecca, provided that his family will not face any hardship till his return.

According to Islamic tenet the income meant for hajj must be hard-earned and honest. Now on an average some 10,000 (ten thousand) male and female from Bangladesh perform hajj every year, although an agreement with the Saudi Government allows a total of one lakh 50 thousand Bangladeshis to perform the pilgrimage. One can go on government supervision or on one's own. The government has fixed Tk 83,815 as total

expenditure for hajj. This amount includes Tk 40,000 plane fare, Tk 1,300 travel tax, Tk 300 terminal fees, Tk 16,000 house rent and other expenditures. Bangladesh authorities have already rented houses for accommodation for 3,323 persons in Mecca. Some 50 persons have been appointed and trained to help the Bangladeshi pilgrims in Saudi Arabia during the time of hajj. Other formalities were completed by the end of last month.

Biman Bangladesh Airlines will operate about 60 special flights to ferry the pilgrims. But the Biman authorities have yet to decide when the hajj flights will start. Subject to sighting of the moon, this year hajj will take place on May 8. The Saudi Government undertook special measures so that the pilgrims perform their annual ritual comfortably, as hundreds of thousands of people pour into the holy city of Mecca and Madina. But almost every year unfortunate accidents claim lives of several pilgrims. This usually happens because of unnecessary hurry and rush, which can be avoided if the pilgrims remain careful.



The Holy Kaba

We could start with Kuakata, a tourism site with more notoriety than fame. The experience of Kuakata is difficult to convey through words, but a sun setting on TV is sometimes just as vivid as in real life. The Sundarbans also is an entire way of life - not only is there the Royal Bengal tiger and masses of deer to

Travel Editor's Note

Cameras to the Heart of Bangladesh

THE satellite channels in Bangladesh have made travel shows very popular. It is very entertaining to sit in one's own livingroom and tour the mystic sites of India or the vast open lands of Australia. BTV itself used to air a show called *Dekha Hoi Nai Chokhu Media* (I didn't open my eyes to see), which took the viewer to amazing historical sites in Bangladesh - another show with high ratings.

But I have never seen the Sundarbans on TV, the strikingly beautiful tea gardens of Sylhet (so I have heard) or the longest beach in the world (our very own Cox's Bazar). The Bangladeshi who has never been to any of these places can only try to picture them through the descriptions of other people, or at best, still photographs. So how about a program that transports the viewer, along with the video camera and crew, right to the sites of undiscovered Bangladesh?

peaceful elections in 1994, has sparked optimism about tourism prospects. I think it's going to be what everybody has been waiting for," says Jorge Martinez, manager of San Salvador's Tourist Information Office. "We're all learning to speak French," he adds. However, he acknowledges El Salvador has a long way to go before it can compete with Central America's big tourist draw, Costa Rica: "We're promoting the country, but not as much as we should. We're not quite ready yet. We're at peace and that's a good beginning."

Since the end of hostilities, the tourist industry has recorded an upturn of 35-40 per cent. Including a large

see, but also the fishermen who live there, the people who survive by selling timber from the trees, and countless other very powerful images that a travel writer cannot convey to the potential tourist. Will such a show be very costly? It shouldn't be. There are many private travellers, photographers, and even organizations who have their own footage of Sylhet, Chittagong, and the Sundarbans. BTV could even start by buying these programs. Will it be popular? Yes, yes, yes. A travel documentary is an incredible luxury - no viewer can resist the idea of watching captivating distant sites for no cost and no pain. GW



Foyz Lake

Travel Briefs

Airshow Canada set on August 9: North America's International Aviation and Aerospace Tradeshow will continue its pattern of growth into the 1995 event, following the success of Airshow Canada '93. It had attracted over 500 exhibitors from 20 nations. Airshow Canada '95 will build upon its international support to expand the scope of its exhibitors and professional visitors when it opens on August, this year. For 1995 Canada has joined forces with the Canadian Business Aircraft Association (CBAA). The International Business Aviation (IBAC) will hold its 1995 Government Board Meeting at this show and other events will be held to corporate aviation manufacturers, operators and service providers. - Monitor

Schiphol, the best European airport: Amsterdam airport, Schiphol, has been voted best European airport by "Business Traveller" magazine for the eleventh year running. Readers also ranked its tax-free shopping center the best in the world. The airport itself was rated second best in the "World" category. - Monitor

Malaysian Airlines Aims High Flying: Tajuddin Ramli, The Malaysian entrepreneur and Chairman of Malaysian Airlines (MAS), says that MAS aims at developing MAS into a global company. MAS has recently reported its results through a controversial highly leveraged US \$702m deal. He warns that if changes are not brought about soon it may go the same way as PanAm, the US airline that went bankrupt in 1991. However, recent results indicate that better times are on the way. - Monitor

River-cruise and sightseeing by Guide: The Guide Tours Ltd. can arrange half-day sight seeing tour every Saturday, Sunday and Tuesday and also on other days with at least four adults. Normally this tour is in the morning and lasts for 3-4 hours. The tour is restricted within the city area only and includes visit to the Shadarghat, Nawab's Palace, Lalbagh Fort, Star Mosque, Armenian Church and many other important sights in Dhaka. This trip, which is taken on rickshaw, can also be arranged for one or two persons. - Monitor

Middle East Airlines has \$15m loss: Middle East Airlines (MEA) recently reported a \$15 million loss in the year 1994 after breaking even in 1993 for the first time in ten years. The transport minister, Omar Miskawi, opposed a proposed \$100 million government loan to modernize MEA's 14-plane fleet. - Monitor

STOL: Privately initiated STOL (Short take-off and landing), the domestic air service which is in its preparation phase to start its services has officially asked RAJUK not to approve plans for multi-storied buildings in different parts of the capital. Sources in the RAJUK confirmed that the civil aviation authority has specified sites where multi-storied structures cannot be raised because they lie on the path of the planned service. STOL plans to use the old airport to start its domestic services in the country. This comes at a time when Dhaka is desperate for commercial spaces and experts feel that only multi-storied buildings could help solve the problem. - Star Correspondent

KLM Cargo sets ties with Emirates: KLM Cargo has stepped up ties with Emirates, the international airline of UAE, to offer freight forwarders an extended range of faster cargo transport opportunities to cities on both airlines' route network. Under the new agreement, Emirates will also gain freight capacity on the KLM operated service between Amsterdam and Dubai. - Monitor

Dhaka, Tehran cooperate in railway sector: Bangladesh and Iran will cooperate with each other in the field of multimodal transport especially in the railway sector under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed in Tehran recently. - Monitor

US Air responds to safety concerns: US Air responded to recent news paper reports about its safety record by appointing a vice President for safety and commissioned an independent audit of operations. Former Air Force General Robert Oaks was appointed to the new position on December 1, 1994. - Monitor

IATA warns Asia: The International Air Transport Association (IATA), the airline industry trade organization grouping more than 200 airlines, recently urged Asian-Pacific countries to convene a summit of transport ministers to address the urgent issue of growing congestion at airports throughout the region. Inadequate ground and air traffic control infrastructure in Europe provoked a crisis in European Air transport a few years ago. There was now a risk that a similar crisis could occur in the fast growing Asian-Pacific market. - Monitor

China to buy 22 planes: China will buy 22 planes in 1995 to reinforce its fast-growing civil aviation fleet. Director of the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) Chen Guangyi said national flag carrier Air China and other state airlines under CAAC carried 40.27 million passengers in 1994, up 19 percent from 1993. They also handled 5.84 billion km-tonnes of freight, up 14.1 per cent. The target for 1995 is a further 22 planes, which will be used to beef up services on busy routes. - Monitor

All European passenger jet: Airbus industries recently unveiled its first "All European" passenger jet airline, powered by British-Rolls-Royce engines rather than American engines. - Monitor

number of executives mixing business with pleasure, says Martinez. Fear of violence appears to be the main obstacle for holiday-makers, even though the tourist office says no incidents of robbery or similar crimes have been reported to it by foreigners. Martinez says FONATUR is planning to build a complex of 1,000 rooms and resources on El Salvador's Tasajera Island in the Pacific, but he adds: "We don't want to make the same mistake as other countries... in Cancun you can't see a single tree. We want a tropical paradise."

Promotion is concentrating on resources such as golf courses, the landscape and black volcanic beaches like the one near La Libertad, 45 minutes' drive from the capital. "The guerrillas used to come here to make contact with the press in 1980. You could recognize them by their clothes," bell boy Raphael Diaz of Camino Real Hotel recalls.

"We don't have rich tourism yet. We're working on attracting more of it," says Martinez. "Our infrastructure is very

peaceful elections in 1994, has sparked optimism about tourism prospects. I think it's going to be what everybody has been waiting for," says Jorge Martinez, manager of San Salvador's Tourist Information Office. "We're all learning to speak French," he adds. However, he acknowledges El Salvador has a long way to go before it can compete with Central America's big tourist draw, Costa Rica: "We're promoting the country, but not as much as we should. We're not quite ready yet. We're at peace and that's a good beginning."

OFFICIALS TRY TO CREATE A BEACH-HEAD FOR TOURISM

by Nicholas Fitzpatrick, San Salvador

WHEN Peter Vesa first came to El Salvador as a tourist from Finland, he had his wits about him and was ready for the worst. It was 1990 and the country was deep in civil war.

His fears seemed justified when, as he sat in the terrace restaurant of the four-star Sberator in the capital San Salvador, the silence was shattered by a small squadron of helicopters which flew low over the building and opened fire on rebels below suspected of sabotaging a nearby electrical plant. The fighting cut the power supply and provided holiday snaps not untypical of the era for the hotel's few guests. Now 27-year-old Vesa is no

longer a tourist, but a member of the management team at the hotel, which has been re-named the El Salvador Hotel.

He is also part of a new wave of young Europeans and Americans brought in to help bring back scared-off travellers and create an upturn in the country's tourist economy - an ambitious effort that the government-run tourist office dreams will make El Salvador into the new tropical paradise. "Hotels try to bring young people with experience from abroad," says Vesa. "There's a lot of tourist operators coming to the country to see what it has to offer. The country has very nice beaches, but a lot of

people still have a scary impression, especially in Europe."

To try and erase the country's death-squad image, the tourism office has begun promoting itself in Europe as a tranquil land of beaches and Pacific golden sunsets, via a series of tourism conventions for the travel business. The tourist drive was made possible by the Peace Accord signed by rebels and government forces in 1992 after 12 years of war. Then came President Alfredo Cristiani's declaration that he wanted to make tourism a priority. All this, coupled with relatively