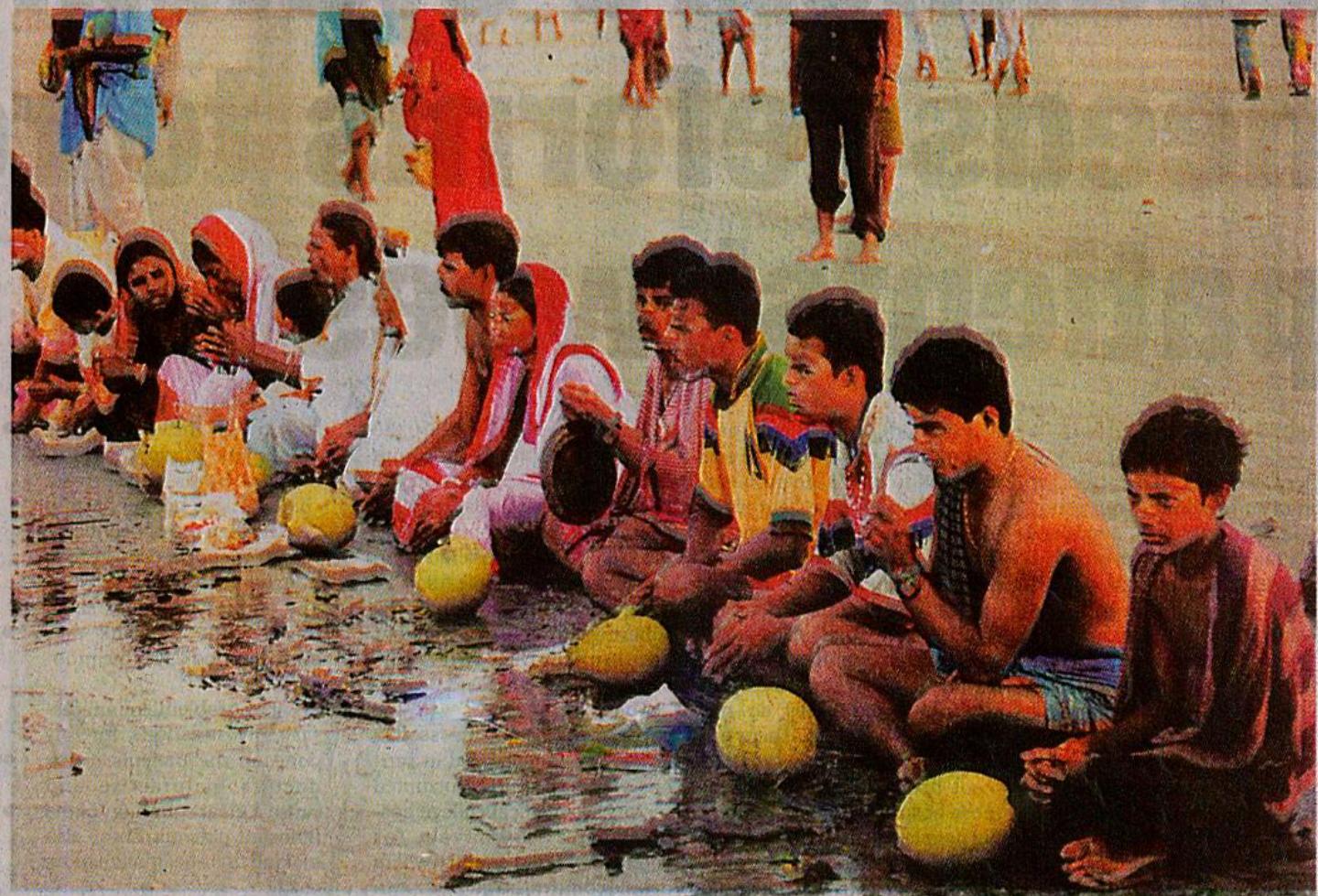




DHAKA SUNDAY NOVEMBER 28, 2004

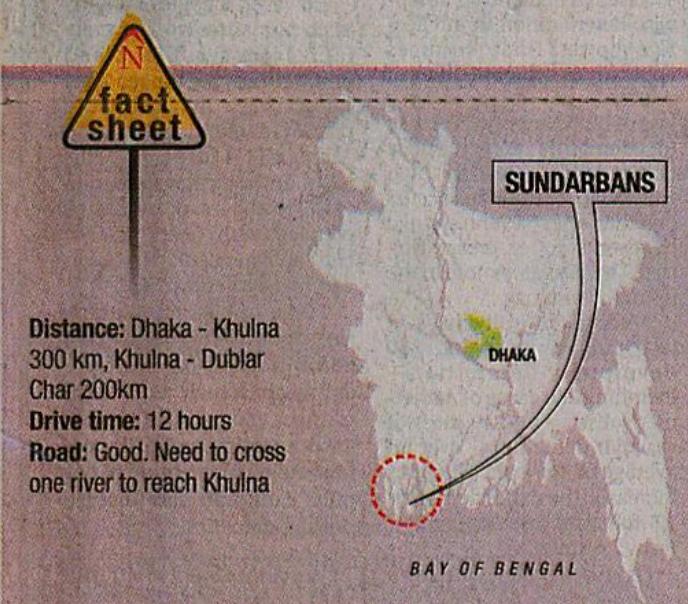
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LOCATION > THE SUNDARBANS CATEGORY > ADVENTURE

Dip in Divinity



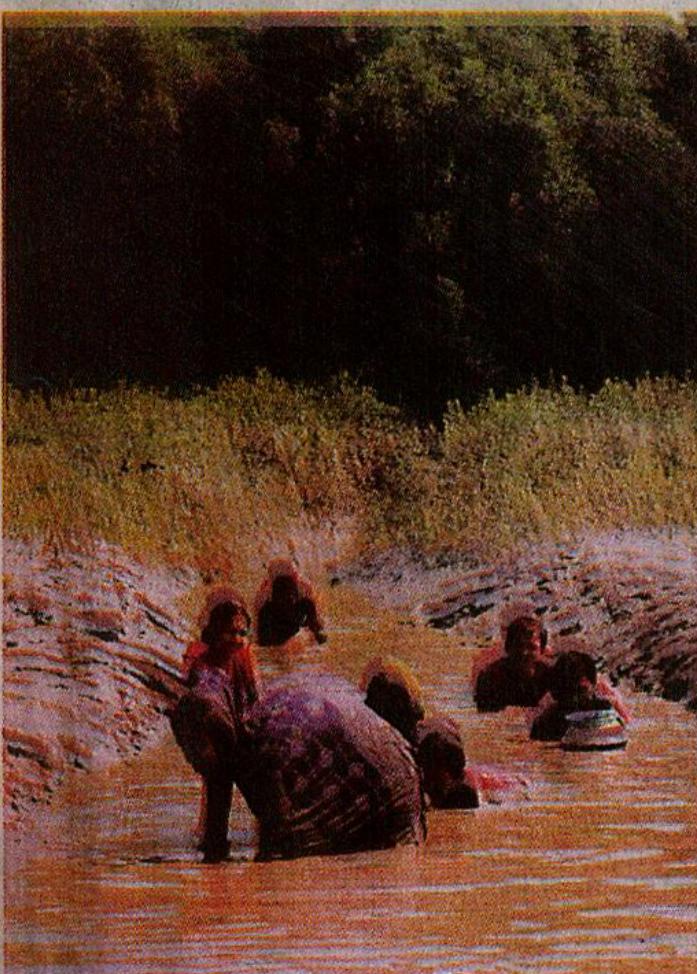
Distance: Dhaka - Khulna
 300 km, Khulna - Dublar
 Char 200km
 Drive time: 12 hours
 Road: Good. Need to cross
 one river to reach Khulna

BUDGET

Participants must reach Dublar Char at least two days before the festival. Tourists may hire boats from Mongla, but they have to take permission from the forest department. Our advice is to go with the tour operators. Guide Tours Ltd and Bengal Tours operate trips to the festival from Dhaka. The cost for a four-day trip including accommodation, transport, food and guide would be between Tk 5,000 and Tk 4,500 per person.

THINGS TO CARRY

Light-soled shoes • Warm cloths • Sun screen lotion • Sunglasses
 Sun hat • Binoculars • Insect repellent • Flashlight • Camera gears



As we were cruising along the vast mouth of the river Passur, the first thing that greeted us was the musty odor of dry fish, probably coming from Dublar Char where we were heading.

The delta shaped island is part of our great mangrove forest, the Sundarbans, situated on the eastern bank of the Passur and considered as a key area for dried fish trade.

The eastern face of the island popularly known as 'Alorkol' is the site of the great bathing festival of Dubla on Rush Purnima. The event is arguably the biggest festival of the southwestern Bangladesh. Every year, thousands of pilgrims and fun-lovers throng the place irrespective of their religious beliefs.

Our boat anchored half a kilometre off the shore as the gentle slope of the sandy beach prevented our approach any further to the shoreline. From the deck of the boat we scanned the vast crescent shaped sandy island against the green belt of mangroves on the eastern horizon showing the boundary of the beach. Along the shoreline, we saw hundreds of mechanized boats, known as trawlers, tossing gently in waves breaking on the shore.

We stepped on the shore at around dusk. We saw three or four groups of people playing football on the beach. On the other side, the sun was sliding down over the faint forest line of Heron Point. We walked down the smooth sand towards the north and saw some trawlers pushed up on the beach out of the reach of high tide. These trawlers are mostly used for carrying fish. But now, these had been transformed into 'house boats' for the pilgrims and makeshift shopkeepers.

The pilgrims spend a lot of their time singing religious songs. Dhol, kartal, khol and harmonium are their accompanying instruments. One of the pilgrims introduced himself as Nironjon of Kaira and said he is a regular visitor to Dublar Mela sometimes with his family members, sometimes with friends. This is the only festival they can participate in without any prejudice although sometimes they fall prey to pirates. He said only a third of the visitors are camped on the beach and the rest are scattered inside the forest creeks either for hunting deer or enjoying adventure in the forest. Tomorrow evening, the boats will return to the island.

By this time, the moon rose over the sky, spreading a mysterious light over the sea.

While we were returning to our boat a feeling of emptiness gripped our hearts. Waves of the

rising high tide broke on the shore. A thin layer of mist diffused the moon light, the dark line of the forest stood sombre, making our heart heavy. We hardly uttered a word.

Next morning we visited the fishing villages on the northeastern part of the island. After a while we visited the makeshift temple where we found some effigies of Hindu gods and goddesses. Although the festival is observed on the eve of 'Rush Purnima' in memory of Lord Krishna's romantic episode with Radha and her aides, but here Komoley Karning, a river god-

dess, is considered as the chief deity.

We visited the festival area the same evening. Thousands of people gathered there and it became impossible to move without bumping into others. While some of the crowd paid homage to the deities, most of them encircled the stage where Lila Kirtan was going on. The shopkeepers were busy selling cosmetics and other household goods.

The main attraction of the Dubla festival is bathing in the sea. We saw thousands of devotees sitting on the shore with

various offerings. They were waiting for the high tide. People were singing religious songs. As the tide turned high, the devotees rushed to the water to take a dip. The devotees believe that the holy bath would wash away their sins and would help emancipate them from next incarnation.

After the bathing rituals, the devotees headed home in their trawlers.

By eleven, the whole area became deserted.

story & photo
 KHASRU CHOWDHURY

