

Star Holiday

DHAKA SUNDAY APRIL 18, 2004

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LOCATION > MANIKGANJ CATEGORY > FAMILY

On a Tern's Flight

Position from Dhaka: North
Distance (first destination): About 90-km
Journey time by car (first destination): 2 hours (appx.)
Road condition: Good
Best time to visit: Winter

IMAGINE a shark's jaw and it had the similarity.

I stood by the Padma and looked sideways -- the broken banks jutting out in sharp edges. The water laps in gentle motion as if it is taking a slumber after its full-fury assault on the bank, devouring it in hungry monsoon lashes. The river now flows at least 30 feet below the bank.

It is after midday, around 3 in the afternoon. The bright yellow mustard fields by the river looks even brighter in the slanting light. Houses cling to their last ground precariously. I shudder just at the thought of how these structures will crumble into the Padma in the coming monsoon. They will not be there any more a few months later. The residents know it all, yet they have not gone insane, these brave people living by the Padma. But for now, everything around us makes a postcard view drawn in watercolour. A few farmers work on Boro fields, planting seedlings. Their teenage girls standing close-by, watching the transformation. She might be dreaming of another good crop and the dress the father promised her.

A very fine mist hangs over the river. It is a lazy afternoon in Maluchi village in Manikganj. We arrived here a couple of hours ago with Anis. It is an outstanding place for many reasons. For one, the villagers are staunch protectors of wild birds and animals thanks to the efforts of an IUCN project. We walked along the famous Grand Trunk Road built by Sher Shah in the 18th century that now runs through the village. From here, traders would go to Goalanda ghat across the Padma with jute and other goods. This was one of the oldest routes along which postal mails were horse carted from Dhaka to Calcutta. Today, trading routes have changed, so has the mode of communication. But this narrow Mughal road remains well maintained. As we walked the way, we were amazed to see the greens canopied the villages, the swishing branches, singing birds and a wide variety of indigenous fruit trees.

Now, standing by the river, we watch huge Pansha boats getting loaded and unloaded. Rice sacks are being carted down on heads. This river bank frame throws us back to the nostalgic age when our forefathers used "Ghasi Nouka" to sally down the Padma. It is an unreal scene in this calm, quiet and lazy village. Or maybe that is the paradox of life. We hired an engine boat from the ghat and chugged off. On an almost ripple-less river, we were soon lost in a watery world. I climbed on the canopy with Anis and sat there. The thin mist has now blurred the banks; and the sky and the water have mingled into one single entity. And we find out soon that staring into the endless blankness is quite stressful for the eyes. Suddenly, we saw this black hump leap out of water

for a second and then disappear in a curvy motion.

"Gangetic dolphins," Anis murmured. "Keep watching, more will surface."

And they did. In pairs first. One closely following the other. And then four of them, close by a fisherman's boat.

"There must be a school of fish there," Anis said. "The dolphins are feasting on them."

We watched the magnificent water ballet of the happy-faced mammals. This is another characteristics of the area. The fishermen of the village don't kill dolphins as the IUCN project has waged awareness campaigns

down in knee-deep water. The sand feels warm, warm as pulsating life. It's not very wide, but immaculately clean. We run in wild delight on the soft sand. We lie on it and feel the warmth. A strange smell assails our nostrils, smell of a land being formed, of the beginning of life, of the rudiments of beginning. It is the algae that form the first base for soil. "And then the insects, microbes and snails gather and die on it. Gradually the pioneering herbs and shrubs start sprouting. And slowly the sand turns into soil," Anis says and shows us the sure signs of soil formation -- a long line of brown-

they also add to the soil enrichment.

We find a black thing lying on the char. A dead cormorant, lonely in its death. We clear the sands around the carcass, a few red ants crawl out of its open peaks.

"A bird of prey, probably an eagle killed it," Anis shows us the wounds -- a broken wing and the hollow in the chest left by eaten-out flesh. It might have been killed this morning. Yes it was. We spotted an Osprey roosting in the sand dune nearby.

We have reached the tip of the char -- a wedge-shaped end. There, we sat still and witness another wonder of the world.

times in flocks. First the Arctic terns. They fly in abrupt angular flight over our head, circle and softly settle on the char. Then the gulls come with shrill ki-ki-ki-ki. They edge around us and squat about 50 metres away.

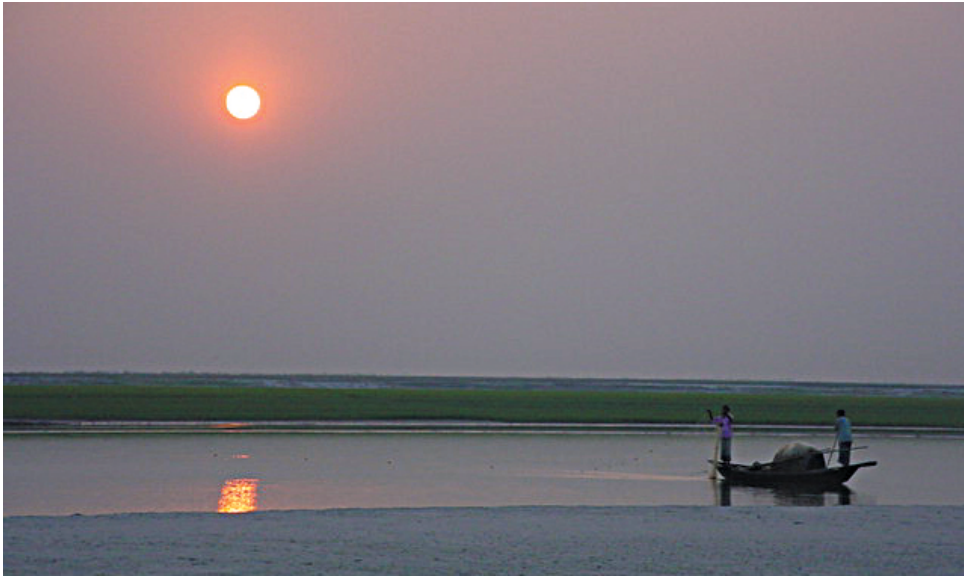
One thing common about them is they are all migratory birds. They have come all the way from the central Asia and even farther from the Arctic Circle following the great migratory trail that stretches back to Alaska. Now it is time for them to go back to their nest, to the land they left some three months ago. It is an end to their winter holiday.

This evening, they have found a final roosting ground here on this char. A place to spend their last night in Bangladesh. Come tomorrow morning, they will take to their final flight, non-stop, over the Jamuna, the Teesta and then beyond. Some will settle down in the Himalayas, some will push farther north to the Arctic Circle. The call of the home, a yearning for familiar ground will give them that extra power on their wings as once Jibanananda wrote "their wings carry the euphoria of pistons".

They are still coming. By now, at least a thousand of them have roosted down. We can hear their mixed calls but cannot see them anymore -- the mist has thickened and in the gathering twilight sadness drips. They are now some invisible travellers sharing the same ground as we are. A sad feeling blows over us. We will be leaving this char very soon and probably never come back again. Like us, these birds may also never return to their constant flight the guns of the hunters may silence them forever.

But now, it is completely dark. We get up and walk back. The engine boat bobbing on water alone. Slowly we head back to where we came from. A huge full moon is hanging on the eastern sky, spreading a pale across the Padma vastness. We keep coming back.

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INAM AHMED



SYED ASHFAQUIL HAQUE

about the ecological indicator the mammals work as.

Slowly, we leave the dolphin spot behind and move towards a blur line, a new char or island that has humped above the water.

Anis pointed to fish eagles gliding above the water. Huge Herring Gulls sometimes cross our path lazily flapping their huge wings into the westerly sun. Their silhouettes melt away in the distant mist.

The char becomes clearer slowly. A vast sandy line glinting in the sun. We moor by it and get

ish algae dying on the sand.

By the water, we find thousands of footprints of winter birds. The entire bank is marked by their droppings. A perfect setting for quick soil formation.

We wandered around the char, crossing sandbars after sandbars. There are small depressions filled with crystal clear water. These are the natural lagoons, some 200 feet wide, some even 400 feet. Small fishes and water insects swim in them. Other water animals and plants are re-colonising the waterbodies. When they die,

The sun was now hanging very low on the horizon -- a very round fireball with the afternoon fury gone. Around us, a marvelous transformation is taking place. The water has now turned gold. It's an unearthly scene -- the vastness of white sandbars is now dotted with golden ponds, the gold is softly radiating on the sands. Everything is now a soft glow, giving us a palpable sense of goodness.

Then we saw them coming -- the terns, gulls, ducks, geese and waders. One after another, some-



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Budget

Microbus fare (7-seater) - Tk 3,000
Fuel- Tk 1,500
Food - Tk 1,500
Total Tk 6,000

Travel tips

- Mosquito repellent
- Light-soled shoes
- Sunscreen lotion
- Sun hat
- Sunglasses
- Binoculars
- Flashlight
- Camera gears

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