



Tourists with a Difference

by Lavina Ambreen Ahmed

Lena and Heinrich Grosse-Sender are not ordinary tourists on the lookout for scenic, popular leisure spots. They travel around the world with the particular intention of learning about a country and the lifestyle of its people. The German couple from Cologne, recently came here to see the real Bangladesh. "The media don't paint a pretty picture of the country. We only hear and get to see the natural calamities like floods and cyclones on TV, most of the foreigners don't know anything besides the negative aspects of Bangladesh. That is why we came here" — they explain the reason for their visit. Before arriving, they gathered information about the country, most of which was quite discouraging. Some even thought they were crazy to spend their vacation in Bangladesh, but the Grosse-Senders were determined to make the trip. They wanted to see beyond the austere, unimpressive media coverage and discover the true Bangladesh.

Amiable and unassuming Heinrich Grosse-Sender is the Secretary-General of the State Parliament, North-Rhine-Westphalia, Germany and his charming wife, Lena is a school teacher. The day before their departure, they squeezed in some time from their busy schedule and were eager to talk about their impression, after four weeks' stay in Bangladesh.

Tourists usually prefer to

come in the brief months of winter, when the weather is pleasant. Why did they choose such a bad time to visit? "We have a longer summer vacation than a winter one and wanted to make good use of our holiday," they elucidate, adding that the incessant rain didn't upset their travel plans. They had seen Rangpur, Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Bogra — almost the entire northern zone — and have actually covered a vast area of Bangladesh.

The Grosse-Senders preferred the comparatively unspoiled, serene small towns than the busy, hyperactive metropolis, Dhaka. In the city, they visited Ahsan Manzil and the National Museum. While travelling, they have seen some interesting historic sites. The old Rajbari at Rangpur impressed them. Once it was a beautiful palace, full of life, now it's in ruins. There are many such derelict ancient edifices in deplorable state in Bangladesh. The German travellers muse on how the Bangladeshis can remain so indifferent about renovating them. Hardly surprising, taking in the fact that they come from a land which pays extra attention to protect their majestic castles and safeguard their glorious heritage.

The lack of maintenance here really disturbed them. They feel: "If converted into hotels, the time-worn

dwelling can attract many foreign visitors and boost the country's tourism as well." We have seen this in the neighbouring country India, where motels and hotels are often transformed royal homes.

The land of two leaves and a bud, the inimitable Sylhet has captivated the European visitors. As Ms Grosse-Sender exclaims "It's a world of its own." The remarkable, verdant tea estates stretching on for miles have lured many tourists from overseas. The couple stayed at Ali Nagar, a well maintained beautiful tea garden.

Their itinerary also included regular tourist spots, like Sundarban and Cox's Bazar. The foul weather did however interfere a little with their travel plan at Sundarban. Due to monsoon, they couldn't see much of the pristine forest besides the mangrove plantation. True, they didn't spot any Royal Bengal Tiger but the picturesque scenery from Dhaka to Khulna compensated for it. They saw the nearby shrimp culture, the migrant fishermen who come from various parts of the country during monsoon and not to mention the confluence point of Pashur river and the Bay of Bengal. The Grosse-Senders think, the concerned authorities should contemplate improving the tour programme and suggested using old tankers as floating hotels for travelling in the Sundarbans: "That way the trip can be more enjoyable."

The couple have been to the port city, Chittagong, but couldn't visit the Hill Tracts as they didn't know that permission was required beforehand to enter the territory. Cox's Bazar was great for relaxation. "We lived in a hotel which was small yet comfortable and well managed," they relate. Every thing would have been perfect for them if the food served in the hotel restaurant was satisfactory.

"Unfortunately there wasn't any variety in the dishes served there, so we had to seek our meals elsewhere," they disclose. Really, one can hardly enjoy sight-seeing and have fun, if the food available is not to one's liking. But as Ms Grosse-Sender quickly adds, the "Sea Queen" a Chinese restaurant on the beach resort is pretty good. While on the subject, one can't help asking what they think of local cuisine.

"Too hot!" was the prompt reply. "but, otherwise not bad at all."

Wherever they went, they were received cordially. So, they took for granted that Bangladeshis are by nature a

friendly and hospitable race. Heinrich Grosse-Sender also points out that Bangladeshis are liberal minded. They expected conservatism and inhibition from the people of a Muslim country, but were pleasantly surprised. Why? "The local people didn't refuse to be photographed, on the contrary eagerly obliged us," unlike many other Muslim nations they have visited. Although, the couple couldn't give us a photo of themselves at one of the many places they've been to (to go with this write-up). They took plenty of snapshots, but not of themselves, they say. "We wanted to preserve the memory of our holiday here, of course, so we simply took pictures, of Bangladesh."

They also observed that Bangladeshis are a busy and active lot, not lazy by far! Both in city and in rural areas people are doing some kind of work, not merely sitting around idling away. "Take the rickshaw-pullers for example, they keep ringing their bells, trying to get your attention, but if you're not interested he will look for

other people, without wasting time. Accurate as not, it is definitely one of the nicest compliments *bideshis* ever paid us.

Besides one or two depressing points, the couple



Unfortunately, they didn't spot the Royal Bengal Tiger.

— The Vanishing Jungle/George Scheller.

side scenery of acres of paddy fields, men working and children playing was absolutely fascinating.

The Grosse-Senders love to travel and have been to many places around the world. Yet, they can't be termed as ordinary tourists. Besides Europe, Australia, the US, former USSR and India, they have also visited countries like Greenland, Iceland, Mongolia, Myanmar, Morocco, Madagascar, Botswana, China, and Thailand. Every country has its own customs and individuality, the Grosse-Senders like to discover them.

They have done a lot of sightseeing, but unfortunately couldn't explore the cultural arena and learn about the songs, dance and drama of Bangladesh that much. "We asked around, but nobody could give us information about the musical soiree and theatre performances. Well, better luck next time, as the easy going couple promise to revisit the country in future. For the Grosse-Senders, four weeks is not enough time to see Bangladesh.

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them a certain skill or trade, so that they can earn a livelihood later on, they speculate.

However, they assure that worries like these didn't mar their vacation here. "Actually, we have had quite an enlightening experience in Bangladesh." When asked which place they liked best, they say: "Each has its own charm, we can't compare one with the other." But for Ms Grosse-Sender, the country-

Travel Briefs

Best employee of June: The best employee award for the month of June 1995, of Hotel Sonargaon, went to Md Nurul Islam. Mr Islam is a waiter in the food and beverage department. He joined Sonargaon Pan Pacific Hotel in April 1981 as Banquet Porter. — *Sonargaon Tatler*

Inland container port next year: The physical work of the inland container port at Keraniganj opposite Pagla is expected to start in the fiscal year 1995-'96. According to Ministry of Ports and Shipping, the port will be able to handle 1200 to 1300 ton containers daily. This will help exporters and importers ship and clear their cargo easily. Besides, it will reduce the pressure of railway container service at Kamalapur. — *BD Shipping Times*

Best Supervisor of June: Mr Aziz Ahmed Chowdhury, airport officer in the sales Department of Sonargaon Pan Pacific has been awarded the best employee of June. He joined the Sonargaon family in 1984 as florist under Housekeeping Department. — *Sonargaon Tatler*

Singapore lines see growth: Shipping lines in Singapore are expecting a 13% growth in container throughput this year, compared to an estimated 15% growth last year, according to survey by the Port of Singapore Authority.

The Shipping Lines say South Asia, Australia, Indochina and the South Chinese ports are growing markets to look at this year. — *BD Shipping Times*

Sonargaon's 'Stay Plus' package: Sonargaon Pan Pacific Hotel recently celebrated its 15th anniversary. To celebrate the occasion, the hotel has introduced a special Stay Plus package. The offer includes a one-night stay inclusive of breakfast, a lunch or a dinner plus other facilities for single/double occupancy or family at an attractive rate.

The package has been developed to provide people with the opportunity to utilize it as a gift item on variety of occasions. It will be a perfect gift for newly-married couples or couples celebrating their wedding anniversary.

EURACA to be formed: An association of air freight containers is to be formed in Europe. This was decided from delegates from six countries. It will be called the European Air Cargo Carriers Association (EURACA). Its aim is to exchange ideas on a European level in the air cargo industry.

Membership is open to all air freight association in the EC Writes Scherete. Members so far include the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the UK and Ireland. — *BD Shipping Times*

Indian Airlines to reduce flights: The Indian Airlines has further reduced its number of flights on Dhaka-Calcutta-Dhaka route from three to two a week.

The flights under the new schedule will operate only on Monday's and Friday's cancelling the flights on Saturdays. — *Monitor*

Decline in Asian Airlines' passengers: The Orient Airlines Association (OAA) is warning of a price war among East Asian Airlines after registering the seventh successive monthly decline in passenger load factors among its members.

In a statement received it said the ratio of passengers carried against the total number of seats among OAA members was 65.7 per cent, which is down by 1.7 per cent from earlier records. — *Monitor*

Lufthansa flying high: The Lufthansa group earned gross profit of no less than DEM 678 million in fiscal 1994. This shows how successful the German carrier has been in adapting to the changed market.

For the first quarter of 1995, Lufthansa group posted increased revenues. Passenger numbers rose by 9.5 per cent and cargo tonnage by 22.5 per cent to 386,000 tonnes. — *BD Shipping Times*



The Ahsan Manzil in old Dhaka.

— Parjatan

A forty-five minute plane ride brought us from Calcutta to Siliguri's Bagdogra Airport — a small, sleepy civilian airport at an army base. The heat hit us like a blast of hot air from a furnace while we were surrounded by Taxi drivers eagerly asking "Sikkim? Sikkim?" "Where to madam?" "Darjeeling?" After heated negotiations regarding the taxi fare, we finally settled with a young man named Ravi, who was the proud owner of a navy blue Ambassador. He talked all throughout the four-hour drive to Darjeeling.

As the taxi drove towards the hills in the distance, we passed through dusty tea gardens and sweltering heat. When the Taxi began its ascent, we were met by cooling breeze, and quaint signs at every curve of the mountain road — signs like "If you sleep, your family will weep", "Watch my curves", "Prepare for sudden surprises," you will sink if you drive and drink "and the most outspoken." It is better to be five minutes late in this world than five minutes early in the next.

As we climbed higher and higher, we passed the "toy train" chugging down hill, filled with passengers. We were told by our garrulous Taxi driver that it took eight hours to get to Darjeeling on the toy train. Our drive took us through pine forest and past small villages and settlements dotting the mountain sides. The homes were wooden, supported by wooden pillars dug into the mountain side, and painted in bright hues—lavender, blue, bright green. Each house had a potted-plant garden filled with primroses, orchids, gardenias and daffodils. People waved and smiled as we passed — they were all Nepali Gurkhas and Tibetans. There were also a large num-

ber of furry terrier-like dogs — both pet and stray, most unlike the short-furred mongrels roaming the Dhaka streets. The mountain-sides were covered with moss, ferns and bright white and yellow daisies — the flowers of my childhood.

As soon as we reached Darjeeling in the late afternoon, we went in search of a place to stay. Our hotel-hunt brought us to the beginning of the 'Mall' a road ending in a square, lined with shops, eateries and donkeys. No cars or other vehicles are allowed on the Mall road and once you reach the square at the top, you are met with the dazzling sight of the Himalayas, and a lovely walk around the hill-top.

Once settled in a hotel — the 'Shangri-La', right in the middle of the mall — we decided to walk along the square, which has a road or lane running right around the mountain top.

Fortunately for us, it was off-season time, the season starting from April 15th. Tourists had just started flowing in, hotel rates were low and there were plenty of rooms.

At four in the morning the next day, we took a three hour drive to 'Tiger Hill' to watch the sunrise over the Kanchanzhonga mountain. It was freezing cold up on Tiger Hill and some local women were making a thriving profit by selling small paper cups of piping hot coffee for ten rupees a cup — every one was drinking coffee. Some had come up wrapped not only in probably all the clothes they had brought but also in hotel blankets and linen! The sun rose at 5:45 — a great, perfect orange ball. We were very lucky to have a clear weather

and the scene was breath taking. Specially when the great K-2 and the three peaks just below it lit up in the first morning rays.

The Kanchanzhonga, or K-2, is regarded as god in the Tibetan faith. As we ascended tiger hill we were met by a religious procession, chanting hymns and playing small drums.

The next day, a 4-hour jeep drive took us to the lake resort of Mirik, below Darjeeling. There we found the shimmering lake edged by pine forests — and more donkeys to ride. There was also a restaurant, gift shops and park in the vicinity of the lake. On the way back we stopped at Pashupatinagar, the Indo-Nepal border crossing. Indian's were allowed free access into the Nepali side, while foreigners (like us) had to show their passports and sign up. There wasn't much to see at the Pashupatinagar border except only a few shops selling Indian, Chinese and "made in Hong Kong" goods but nothing Nepalese.

Darjeeling has a large "Tibetan Refugee self-help centre," which was built in 1985. It has an old-people's home, a wool yearning factory, carpentry shops, weaving, incense making, printing and paper making concerns and an orphanage. All built in traditional Tibetan architecture and colour. The centre was opened by the Dalai Lama himself and it made us wish the Chinese would just pack up and leave Tibet alone with its beautiful people, their culture and their homes. It is heart-rendering to know that the Chinese are systematically

destroying the cultural heritage of Tibet — displacing its people, demolishing beautiful homes to the ground and

building ugly 'modern' buildings in their stead.

Tibetans, were made a minority in their own country. The refugee centre is a rewarding and, at the same time, a saddening experience.



The great Himalayas.

— Diganto

A Visit to the Queen of Hills

by Saria Rahman

Once we decided to travel to Sikkim on the Sikkim National Transport coach service. We were forewarned that foreigners, that is, non-Indians required the permission of the Indian Government to enter this now Indian territory. This involved a 45 minute downhill 'shortcut' to the magistrates office with passports, where the magistrate made us fill in a permit form. We then had to take our forms and walk another 40 minutes uphill to the Foreigner Registration Office. After our permits were signed and stamped we were sent back to the magistracy for a second stamp and signature.

The whole process was brisk and business-like. All smiles and no subtle hints for bribes. That was refreshingly novel to us as we expected long waits and harassment.

Our permits allowed us to visit four places in Sikkim, but having only three days to spare, we decided to visit sites inside Gangtok itself and the famous monastery at Rumtek.

As our coach to Sikkim travelled on, the river Teesta flowed by our side, around the feet of great hills and mountains and over large white boulders, all the way to Gangtok. Gangtok became part of India in 1975.

Sikkim still retains some of its architectural splendour in the form of vividly coloured pillars and lintels topped and edged with carved wood painted, predominantly, in blue, green, yellow, red and gold. Gangtok, like Darjeeling is full of 'Indian' hotels owned by entrepreneurs from Calcutta and southern India. There is also the famous ho-

tel Tibet for those who have expensive taste — which is house of the office of the Tibetan government in exile. Next to it is the Hotel Mayura owned by the department of Tourism. This was the hotel of our choice since we could afford only this.

Our first full day in Sikkim involved a long — extremely long — walk to the Echniya Monastery on the top of a hill. On the way, the road we took went right in front of the back gate of the Palace of the king of Sikkim. The gate was heavily guarded by the Indian Army and the Chogyal (the second son of the late King) under continuous house arrest. No one was allowed to enter the palace without special permission — and we were eyed suspiciously by the patrol as we sat near the gates and gaped at it with obvious curiosity and some pity.

We also visited the 'Institute of Tibetology', in downhill Gangtok. The institute houses one of the largest collections of Buddhist manuscripts in the world and a rare collection of 'thankas' (devotional pictures). These were either woven or delicately hand-painted and depicted the life of Buddha, the circle of life and death, benevolent gods and the like. Most of the statues and thankas in the institute were donated by the last and present Chogyal of Sikkim — and are rare and beautiful master pieces. The institute also has its own beautiful collection of orchids, tended lovingly by the monks.

We travelled back to Siliguri on a Sikkim National Transport Coach filled with Indian soldiers travelling back to the plains. A short baby taxi ride brought us to Bagdogra Airport and we reached Calcutta in the afternoon. We arrived in Dhaka the same day