

Star Holiday

DHAKA SUNDAY, JULY 13, 2003



Carved

Out of Mystery

LOCATION > TEKNAF
CATEGORY > ADVENTURE

A forest wrapped in deep greens, suffused in stifling silence. Once it was a wildlife sanctuary. Locals will tell you that even a few years ago they saw wild elephants, sambar, crab eating macaques, hornbills, muthura, bear and hog deer. This is what *Kudumchihara* forest was in the past. Today, most of them have vanished because of poaching and destruction of the natural habitat.

Still, the forest stands proud with its natural beauty. And inside, you will find a cave -- *Kudum Guha* or *Parir Garta* (fairy's hideaway), as the indigenous people call it. Babul Chakma, our local guide, said this cave is revered as a religious site for the hill people.

As we walked through the forest, we could see

and got down at Hwaikhong bus stand. There we got on a *Chander Gari*, the age-old jeeps that carry sardine-packed passengers. Harikhola village was our next stop from where we hired our guide.

The forest became too thick to walk through. So, we stepped into a *chhara* (stream) and proceeded. It was a difficult terrain, our feet bogging down in muddy sand. But our eyes were skywards, scouring the treetops for monkeys and birds. In excitement, I did not notice that five or six leeches were having good feast on my leg.

We walked about an hour and reached the cave. Its entrance was enveloped in thick bushes. Through the thicket, I could only see a peach black interior. I shivered with an uncanny sensation. And a kind of

battered and scrapped our faces. Shriill shrieks reverberated inside the walls of the dark cave. It seemed the hell has come loose and I ducked in horror.

The bats flapped past us into the daylight. We looked back and saw them flying in various angles into the forest. I heaved a sigh of relief.

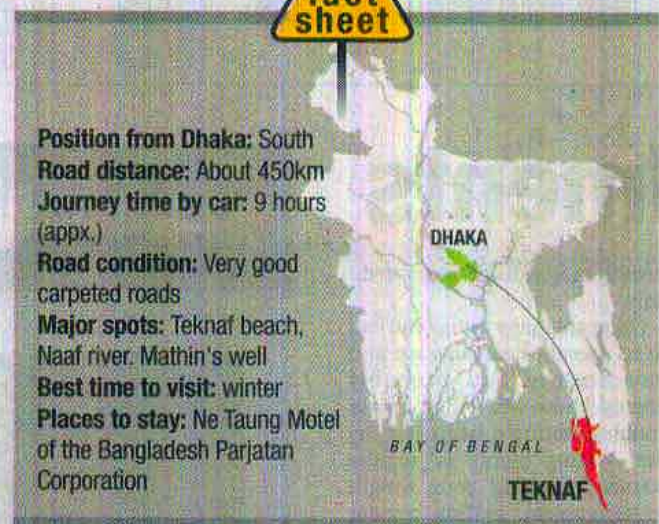
Hardly any people come to this cave because of its position deep inside the forest. It's about 127 feet long, 25 feet high and 12 feet wide. It's a cave undefiled by any human intrusion. We felt the excitement of some discoverers. A strange pungent musty smell hung in the cave air.

We stepped deeper. A stream -- about knee-deep -- runs above the floor. We focused torch beam on the water and saw a motley school of fish. We could identify some koi, prawn, tiki, shol and what not. They scuttled away from the beam and came back again with curious eyes.

We probed the walls of the cave and found birds and spiders, big and hairy with eyes blinking in the beam. We found bird nests tucked in small outcrops on the wall. The chicks cried for food, sensing our presence. We stood in water and watched the wonderful sight. And then we saw a whole family of Whistling Thrust. The mom, pop and their babies, looking at us, eyes round, baleful. Before we found their nests, Whistling Thrusts were believed to be migratory birds. For the first time, it came to light that this species is also local to this country.

Time ticked away. We cannot tell how long we stayed inside the cave. When we came out, we were exhausted, but brimming with a sense of fulfillment. I could only thank Dr Reza for prodding me into this adventure.

Story and Photos by
SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN



bamboo houses perched on platforms on top of hills. The typical housing pattern of the indigenous people. It was drizzling and small hill children returning home with firewood on their back.

I was accompanying zoologist Dr Ali Reza Khan. In fact, it is he who told me about this mysterious cave and asked me to come with him. We had come on a Teknaf-bound bus from Cox's Bazar

fear seized me. What's waiting in there? I decided not to venture in as my courage ran out at that moment.

Dr Khan came to my rescue. It's just a cave and nothing else -- no fairy, no bear -- nothing, he assured me. Finally, he could instill courage enough in me to step inside.

We had battery-operated torches with us. As we switched them on, wings

Budget

Return bus fare (per person) - Tk 900
Food - Tk 600/per person for two days
Room rent Tk 900 two nights
Guide charge Tk 400
Total Tk 2,800

Traveltips

Leeches are rampant in the forest, especially if it is monsoon. So, take a concoction of ground tobacco leaf and mustard oil. Rub it well over your exposed parts.

Wear sneakers or trekking shoes.
Take raincoats or umbrellas.

Take some anti-septic ointment as protection against biting moths. Take paracetamols because if these moths bite you, you are going to get fever.

Take water. It is going to be extremely hot in the forest.

Take powerful torches for use in the cave.

Take binoculars -- the more powerful the better it is.

For photography, don't forget to take at least a 400mm zoom.

Touroffers

Thai Airways Summer Holidays

Chiang Mai 3days/2nights

Business class: From \$586 to \$662 (Depending on hotel class and accommodation)

Economy class: From \$395 to \$482 (Depending on hotel class and accommodation)

Travelhouselimited

The Speldours of Egypt

4 nights starting from \$927 per person + taxes. 8 nights Cairo-Alexandria starting from \$1,107

Emirates Airlines

Holiday Package: Dhaka-Dubai-Dhaka

Economy class ticket, meet and assistance at Dubai Airport, Airport-Hotel-Airport transfers, 3 nights Hotel accommodation, Additional 10kg free baggage on return flight. Prices: \$600 (Twin sharing) and \$695 (Single).

Photographs: 1. Light at tunnel's end 2. Life deep inside 3. Outcrops on the way in 4. Scouring the fairy's hideaway 5. Hut on stilts 6. Cosy nest 7. Uphill climb to destination 8. Adventurer in excitement 9. Lonely stroll 10. Unspoilt greens 11. Waterline 12. Shouldering firewood

