



Sylhet : A Sleepy Town Full of Surprises

by Lavina Ambreen Ahmed

It is a general fact that Sylhet is very popular as far as tourists are concerned. Besides the lush acres of tea plantations, there are Jafflong, Tamabil, Sreepur, Madhabkunda and so many other places to see. Recently I spent about a week in this enigmatic town with my family and two friends. It was an enlightening experience. No amount of hearing stories or reading travel brochures can prepare one for what Sylhet has to offer.

The Tea Gardens: First of all, there are the widely acclaimed tea gardens all over Sylhet and Srimongal, Lakkatoorah, Malpicherra, Lalakhal and Sreepur are only few of such tea estates. We visited Lakkatoorah, one of the more impressive gardens situated in the city. The verdant hilly garden dominated by those dwarf, well-groomed tea bushes and slopes has an inimitable charm.

It was afternoon and the sun's rays were not so glaring. Even in the winter mornings, the heat can be quite ominous in Sylhet, spoiling the tourist's sightseeing plan. We found a guide, who volunteered to show us around.

After ambling through the garden, we climbed up a hill to see the view down below. It was simply spectacular. Lean and tall rain trees planted systematically provide shade to the short shrubs that cover the vast expanse of the territory. We could also spot the beautiful bungalows of the manager and guests of the tea plantation peeping through the rich foliage. From above, the dwellings looked like the ones from Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tales. Tribal women donned in blouse and petticoats, only their heads and torsos wrapped with Sarees mechanically plucked tea leaves, piling them up in the sacks attached on their backs. They have become so accustomed to the surroundings and the frequent visitors that they hardly showed any enthusiasm about our taking their pictures.

The guide pointed out a comparatively high hill, aptly named 'Darbin Tila' (telescope hill) for the panoramic view it offers. Dusk had fallen pretty soon, giving the place a new look. Totally mesmerized, we watched the subtle changes of nature. The fading reddish-orange sun descending into the horizon. The blue sky tinged with gold in the backdrop and the reddish-orange sun descending into the horizon. Lakkatoorah is a well-maintained, delightful tea garden.

Another interesting tea garden is Malnicherra. Besides its aesthetic beauty, the place also has historical. History recounts : during our liberation war of '71 the Pakistan army forcefully occupied the property, established in the mid 19th century. They damaged the plantation, tortured the workers and murdered the then acting manager of the land, Shawkat Nawaz, his brother Shah Nawaz and his friend Mejbahuddin. The epitaph at the foot of the hill ex-

plains the tragic incident.

The Mazar: Then, there is the mystery surrounded tomb of the 14th century Saint Hazrat Shahjalal (R) in Ambarbhan, Sylhet. The imposing structure of the massive white gate stands tall, as if appealing to peoples religious sense. There are shops selling *agarbatti*, (incense) sweets, *halwas* on both sides of the road, leading to the Mazar (tomb).

Thousands of people, from all over Bangladesh including tourists, irrespective of religion, race and creed visit the sacred place. The devotees fervently believe that 'Almighty Allah' will fulfil any wish, if asked through his chosen one Hazrat Shahjalal (R). Only men are allowed to climb up the many steps to the shrine, partially covered by an orange fringed bright pink cloth shade. There is a room for the ladies to offer prayers and recite from the holy Quran.

There are rumours and legends about almost every corner of the Mazar Sharif. Like there are three cauldrons at one side. The devotees often pour money inside them as a token of their faith and respect. The story goes that the gigantic pots came floating across the Surma river.

There is a well constructed at the back side of the tomb. According to local legend the great man wanted to drink the blessed 'Jamjam' water of Macca. Then one day he had a vision. The Deity advised him to set up a well at a particular site, assuring him that the water will have a link with the Jamjam water, so precious to Muslims all over the world. Today, bottled water from this well are sold to tourists.

Also, there is a dirty pond with a 'gojar' fish breeding and some pet pigeons moving around freely on the premises. No doubt there are stories behind their existence also. However, since there are no signboards or booklets available there, one has to rely on the staff and the local people



Women plucking tea leaves in the tea gardens of Sylhet — Parjatan

to get information. At times these stories might sound quite obscure and vary from person to person.

Jafflong: Next, we visited one of the favorite tourist spots — Jafflong, about 45 miles from Sylhet town. We had heard so much about it, that we couldn't wait to see it for ourselves. We hired a microbus for a day. Getting transport is not too much of a hassle in Sylhet. One can reserve one through any hotel. The cost is usually between Tk 1000-3000 or perhaps more, depending on the distance you intend to cover.

Yet, we were a bit disappointed to see the place. It's an ideal example of how a scenic spot can turn into an ordinary one through neglect and indifference. Jafflong with its Sandy shore and exotic stones not only draws Sylhetis but also crowds of local tourists throughout the country, especially during holiday season.

The site could have been a perfect idyllic bliss, if the serenity of the place wasn't disturbed by the constant rattling sounds of the stone-collectors working nearby. It is tough to appreciate the tranquil surrounding because of the cacophony created by the over-exuberant picnic parties from as far as Dhaka and Chittagong, the harsh honkings of the stone-bearing trucks and of course the severe hammering blows of the stone-breakers.

But, one look at the crystal clear waters of Jafflong river with its numerous rocks and pebbles of many shapes and hues is guaranteed to make it worthy of your visit. Visitors often take quaint stones back home with them as souvenirs and enjoy taking a dip in the cool, transparent water.

Winter is the best time for visiting as the water is pretty shallow then. One can also take a boat ride to the other side of the river, where there is a

colourfully decorated food joint, serving refreshments to the pooped out holiday makers.

Jafflong river continues along to Sreepur, where the Indian hills almost touch the rough stone-strewn water's edge. There, too you're greeted by the same picturesque scenery, though the number of visitors are a lot less. While returning back to C&B's rest house, the place of our temporary stay, we stopped at the Tamabil border area. Tourists clicked away with their cameras at the no-man's land near the Bangladeshi checkpoint, ignoring the sign that firmly prohibits taking pictures.

On our way to Jafflong, a derelict structure on one side of the Jaintiapur road, 25/26 miles east of Sylhet drew our attention. The local people informed us, that it was virtually a 'pit' built by the king of Jaintia (now Jaintiapur). The legend told by them as well as our driver-cum-guide, is that the king erected the pit during his tenure to punish his defiant subjects.

There was a venomous snake inside the hole and rebellions and mutinous poor souls were thrown into the dark abyss. On enquiring further about the cruel ruler, an elderly man pointed out a nearby hill, saying there are remnants of a 'Rajbari' (palace) of the Jaintia Raja up the hill.

The king seemed to have led a very luxurious life if the stories are to be believed. The locals say that he constructed a majestic abode at the hill top, just to spend one night there. There wasn't any signboard verifying the story. However, there is an inscription announcing that, it was the place

of discovery of Dhupi copper plate of the era of Raja Ram Sing II of Jaintia. There was no mention of the palace high up though.

In any case, intrigued we climbed up to find out the truth ourselves. The hill was relatively high with steep, broken down spiral steps carved out of the hill. There, cloaked under over grown headages, parasites and weeds, stood the once regal, now in desolate ruins the one-day-home of a king. Totally neglected, forlorn and decrepit, the place calls for immediate restoration.

Fearing snakes, our driver advised us not to venture too deep into the ruins. According to history journals, notably 'Discover the monuments of Bangladesh' — by Dr Nazimuddin Ahmed, the Jaintia kingdom was formed by an ancient 'khasia' tribe (ethnologically an Assamese group) of Hindu converts. They are believed to have inhabited the Jaintia hills, plains of Sylhet and some adjacent regions, way back in the 11th century to early 19th century.

The Jaintia remains also consist of the original 'Rajbari' and the notorious 'temple of



The Mazar Sharif of Hazrat Shahjalal(R) — Masheed Ahmed

'Green' Tourism to be National Blueprint

by Margaret Laing

A 'green' tourism project created in South-west England has won a top award in the English Tourist Board's (ETB) annual 'England for Excellence' awards and is set to provide a national blueprint showing how successfully the interest of tourism and the environment can be combined.

The tourism and environmental award, one of ETB's most important plaudits, underlines the nation's concern for the planet. It was won by the South Devon Green Tourism Initiative, based in the village of Dartington, for its project backed by a public and private sector partnership, to develop practical and sustainable methods for the local tourism business community.

After the 1990 Rio Earth Summit in which Britain played a leading role, the UK government set up a task force to see how a balance could be

maintained while developing both the tourism industry and care for the environment. This was followed locally by the creation of the south Devon project, whose 1993 target was to formulate and publish a self-help do-it-yourself environmental audit manual that was easy to use, interesting, and relevant to the area's small and medium sized tourism businesses.

The resulting green audit kit, launched that year, emphasized the communal advantages of a 'Green' business approach and showed how business responsibility could be developed as an integral part of this.

By the end of 1993 some 50 businesses had implemented the scheme, which was promoted in presentations to tourism associations and through personal contacts. It has now attracted 150 business partners plus 11 partners in the public sector.

Announcing the award, heritage expert and celebrity Lucinda Lambton said: "The judges thought this an excellent scheme for a very modest outlay which successfully promotes and encourages green tourism."

Peter Moore, managing director of Center Parks (UK), which won the award in 1990 and has since sponsored the tribute for four years running, said that the company believed in the provision of top level sports, leisure health and relaxation facilities 'in harmony with a total dedication to conservation and the environment'. Its sponsorship of the award was designed to encourage other organizations to regard these elements as staple elements of their own operations.

Karl Meyer visited Bangladesh for a month from December to January. The following are excerpts from his letter to the Daily Star about tourism in Bangladesh.

Chittagong - About the town itself, I would like to repeat my remarks about Dhaka : big and noisy, not very impressive for me.

Without doubt, a great attraction can be a harbour tour with a privately hired motorboat. The port Authority does not seem willing to allow tourists into the harbour area. The ethnological area is also well worth a visit.

Cox's Bazar - At first I was shocked : you drive through a dirty, ugly bazaar road, permanently congested. You have to search the places of interest, e.g. the fishing harbour, boat tours to the neighbouring island, and of course the beach.

To me, the beach near Cox's hotels seems to be catering entirely to Bangladeshi tourists (stall hawkers, etc.). The really beautiful stretch begins some 3-4 km southwards so that you need one of the jeeps. This is unspoiled nature and I hope development will be very careful.

Concerning facilities (hotel accommodation, restaurants, amusement) Cox's Bazar is absolutely no match for neighbouring countries. As it is today, western tourists will definitely prefer e.g. Thailand beaches to Bangladesh: beach tourists from Europe are just used to higher quality.

I think it is a long, long way to establish an internationally accepted seaside resort in Cox's although the potential is there.

Rocket Steamer - Perhaps the highlight of the complete

Letter from a German Tourist - Part II

tour : fascinating scenery during all the journey (life on the river as you find it here does not exist in Germany any longer) and on "MS Ghazi" a really good cabin and sightseeing deck.

Sundarbans - I failed to make a real Sundarban tour. Parjatan is somewhat passive organizing trips; they only seem to be interested in huge groups - the big money. And some of the private companies

do not see much wildlife) but it can give you an idea of this ecosystem.

Into the bargain you pass a couple of big steamers. Coming back to Bangladesh I would reserve a couple of days

this letter with some general remarks:

Although at present you have considerable political difficulties with your parliament I never felt real tension or danger; "harta!" is sometimes annoying (no transport/service) but the country remained remarkably calm (at least where I have been).

Perhaps this is due to the fact that I got to know people in your country as calm, friendly and helpful.

Contacts were much more pleasant than e.g. in Nepal. Because there are hardly any western tourists often people tend to be really curious; you are asked the same questions again and again - this cost me some nerves! But you are quickly left alone if you ask for it.

This friendly atmosphere and the attractions mentioned above could be a basis for international tourism.

But I guess Bangladesh will have a lot of hard work to do to compete with tourism "giants" like India, Nepal, Thailand and others.

At the moment its reputation simply does not invite holiday makers, false as it is. So a very important step could and should be simply to publish and make known facts about Bangladesh.

And please reduce the noise - Bangladesh is the noisiest country I ever visited! Looking back my visit to Bangladesh was absolutely worth the four weeks travelling. I enjoyed the tour.

Maybe some of my remarks are somewhat puzzling or may even annoy you/Bangladeshi people. But I prefer to make direct statements to use frank words. I hope these lines are of some interest to you. Best wishes for your work! Goodbye and so long.



A country boat inside the Sundarbans

It is a peaceful and tranquil way to get an idea of the country and without doubt very attractive for foreigners : you should promote it! (Not all the steamers of BIWTC are of the high standard of "MS Ghazi". I saw others I would not like to travel with: standards for the same price should really be the same).

just offer very poor quality (I was already booked on a 5 day tour - after one day delay I found out that the boat was one of the more rusty launches : a rip-off. I got back my money).

From Khulna and Dangamari village (near Mongla) the forest office is helpful to organize day-trips on a hired motor boat. It is not a real Sundarban tour (you will

for the Sundarbans which could be developed once again very carefully, no big crowds should be allowed here) into a really unique tourist attraction.

Ask people in Germany/Europe, hardly any one will ever have heard about the Sundarbans - they are simply unknown. I would like to conclude

Travel Editor's Note:

The Unexpected Delights of Sightseeing - "I guess we're sleeping under the sky tonight!"

I'M convinced that any tourist in Bangladesh, no matter how well-planned, has a handful of surprises in store.

We've just been dropped at Mongla port by the Gazi. We were supposed to spend the night at the Mongla port rest-house, on the way to the Sundarbans. But things are a little confusing at the moment. The women sit around on their luggages, while the professors (leaders of our excursion team) discuss what is to happen to us. We're all waiting for the word to go.

We've been waiting for two hours already. We climbed up to the harbor using four wooden planks. Each one of us had two bags at least. I had thought the women wouldn't make it, but everyone did, laughing from a sense of adventure. The first thing the group did was gather for a series of pictures and some video shooting.

At 5:30 pm, the steamer leaves, hitting the harbor so that it sways from side to side. All the other passengers have left, except for the forty or so of us crowding the drawing-room-sized port. A man emerges and begs us all to leave. "In the name of God, leave," says he. We still don't know where we're going.

In front of us, we see: huge sacks (say 5 ft high cylinder like structures) for a Mr. Abdur Rouf, Mongla port. They probably contain steel cooking pots. All around us are our luggages: Corralite bags, backpacks, foreign-looking carrier-bags (the high ones that airlines frown upon), a few suitcases, quilts, water containers, and fruits and chicken (live) bought on deck. The sun is gone. A party leaves to find out if there is any space in the resthouse, and if so, how on earth we're going to get there. Two of the women sit down on Abdur Rouf's imports.

One of the steamers on the other side plays a song which travels to us across the waters. No mosquitos yet. Suddenly, we see a boat speeding away. The women call to me, the reporter.

"Apa, Apa, look!" The sailor is a woman, her saree wrapped around her head, her naked baby balanced in the middle of the boat. The students have started to point out everything they see. "Gemini apa, look at that bird. Did you just see that thing?" I feel like I have a thousand eyes.

We finished all our biscuits, and our stomachs still churned. We were starting to make plans to sleep right under the sky. Mosquitos buzzed over everyone's head, remind-

ing me of the Lord of the Flies. Finally, when it was pitch dark, our party returned with this word: there were some technical difficulties with the Port resthouse, but the cement factory resthouse would take us. We'd have to go there in trawlers, over the Pussur River.

We descended in the dark, using pencil torchlights. One false step, and you'd be gone. There was a huge debate about whether all the women should be allowed to go in one trawler or not. Just as we were filled with a sense of adventure, a man from the port brought his son and daughter over to us.

"Look," he said, pointing to us. "These people are from Dhaka. If you learn your lessons well, you too will one day go to this big city, filled with adventure."

The children looked at us with round eyes. I descended and sat along the railings, my feet stretched along the seat. We were very, very close to the waters, so that I felt we were sitting in the Pussur. Then we started across the river to the great Cement Factory Rest-house. On the way we saw huge stakes in the dark waters (What are those? jetties, replied our sailor), and multi-storied ships. The rest is another story. —GW