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DHAKA SUNDAY JULY 25, 2004

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LOCATION > SATCHHARI, MOULVI BAZAR. CATEGORY > FAMILY / ADVENTURE

Bergman in a Rainforest

I have never experienced any rain like this before. It came down in a thick wall of water. There seemed not to be any individual drop, just a continuous tape of water. And for the first time, we knew what monsoon is like.

Our car moved slowly through the tea country and the wiper could hardly make the vision clear. The road snakes through tea gardens and at every turn, our hair bristle, because we know the cars coming from the other direction would not see our headlights, nor would we notice theirs.

I wiped the condensation on the side window and looked outside. It was 12.30pm. Yet, the light gave away nothing about what part of the day it is. It is just

drifting in the high wind. As our driver started bringing out the jack and other paraphernalia, we munched on the few biscuits we had. The wet road has snaked away into woods and tea gardens. We saw some tea garden workers walking our way and asked them how far the Satchhari forest office is. Just round the corner -- they said. So we left the car and started walking through the empty road.

Big drops splatter on the road as branches sway in the breeze. Let them drop, we don't mind. A bluish tint hangs around us. We walk on. A bunch of monkeys appear from the bush, stop in the middle of the road, give us a cursory look and then cross quickly into the tea garden. They climb up the shade trees and jeer at us. Let them jeer, we don't mind.

Half an hour later, the signboard appears Satchhari Forest Range. We follow a steep herringbone path through a palm tree forest. About 400 feet up, the bungalow comes into view. In the middle of a sprawling green lawn, sits the cozy building, decking a long veranda in the front, a small one on the side. We dump our backpack in the veranda, jump on the railing and lay back. Heaven is right here, we thought. The green lawn looks shades lighter because of the frilling greener trees -- the palms, the teaks and the chambals.



Flowers have bloomed in the garden with a riot of colours. Big bright red flowers. Hundreds of large black butterflies with yellow tails flap around. I look up at the slate sky, taking the drizzle in the face, it feels like the tears of a wailing woman. I close my eyes and let it roll around the collar.

In the afternoon rain, I strolled through the Satchhari rainforest. Rainwater rolls down the sandy streams in a strange gurgling noise. I cross them again and again. An unknown tingling feeling runs down my toes. I walk in a strange muted afternoon. The noises are only those of raindrops splattering down the towering trees, crashing against

branches and leaves and each other before finally falling to the ground in small sprays. Then I stop in the middle of a track and stand and listen to the afternoon getting longer and paler. I watch the ants. Even the ants must have caught the sleepy mood. They stand still in queues under the leaves, brushing their antennas with one another, passing on some secret message we human beings would never know. A centipede lies dead and coiled in a small pool. I feel the death in the afternoon. A dead log lies half-submerged. Small mushrooms are growing. Everything around takes the edge of an unknown sadness. The rains then

become tears. Night came suddenly with a furious intensity. Back in the bungalow, we felt without any entity. The generator is yet to start and we let ourselves be taken over by the darkness, feeling as if we are entering a blackhole.

It was around 3 o'clock that a slice of the moon appeared and it appeared suddenly. And the whole forest stopped spellbound. It was no more a forest; a piece of celluloid from Ingmar Bergman. Standing on the edge of the forest, I look up at the sky. Patchy black clouds drifts in swans. The moon disappears, and comes back again. The flowers of the teak trees silhouette like thousands of spiky pine leaves. The palm trees are some demented women, their hair drooped in grief, heads swaying.

An unearthly light cascades over the trees and the lawn. A light so dim, so soft that you could hardly make out the shapes and colours. You only feel their presence. As clouds roll in, the light dims with that effect of old celluloid. The projector rolls, the film jumps, the light dims, the characters become mysterious. A night bird calls in the faraway forests.

The Bergman night gets older.



photo & story INAM AHMED

fact sheet

Position from Dhaka: Northeast
Road distance: About 140-km
Journey time by car: 4 hours 30 minutes (approx.)
Road condition: Partly under construction
Best time to visit: Anytime depending what mood you want to capture

Budget

Microbus fare (7-seater) - Tk 3,000
Fuel - Tk 3,000
Food - Tk 2,000
Room rent Tk 1,200 (three rooms for one night)
Total Tk 8,200

Travel tips

Umbrellas or raincoats.....
Trekking shoes
Never wear shorts or half-sleeve shirts because of insect bites
Mosquito spray.....
Avoid mosquito bites between 4:40pm and 7:30pm
Take a first aid kit that must contain paracetamols, anti-septic ointments, bandage

a diffused light. Through the whitish misty look, the shade trees in the tea gardens strike dark straight lines. It is difficult to discern that they are trees, posing a surrealistic scene drawn in watercolor.

We are heading for Satchhari, a rainforest with a wide variety of bird and tree species, close to Teliapara few kilometre before Srimongol. On previous occasions, I have passed by it without stopping. Lawachhata had seemed more alluring with its gibbons. But when I decided to take another break into the north, Satchhari became the natural choice.

The dashboard clock says we have been on the road for over four hours and Satchhari should appear anytime. And then, the car hobbled oddly to one side. We cursed our luck and got down to find the left rear tyre sitting flat. In an hungry stomach even the slightest trouble look tall and this one is not so small. Luckily for us, the rain had eased to fine drops,

